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BRIGADIER GENERAL GEORGE LINCOLN SPENT THE NIGHT OF AUGUST 10–11, 1945, in his office at the Army Operations Division in Washington. During the past week his country had dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In between those attacks, the Soviet Union had declared war on Japan and commenced attacks against its forces in continental northeast Asia. On August 10 the United States had received word of Japan’s willingness to surrender, provided the position of its emperor was not compromised. The news produced a scramble among planners in Washington to craft an order for postwar operations to American forces in the Pacific. As the army’s adviser to the State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee (SWNCC), General Lincoln was one of dozens of U.S. officials working through the night to carry out that task.¹

Sometime after 2:00 A.M. the phone rang in Lincoln’s office. The State Department’s James Dunn, SWNCC’s chairman, was on the line. He stated that the United States needed to move troops into Korea, which had been part of Japan’s empire since early in the century. So-
viet troops reportedly had already entered the peninsula in the extreme northeast, so Dunn wanted a point at which Korea could be divided between Soviet and American forces. After hanging up Lincoln gazed at a map on the wall, quickly focusing on the thirty-eighth parallel, a line dividing Korea nearly in half.

Uncertain, he called in Colonels Charles Bonesteel and Dean Rusk, instructing them to see if they could do better and giving them a half hour’s time to decide. Equipped with a small *National Geographic* map titled “Asia and Adjacent Areas,” they soon confirmed Lincoln’s judgment. With that the general hurried off to a meeting of the Joint War Plans Committee, armed with a proposal on Korea as part of a draft of General Order Number One, the directive that would determine to whom Japanese forces surrendered.

The thirty-eighth parallel was a line on a map, nothing more. It followed no political boundaries or physical features within Korea. As a U.S. Army historian later noted, it passed through more than “75 streams and 12 rivers, intersected many high ridges at variant angles, severed 181 small cart roads, 104 country roads, 15 provincial all weather roads, 8 better-class highways, and 6 north-south rail lines.”

General Order Number One went through numerous drafts over the next four days. In considering Korea, planners discussed lines as far north as the fortieth parallel, which in the west extended virtually to the Yalu River, the border with Manchuria. But the original proposal survived in the draft that went to the White House on the morning of August 15, only hours after Japan’s surrender. President Harry S. Truman quickly approved, and the proposal was sent on to Moscow for the consideration of Soviet premier Joseph Stalin. His response came immediately, and although he did request an occupation zone in northern Japan—which was denied—he assented to the proposed line in Korea.

Thus the thirty-eighth parallel became the demarcation line between the Soviet and American occupation forces in Korea, which were to accept the surrender of the Japanese there and return them to their homeland. Soviet troops rapidly spread out across their zone. The Americans did not begin landing in Korea until September 8. Each of the occupiers set up a military government in its zone.

MAP 1. The thirty-eighth parallel was the boundary between the Soviet and American occupation zones. The armistice line of July 27, 1953, was south of the thirty-eighth parallel in the extreme west, but otherwise north of it.
It was December before an initiative was taken to end the division. Then, at a foreign ministers’ meeting in Moscow, the United States proposed the immediate establishment of a unified administration in Korea under the occupation commanders. This accomplished, the United States and the Soviet Union, joined with China and the United Kingdom, would create a four-power trusteeship with an executive council and a high commissioner at the top. The council would organize a “popularly elected Korean legislature.” In five to ten years Korea would become independent.5

The Soviets countered with a proposal of their own. It provided, first, for an early conference between representatives of the two commands to discuss “urgent problems affecting both northern and southern Korea” and coordination “in administrative-economic matters” between the two zones. Second, the Joint Commission, also made up of representatives of the two commands, was to be established “to make proposals for the formation of a provisional Korean government” and, after such a government emerged, for “a four-power trusteeship for a period of up to five years.” All commission recommendations required approval by Moscow and Washington.6 This plan merely provided for negotiations at the level of the occupation commands. The U.S. delegation, anxious to reach quick agreements and squelch perceptions at home of deteriorating Soviet-American relations, accepted the proposal virtually unchanged.

The preliminary conference between the occupation commands began in Seoul on January 16, 1946. The Americans wanted a broad and early administrative integration of the two zones, but the Soviets desired discussions only on economic exchanges and transportation. The primary Soviet interest was in negotiating for rice from the South. Since the Americans faced a shortage of this commodity in their zone, they were uncooperative in this area. Three weeks of talks resulted in only narrow agreements, several of which were never implemented. In the end, little was accomplished other than periodic exchanges of mail and meetings of military liaison personnel.7

The Joint Commission did not convene until mid-March. It soon became stalemated over consultation with Korean groups for establishment of a provisional government. The Americans wanted a broad range of groups consulted, whereas the Soviets insisted on excluding groups that demanded immediate independence and thus opposed trusteeship. On May 8, after weeks of sometimes acrimonious exchanges, the commission adjourned at the United States’ request without plans for future meetings.8

Although the commission would reconvene a year later, the issues that arose in the first session proved irresolvable, a predictable result given the ongoing polarization of both Korean politics and Soviet-American relations. In reality the die was cast on Korea’s division when the Joint Commission first adjourned, arguably well before that. The first major step toward the fighting that broke out on June 25, 1950, was in place. The Cold War had come to Korea.

Why was this so? Why did the United States and the Soviet Union divide Korea at the thirty-eighth parallel in August 1945? Why did they fail to eliminate that boundary in the months that followed? Why did Koreans fail to unite to prevent this result? An understanding of the origins of the Korean War begins with answers to these questions.

The thirty-eighth parallel decision of August 1945 alone heavily weighted the scales toward Korea’s long-term division. American aspirations for a position in Korea following Japan’s defeat clearly derived from a desire to contain Soviet influence. For their part, the Soviets had inherited an interest in the peninsula from their Russian predecessors, who in the late nineteenth century had expanded their country’s boundaries to the western Pacific and, early in the new century, had fought a war with Japan for influence in Korea and Manchuria. Japan had prevailed and, for two generations, had held a powerful position in continental northeast Asia. Naturally, the Soviets wanted to change that situation to their advantage, and establishing a foothold in Korea represented an important means to that end. Once ensconced in their halves of Korea, the Soviets and the Americans, authoritarian socialist in the first case, liberal democratic in the second, were bound to find it difficult to reach common ground in establishing a unified indigenous government.

The total defeat of Japan, of course, was what brought Korea back
power on the Asian mainland. It hoped that China, once rid of Japan in Manchuria and coastal areas farther south, would emerge as a great power to help create a new balance in the region. As World War II progressed, however, a free China split between Nationalists in the south and Communists in the north showed limited capacity to contribute to the struggle against Japan. Increasingly, China appeared as likely to emerge weak and divided at war's end, a prospect that produced growing apprehensions in Washington that the Soviet Union would reign uncontested in continental northeast Asia. A U.S. State Department paper of the fall of 1943 concluded:

Korea may appear to offer a tempting opportunity [for Soviet premier Joseph Stalin] . . . to strengthen enormously the economic resources of the Soviet Far East, to acquire ice-free ports, and to occupy a dominating strategic position in relation both to China and to Japan . . . A Soviet occupation of Korea would create an entirely new strategic situation in the Far East, and its repercussions within China and Japan might be far reaching.9

Actually, concern about Russian expansion was not new. At the turn of the century, with Russia having acquired huge blocks of territory in the region over the previous two generations and now on the verge of completing the trans-Siberian railroad, such American strategists as Alfred Thayer Mahan and Theodore Roosevelt expressed apprehension about Russian expansion on the Eurasian landmass. In industry, though, Russia remained the most backward of the great powers. In the hands of a clumsy, autocratic government, it was unlikely to catch up anytime soon. Thus Roosevelt opined, "Undoubtedly the future is hers, unless she mars it from within. But it is the future not the present." For the moment, he thought, a rising Japan provided "a check on Russia," a goal that would be furthered by the former's acquisition of Korea.10 Japan's success in doing just that, combined with its expansion into Manchuria, largely eliminated concerns about growing Russian influence in the region.

What was new in 1943 was the impending elimination of Japan from its position on continental Asia and the prospect of an already powerful Soviet Union taking its place uncontested. The prospect was
all the more real given the desire of American leaders to secure Soviet assistance, once Germany was defeated, in the struggle against Japan. Wartime needs threatened to compromise postwar aims.

To the authors of the State Department paper just quoted, the prospect of Soviet domination was even more likely due to the apparent existence of some thirty-five thousand Koreans stationed in the Soviet Far East who were "thoroughly indoctrinated with Soviet ideology and methods of government." To be sure, exiled Korean nationalists were congregated as well in China and the United States, and many of them were strongly anti-Communist. Yet they were a weak and divided lot, incapable of raising a significant armed force to contribute to the fight against Japan; they also appeared to lack substantial support from Koreans in their homeland. In a word, projected conditions, both international and indigenous, seemed to give the Soviet Union a distinct advantage in Korea—unless the United States itself played a direct role. That the same could be said of the resource-rich, industrially developing region of nearby Manchuria added to American concerns.

American leaders did not for the moment adopt a competitive attitude toward the Soviets regarding Korea. Indeed, insofar as President Franklin D. Roosevelt gave thought to the peninsula, it was largely in an attempt to avoid postwar competition there. His favored method was a multipower trusteeship, including the United States, the Soviet Union, and China. The great powers with interests on the peninsula would share in an arrangement that would at once prepare Koreans to govern themselves and enable the trustees to amicably work out their differences.

In the spring of 1943, State Department planners looking to the postwar era prepared a series of papers outlining the rationale for the trusteeship approach. Their analysis grew out of a reading of Korea's history since the late nineteenth century. Although the peninsula had enjoyed several centuries of relative stability prior to that time, by the late 1800s "internal weakness" deriving from the corruption, inefficiency, and lack of "virility" of governing elites had produced serious "internal weakness." Since Korea had "become important as a gateway to the fast-developing Asian mainland," this condition led to the rise of an intense rivalry there among China, Japan, and Russia. The eventual result was Korea's subjugation by Japan.

By the 1940s Koreans had lived for more than a generation "as a subjugated people with little practical experience in self-government." True, more than half of the public officials in Korea in 1939 were Korean; however, such officials were always under strict Japanese supervision and had "no opportunity for choice as to policies to be pursued." Furthermore, "the whole educational system" sought to make "Koreans loyal Japanese subjects, with the help of obliterating all vestiges of Korean opposition and culture." Exiled groups had formed various organizations to agitate for independence, including the Korean Provisional Government (KPG) now stationed at Chunching, the wartime capital of the Chinese Nationalists; but none of them had had "the responsibility of governing at home." The KPG had failed to unite all exile groups even in Chunching, where the Korean National Revolutionary Party, made up of generally younger, more progressive exiles, contested its authority. In the United States Dr. Syngman Rhee, who claimed to speak for the KPG despite a contentious relationship with it over many years, refused to cooperate with Kilo Haan, who assumed the mantle of representative of the Korean National Revolutionary Party. The image of the KPG was dimmed further by recent reports that its president, Kim Koo, had "accepted arrangements from the Chinese government which restricted the Korean revolutionary movement in return for a monthly subsidy." As for Haan, although he claimed to be an anti-Japanese spy and presented numerous reports to various agencies of the American government characterizing conditions among Koreans in the Soviet Maritime Provinces, Manchuria, Korea, Japan, and Hawaii, American intelligence agencies doubted his loyalty to anything other than his own aggrandizement, pecuniary and otherwise. It remained unclear whether he or any other of the exiles was in a position to return to Korea after Japan's defeat and establish a viable independent government.

Koreans hardly seemed prepared economically for immediate independence. Since Japanese operated the vast bulk of industrial enter-
prises, Koreans lacked "an adequate supply of trained and skilled personnel" to take them over. An independent government would probably quickly confiscate Japanese property and remove Japanese personnel, which would lead not only to poor management of the businesses concerned but also to a disinclination on the part of Japan to keep open its market to Korean goods. Under such conditions, "economic instability would be such as to threaten the very existence of the new government." The internal weakness leading to foreign intervention, war, and subjugation that had occurred at the turn of the century might repeat itself.

The course that stood out as in the best interest of Koreans and the world community alike was "recognition of the right of Korea to be free and independent and of independence after a period of self-government under international trusteeship." Oversight of Korea's movement toward independence by the nations with the greatest stakes in the country would at once encourage orderly development, both politically and economically, and ensure protection of the fundamental interests of the major outside powers.

This approach led the United States to reject a proposal by Nationalist China to recognize the KPG. Such recognition would do nothing to further the war effort against Japan while creating suspicions in Moscow as to U.S. postwar intentions regarding Korea. At Cairo in late 1943, Roosevelt persuaded the British and the Chinese Nationalists that Korea would "in due course . . . become free and independent," but he received no commitment on trusteeship. Shortly thereafter, at Teheran, he broached the subject with Stalin, who he thought agreed to a period of tutelage for Korea. Then at Yalta in February 1945, Roosevelt proposed a trusteeship, to include the United States, the Soviet Union, China, and perhaps Great Britain. Stalin did not demur, but he expressed a desire to make any trusteeship period as short as possible. He seemed pleased when Roosevelt said that troops would not be stationed on the peninsula.17

It was natural for Roosevelt to initiate discussion on the issue: the Soviet Union was not yet in the war against Japan and even had a neutrality treaty with that country. In addition, Stalin was more intent on nailing down with Roosevelt an advantageous position in Man-

churia before the Chinese Nationalists staked their claim. Stalin probably wanted to avoid detailed discussions and concrete commitments on Korea, since his ability to exert direct influence in the area was bound to improve once Germany was defeated and he augmented Soviet forces in northeast Asia. In a few months the Soviets might be in a strong position to get a good deal more than one place in a four-power trusteeship on the peninsula.18

During the visit of Harry Hopkins to Moscow in late May, Stalin expressed general support for a four-power trusteeship in Korea. Hopkins had been appointed by Harry S. Truman, who succeeded to the U.S. presidency upon Roosevelt's death on April 12, to lead a special mission to talk with Stalin about recent difficulties in Soviet-American relations and to help prepare for a summit conference in July. As a former intimate of Roosevelt and a well-known sympathizer of friendly relations with the Soviet Union, Hopkins was considered the ideal person to deal with Stalin at a time when bilateral relations threatened to deteriorate over a series of postwar issues.

Among other things, the State Department hoped that Hopkins would negotiate specific agreements on the nature of the Korean trusteeship, ones that would provide for, as one historian has written, "equal representation in the civil administration" and emphasis "on training local Koreans for self-government."19 The latter objective reflected, first, the continuing concern that Stalin would favor those Korean exiles who had spent the war years in the Soviet Union and, second, a willingness to bypass Korean exiles in the United States and southern China in developing indigenous political institutions on the peninsula. But Hopkins was in poor health, and Stalin was disinclined to engage in detailed conversations on Korea. In any event, issues involving Poland and the United Nations seemed more pressing.20

At the Potsdam summit in July, neither American nor Soviet negotiators showed particular interest in discussing Korea. Soviet foreign minister V. M. Molotov did mention that country at one point, but in the context of Soviet efforts to secure a place in trusteeships for Italy's African colonies. The move probably represented a bargaining ploy rather than an effort to reach detailed agreements on the peninsula.21 For their part, American military planners talking about theater opera-
tions with their Soviet counterparts mentioned only air and naval operations in and around Korea. These were to be part of their invasion of Kyushu, the southernmost of Japan’s main islands, which would not commence until late October. Yet, privately, top American leaders, having received reports of the successful test of an atomic device in the New Mexico desert, believed that Japan might be forced to surrender before the Soviets entered the war, which would give the United States the opportunity to occupy all of Korea.

Despite the Hopkins mission, Soviet-American relations remained touchy during the summer. On Asia the most prickly issue related to China, as the Soviet Union pressed the Nationalist government there for concessions in Manchuria that exceeded those granted by the United States and Great Britain at Yalta. Each party was now more likely than ever to seek every possible advantage in its relations with the other. With the Soviet Union approaching readiness to enter the war against Japan, and the United States seemingly lacking plans for operations in Korea, Stalin probably thought continued delay on reaching agreements regarding the peninsula would redound to his advantage. The Americans, in turn, were willing to wager that the atomic bomb would soon turn the advantage their way.

In the end, time gave neither side a decisive advantage in Korea. The main thrust of Soviet operations against Japan beginning on August 9 was into Manchuria. Nonetheless, on August 10 a new order was phoned to the commander of the Twenty-fifth Soviet Army. It included an early move into Korea to capture the ports of Ch‘ongjin and Wonsan. By the time Japan surrendered five days later, Soviet troops were at the gates of the former city, some fifty miles down the east coast on the Sea of Japan.

Why, then, with American troops still several hundred miles from Korea in Okinawa, did Stalin accept Truman’s proposal of the thirty-eighth parallel? Context suggests two factors, one primary, the other secondary. First, the situation in northeast Asia generally and in Korea specifically probably did not appear altogether favorable to Stalin. The Americans had mobilized huge forces in the area in preparation for an invasion of Japan, and they had just leveled two Japanese cities with atomic bombs. The Soviets had moved major forces to the region as well, but their overall strength in air, ground, and naval power could not match that of the Americans, especially given the latter’s greater capacity for resupply. Furthermore, Stalin undoubtedly suspected—if he did not actually know through espionage—that Truman was now considering early landings in Korea and Manchuria. Stalin also feared that the Americans might cut a deal with the Japanese to continue to resist the Soviet advance in Manchuria and Korea after they surrendered to the United States. With the Japanese possessing nine army divisions on the peninsula, they certainly had the capacity to resist the Soviets, who had only two divisions and were operating over rugged, unfamiliar terrain. In the meantime, U.S. troops might rush into the southern part of the country, and into Manchuria’s Liaotung Peninsula as well. It is no coincidence that, two days before accepting the thirty-eighth parallel, Stalin signed a treaty with the Nationalist government of China adhering to the Yalta accords.

If the military conditions and fears of American intentions alone were enough to persuade Stalin to cut an immediate deal with Truman on Korea, a supplementary consideration may have been the hope that the United States would grant the Soviet Union a share in the occupation of Japan. In his message of August 16 accepting the U.S. proposal regarding Korea, Stalin requested that in the northern part of Hokkaido, the northernmost of Japan’s main islands, the Japanese be ordered to surrender to Soviet troops.

Why did Truman ultimately back off from any attempt to seize all—or at least more—of Korea and a foothold in Manchuria? Here, too, the answer appears to be twofold. First, American planners in Washington and in the field overestimated the Soviet head start in both areas. Lincoln, Bonesteel, and Rusk had chosen the thirty-eighth parallel because it was north of Seoul and would thus place the Korean capital in the U.S. zone. They were surprised when Stalin accepted it. Second, General Douglas MacArthur, the American commander in the western Pacific, was determined not to divert forces from the occupation of Japan, where resistance to American operations might develop despite the government’s surrender.

By the time of the agreement on the thirty-eighth parallel, a competitive relationship existed between the Soviet Union and the United
States over the peninsula. Washington had recently considered an attempt to occupy all or most of the country, and the eventual proposal of the thirty-eighth parallel represented an effort to contain Soviet influence there. As for Soviet thinking, in addition to the circumstantial evidence already covered here, one document has surfaced written in late June by two members of the Second Far Eastern Department of the Soviet Foreign Ministry. The paper summarized the background of Korea as a focal point for conflict in northeast Asia and emphasized that "Japan must be forever excluded from Korea," that an independent Korea must have "friendly and close relations" with the USSR, that the United States and China might post a threat by attempting to preserve Japan's economic position in Korea, and that, if a trusteeship was to be established on the peninsula, "the Soviet Union must . . . participate in it prominently." The vague nature of agreements on Korea's future at the time of occupation provided a firm foundation for future stalemate. It is difficult to see a point prior to August 1945 in which an alternative foundation was likely to have emerged. Detailed agreement on neutrality for an independent Korea would have been the solution best suited to balancing the needs of the three great powers involved and the aspirations of the Koreans themselves. Yet Korea was never a high-priority item for either the Soviets or the Americans; and never was the relationship between them sufficiently trusting that either was willing to go out of its way to reach accord on an issue not essential to the war effort. Even in countries more central to that effort, such as those in Eastern and central Europe, detailed agreements failed to emerge until the balance of military power on the ground became clear, and sometimes not even then. Austria, the one place in which neutralization occurred, did not possess a national provisional government recognized by all the occupying powers until mid-October 1945, by which time they all had been in place for several months. Neutralization was not agreed upon for ten years. In Korea, unless Japan was to be left on the peninsula to manage Korea's transition to independence, or unless Koreans, without viable leaders and with a recent history of difficulty in cooperating with each other, were to be left completely to their own devices, the peninsula had to be occupied by outside forces at the end of the war.

The Americans deserve credit for advancing an idea reflecting a degree of sensitivity toward the interests of the Soviets while envisioning eventual independence. Yet such sensitivity was at least as much a result of a sense of weakness and limited interest as of visionary benevolence. Although the United States at one point flirted with a more assertive policy toward Korea, the likelihood remains that Stalin was never willing to negotiate detailed agreements on a trusteeship prior to the end of the war.

The behavior of Koreans contributed to a sense that the eventual victors must occupy the country temporarily and that no obligation existed to grant its people immediate independence. Americans in contact with Koreans in the United States and China were appalled by their factionalism and disappointed at their inability to mobilize significant forces to fight Japan. They were also well aware that the Japanese had mobilized the peninsula to assist their side in the struggle. Although the Soviets were in touch with thousands of Koreans in exile who had resisted—or were still resisting—the Japanese from bases in Manchuria, they knew that these patriots faced constant pressure from antiguerilla forces often made up in part by Koreans. Moreover, unlike in Austria, where the Soviets in the spring of 1945 moved quickly upon occupying their zone to establish a provisional government, Korean Communists were scattered and had a history of factionalism and independence from the Comintern and Soviet party line. Certainly Moscow regarded a period of occupation of at least part of the country as fundamental for the achievement of its aims.

Once the Soviets were in Korea, they had no intention of risking creation of an unfriendly government over the entire country. Already they had made disparaging remarks about the KPG in China and the right-wing independence leader Syngman Rhee in the United States.
While the Soviet occupiers soon displayed a willingness in the North to work with “people’s committees” set up by the Koreans themselves, they refused to acknowledge the Korean People’s Republic (KPR), established in Seoul on the eve of the American arrival, which was leftist in orientation. Perhaps if the Soviets had occupied the capital city, as they did in Austria, they would have worked with the KPR. But without control in Seoul, they probably regarded Communist participation in creating the KPR as an undesirable act of independence, especially given its offer of the top leadership position to the absent Rhee.

The Soviets preoccupied themselves with establishing dominance in the North rather than setting the stage for national unity. They sharply restricted economic activity between the zones. In October, over the objections of Communists who had spent the war years in Korea, they sponsored the establishment of a northern branch of the party. Two months later they referred to it as simply the North Korean Communist Party. Kim Il-sung, an early advocate of creating the organization, became its chairman.

The Soviets did not rule out unification, however. Although Stalin’s views remain uncertain, several documents are available from the Soviet Foreign Ministry for the period from September to December 1945. Three papers from September reveal that the Soviets had no definite program for resolving the Korean issue but viewed the U.S. trusteeship proposal as potentially strengthening their position in northeast Asia. Specific concerns focused on control over three ports below the thirty-eighth parallel: Inchon in the west, Pusan in the south, and Cheju Island off the southwestern coast. After up to two years of joint occupation of Korea, Soviet control of these strategic points between the Soviet naval bases in Vladivostok and Port Arthur might be gained through negotiations for a four-power trusteeship. In return for American acceptance of these Soviet positions, Moscow might support Washington’s desire for trusteeship over the western Pacific islands, the Bonins, Volcano, the Marianas, the Carolines, and the Marshalls. By the time the Moscow meeting of foreign ministers approached in December 1945, the Soviets focused on establishment of a provisional government for all Korea. Yet they were dubious, given U.S. occupation policies in the South, that such a government could be established that would protect key Soviet interests.

Like the Soviets, General John R. Hodge, the U.S. occupation commander, did nothing to encourage the coalition-building efforts of moderate leftist Yo Un-hyong within the KPR. Before arriving, Hodge, a hard-nosed corps commander with little tact, even less knowledge of Korea, and profoundly conservative instincts, had received several messages from Japanese officials in Korea and from the War Department in Washington. They warned that Soviet troops might continue moving southward once they reached the thirty-eighth parallel. The Japanese also complained of Soviet treatment of surrendering Japanese soldiers, officials, and civilians and of efforts to place some Koreans in positions of administrative authority. When he arrived in Seoul, Hodge found few Soviet soldiers in the South, and, with the exception of those on the isolated Ongjin Peninsula in the extreme west, these quickly departed. Yet his interaction with Japanese officials already had made him suspicious of leftist activity among Koreans. He also suspected that they were in collusion with members of the Soviet consulate in Seoul, which, because the Soviet Union did not declare war on Japan until August 8, had stayed open throughout the war. The Americans possessed insufficient numbers to administer the entire country themselves, but Hodge refused to acknowledge the people’s committees. Rather, he decided to work with the Japanese and with local conservatives, who as landowners and businessmen had collaborated with their colonial masters and had recently organized the Korean Democratic Party (KDP) to counter the KPR.

Hodge’s decision to temporarily retain Japanese officials in top administrative positions was soon altered in the face of widespread Korean protests and instructions from home. Nonetheless, he continued to consult the Japanese and to keep the basic administrative apparatus, including the hated Japanese police force in which many Korean collaborators served. His approach was evolutionary, which was consistent with the wartime view in Washington of Koreans’ inability, in the short term, to govern themselves: he kept the existing government organizations largely intact and manned with some Japanese
personnel until new institutions could be developed and Korean personnel trained to fully replace the colonials. He worked to get back into the country prominent exiles such as and KPG officials who could provide conservative leadership facing the stigma of collaboration. Rhee arrived in mid-October officials a month later.

Rhee quickly emerged as a formidable political operator. He made an initial gesture for unity between Left and Right by creating the Central Council for the Rapid Realization of Korean Independence, but he also lambasted the Soviet Union and its policies in the North. Although Yo and Pak Hon-yong, the leader of the Communists in the South, attended the first council meeting, they soon abandoned it because Rhee refused to work with the KPR, clearly favoring the KDP. His refusal to accept membership in that collaboration-laden party did not hide his rabid anti-Communism. And the return of KPG president Kim Koo merely added to the anti-Communist chorus in the South.44

Hodge's tolerance of considerable leftist activity in the South did not eliminate concern in Moscow. On the eve of the Moscow meeting, one Soviet official wrote that

the question [of creating a united government] is extremely complex, because of the multiplicity of political parties and groups, the lack of unity among them and the solicitations of the USA. . . . The character of the future government . . . will be one of the decisive moments in the determination . . . of whether Korea will in the future be turned into a breeding ground of new anxiety for us . . . or into one of the strong points of our security in the Far East.45

Despite Soviet concerns about the U.S. position, another analyst concluded that "it would be politically inexpedient for the Soviet Union to oppose the creation of a single Korean government."46

Stalin was in no hurry to unite Korea. The American position in the South aside, conditions in the North, though well under Soviet control, were far from tidy. Soviet soldiers raped thousands of native women and engaged in widespread pillage, thus alienating many Koreans. As in most Eastern and central European countries, the Soviets mounted a united front policy. This entailed placing Korean Commu-
giving up anything. Since many on the right wing in the South had declared their opposition to trusteeship, the agreement created difficulties for the Americans with their natural allies the Soviets an excuse for trying to exclude them from the process of creating a provisional government.  

III

The reaction in Korea to the Moscow agreements provided the context within which the final polarization between the Soviets and the Americans and Korean political groups occurred. When word of the Moscow agreement reached Korea in late December, expressions of outrage sprang up immediately among many political groups in the South, Left and Right alike. On January 7, 1946, however, a shift occurred: the Communist Party and other leftist groups joined with the KDP and the moderate rightist Korean Nationalist Party to support the agreement. Unfortunately for the prospects of national unity, that coalition quickly split apart, as the KDP reversed itself and joined Rhee and Kim Koo in opposition to trusteeship. Hodge, who had warned Washington against pursuing trusteeship because of widespread indigenous opposition, probably encouraged this change.

In response to the campaign against trusteeship, the Soviets, who in all likelihood had engineered the change in the position of the Communists in the South, launched a sharp attack on the Right. An article on January 12 in the leading Soviet journal, Izvestia, argued, among other things, that the Korean people lacked “sufficient experience to solve the political and economic difficulties on the way to the creation of a democratic state.”

As its chairman and Communists firmly in control, it had made his name as a guerrilla fighter in the 1930s and had spent most of World War II in Europe. He had no base in the South, and his position largely rested on the support of Soviet occupation authorities. His emergence as the top Korean leader in the North reflected the determination of the Soviets to stay in control there as a priority over unifying the peninsula. The radical turn in political and economic policies, which included the redistribution of land to the peasants, also reflected these concerns, as did the purge of domestic Communists—that is, those who had spent most of the period of Japanese rule in Korea and were not always disciplined in following the Moscow line.

Almost simultaneously, the Representative Democratic Council was installed under the American occupation in the South. This advisory body was so dominated by the antitrusteeship Right that the leftists appointed to it refused to serve. Unlike the Soviets in the North, the Americans still tolerated a good deal of dissent in the South, but their continued favoritism of the Right in the face of its opposition to trusteeship demonstrated that unification was not their top priority either.

The storm over trusteeship combined with events abroad to dim prospects for successful negotiations in the Joint Commission. The Right now had an issue over which it could challenge the nationalist credentials of the Left and broaden a popular base heretofore limited by its economic interests and the collaborationist record of some of its members. The Soviets, in turn, could legitimately cry foul over the U.S. occupation's failure to press South Korean political groups to fall into line behind the Moscow accords. Soviet suspicions were genuine, but Moscow's sudden championing of trusteeship also was suspect, especially given that its implementation would add Nationalist China and Great Britain as factors in the Korean equation. The trusteeship controversy probably only confirmed Stalin in his view that, for the present, a divided peninsula served Soviet interests better than a united one, and it gave him an excuse to launch an open attack on the Korean Right.

As for Hodge, January events produced considerable embarrass-
ment once the Soviets revealed to the Korean public that trusteeship had been an American, not a Soviet, idea. Yet with the Right so clearly committed against trusteeship and the Left now following the Soviet lead in supporting it—and with Soviet-American relations rapidly deteriorating outside Korea—Hodge temporarily secured greater support from Washington than ever before in his favoritism of conservative groups.  

The Joint Commission called for in the Moscow agreement did not meet until March 20, 1946, in Seoul. By that time, Soviet actions in Eastern Europe, Turkey, Iran, and Manchuria had drawn sharp comments and tough diplomatic follow-ups from Western leaders, and these had produced spirited ripostes from Stalin and the Soviet press. In his opening speech to the Joint Commission, Terentii F. Shytkov, the head of the Soviet delegation, stated that “the Soviet Union has a keen interest in Korea being a true democratic and independent country, friendly to the Soviet Union, so that in the future it will not become a base for an attack on the Soviet Union.” This was largely a paraphrase of a statement by Stalin published on March 14 in the leading Soviet newspaper, Pravda, which included a broader defense of his policy on the entire Soviet periphery.

Talks in the Joint Commission produced nothing but stalemate, and the hardening of zonal division proceeded apace. When, on May 8, Shytkov informed Hodge that he and his delegation were leaving Seoul, he emphasized again that the Soviets wanted a “loyal” government in Korea. The rightists who rejected trusteeship, he asserted, had “slandered the Soviet Union and smeared it with mud.” If they formed a government, they would organize “hostile actions on the part of the Korean people against the Soviet Union.” Hodge responded with a demand that the Soviets permit the United States to establish a consulate in Pyongyang, the northern capital. The Soviets had had a consulate in Seoul all along, and in recent months the Americans had become persuaded that they were using it to coordinate leftist activities below the thirty-eighth parallel. Either the Soviets must now reciprocate by permitting an American consulate in the North, or they must close down their operation in Seoul. The Soviets chose the latter option, and they delayed the reconvening of the Joint Commission until the following spring.

DIVISION AND COLD WAR CAME TO KOREA FIRST AND FOREMOST because of the inability of outside powers, the United States and the Soviet Union, to devise a unification plan that would protect the interests of both. From the start the two powers regarded internal political configurations as highly unpredictable, so they were disinclined to encourage creation of an indigenous government that crossed zonal boundaries. The best opportunity for the emergence of such a government came in September 1945 with the rise of the KPR, a group that possessed strong linkages with the people’s committees at the local level. Had the Americans supported the KPR, thus encouraging the KDP to play coalition rather than class politics, Koreans might have taken the lead in developing a vision of a united, independent country unthreatening to the great powers. Yet the best opportunity in this case does not represent a good opportunity, since such an outcome would have required extraordinary patience and trust on all sides, ingredients that were far from common at the time.

Such qualities certainly were absent in General Hodge, so any plausible if imaginary scenario for peace and unity would have to replace him with General Joseph Stilwell as U.S. occupation commander. This was not a remote possibility, since the former American commander in the China theater was in August commander of the U.S. Tenth Army, the unit initially scheduled to occupy Korea. Unfortunately, Stilwell’s old adversary, Nationalist Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek, vetoed the idea of his having a command on the Asian mainland. Stilwell had spent years in East Asia, was far more sensitive than Hodge to the economic conditions that bred discontent there, and was flexible in dealing with Communists. On the other hand, he was not a tactful man—“Vinegar Joe,” he was called in the press. Whether he or any other American could have navigated the rapids of Korean and inter-occupation politics in a manner that would have averted long-term division remains uncertain. What can be said is that Stilwell would
not have possessed the predisposition of Hodge against the KPR and in favor of the KDP.

Nor can we imagine him lobbying Washington, as did Hodge, for the return of Rhee and leaders of the KPG. Rhee’s presence in particular plunged a dagger into the heart of prospects for unification; he was uncompromising in his opposition to any deal with the Communists or the Soviet Union—and he was a sufficiently adept manipulator of political trends in the South to command a hearing. None of the KPG leaders were in his league, and the conservative president Kim Koo was at least balanced by the more moderate Kim Kyu-sik. We know that the State Department personnel who had dealt with Rhee and the KPG were not anxious for them to return to Korea.68 Had Stilwell been of the same mind, a powerful conservative coalition congregated around Rhee and the KDP might not have developed.

The question remains of how the Soviets would have reacted to more moderate developments in the South. We know that in the North, as in Eastern and central Europe, the Soviets initially did not exclude non-Communist forces from political activity. In addition, prior to 1945 the Soviets had not had an altogether positive relationship with the domestic wing of Korean Communists. With the Americans controlling Seoul and nearly two-thirds of the Korean population residing in the South, it is questionable that the Soviets would have risked undermining their buffer by permitting the KPR to penetrate the North. The best that can be said is that the indigenous climate for negotiations between the occupations in late 1945 and early 1946 might have been more conducive to moderation than it actually was.

But this assumes that the deterioration of Soviet-American relations in general from the fall of 1945 onward would not have overwhelmed any spirit of compromise that might have remained in Korea. The assumption requires us to envision Koreans cooperating consistently with each other for a common outcome rather than playing the inherent ideological differences of the occupiers for personal advantage—a dubious prospect, given the preexisting divisions in Korean society and political groups, even excluding Rhee and the KPG. It also requires imagining both the United States and the Soviet Union risking loss of their positions in Korea at a time when the overall lines of conflict between them were hardening.

This brief excursion into counterfactual analysis highlights the structural barriers to Korean unity that came into place once the occupation forces had arrived on the peninsula. The simple fact—that as it may be—that division was the price Koreans paid after World War II for their failure to liberate themselves from the Japanese. As a shrimp among whales—and a weakly integrated shrimp at that—Korea was not in a position to control its own future.

To articulate this painful truth is not to concede that the war that ravaged the peninsula from 1950 to 1953 was inevitable after August 1945 or even May 1946. If the foundation for war had been firmly laid, much of the structure to accompany it had yet to be built. Most important, despite the stalemate, neither the Soviets nor the Americans wanted a direct military clash over Korea, so as long as both maintained troops there, all-out war remained unlikely.

Privately, there were already some on the American side who wanted out of Korea. As early as October 1945, the War Department showed interest in U.S. withdrawal as part of the general plan for demobilization.69 In December a frustrated Hodge suggested to Washington that “serious consideration” be given to proposing to the Soviets a joint withdrawal so as to “leave Korea to its own devices and an inevitable internal upheaval for its self-purification.”70 Five months later, with the Joint Commission adjourned, William Langdon, the State Department adviser to the occupation, pleaded with his superiors at home for an initiative in Moscow to seek a mutual withdrawal by early 1947, an idea that had plenty of support in the Pentagon.71

Yet President Truman and most in the State Department remained a long way from giving up on Korea. Convinced that the U.S. retreat from international responsibility during the 1920s and 1930s had produced World War II, they were determined that their nation play a global role as political and economic stabilizer. A State Department paper of early June 1946 applied this conception to Korea. Soviet domination of the peninsula “would further endanger Chinese control of Manchuria and would thus lessen the prospect [for] . . . a strong
and stable China, without which there [could] . . . be no permanent political stability in the Far East.”

Two weeks later, U.S. reparation commissioner Edwin Pauley, who had recently visited Manchuria and Korea to study the reparation issue, reported to President Truman that the peninsula was “an ideological battleground.” As the only country in which U.S. and Soviet occupation forces faced each other without the presence of others, Korea provided a unique testing ground “of whether a democratic competitive system can be adopted to meet the challenge of defeated feudalism, or whether some other system, i.e., Communism will become stronger.”

Truman agreed.

In the weeks following the adjournment of the Joint Commission, the Americans devised a strategy on Korea that they hoped would lead the Soviets to a settlement. The U.S. occupation would gradually turn over the functions of government to Koreans, both through employing them in civil administration and through creation of an interim legislative assembly. Simultaneously, an effort would be made to build a centrist coalition around moderate rightist Kim Kyu-sic and moderate leftist Yo Un-hyong. The military government had lowered rents for tenant farmers the previous fall but had postponed land redistribution because opinion surveys indicated that most Koreans desired to await creation of a provisional government so they could implement such a program themselves.

Once the interim legislative assembly came into operation, the Americans hoped, it would institute reforms that would quell growing discontent in the countryside. Together, these measures would stabilize conditions in the South and undermine the intensely anti-Soviet Rhee, thus setting the stage for a resumption of Joint Commission negotiations on unification.

For the moment, then, stalemate reigned in Korea, as both occupying powers hung tough while striving to bolster their positions in their respective zones. While there was evidence that the Americans were impatient, the question remained as to whether or not they would eventually give ground and, if so, how much. In the answer to that question we will find the margin between a tense peace and international war.

CHAPTER 2
Syngman Rhee, the Truman Doctrine,
and American Policy toward Korea,
1947–1948

SYNGMAN RHEE WAS FRUSTRATED. HE WAS SEVENTY-ONE YEARS old in December 1946, with a career that extended all the way back to the last years of the Yi dynasty, when he had participated in the reformist Independence Club and even had been sent to the United States by the Korean monarch to seek American help against a rapacious Japan.

That mission failed, and the experience represented the first of many over the next forty years that taught him that Korea could depend on no foreign nation to protect or advance the cause of its independence. Now, with Korea liberated from Japan, his country remained divided between the American and Soviet occupiers, who so far had refused to grant independence.

On the positive side, the Joint Commission remained adjourned, so


11. Socialism.

12. Uncertain.


14. An early work that emphasized the Korean origins of the war without denying an important international dimension is John Merrill, Korea: The Peninsular Origins of the War (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1989).

15. For revisionist coverage of the war itself, see Origins, 2:625–756; Simmons, Strained Alliance, 137–270; Cumings and Halliday, Korea, 95–219.


16. For Haam’s reports to American officials in the State Department, see Roll 1–2, SDR; and Official File 11943, Hoover Library.

17. FRUS, The Conferences at Malta and Yalta, 1945, 770. See also Socialism, 34–48.

18. America’s, 172.


24. Although Stalin saw advantages in avoiding an early break with the Americans, he had never regarded the alliance with the United States as more than temporary. By the Yalta conference, he clearly regarded the time as approaching when the alliance would likely end. In mid-January 1945 he told Georgi Dimitrov, the head of the Bulgarian Communist Party, that “the crisis of capitalism led to the division of the capitalists into two factions—the one fascist, the other democratic. . . . We are today with one faction against the other, but in the future we shall be against that faction of capitalists.” As quoted in Eduard Mark, “Popular Democracy in Romania: An Instance of Stalin’s Plan for Postwar Europe,” (paper presented at a conference at Yale University on the international history of the cold war, September 1999). I wish to thank Dr. Mark for providing me with a copy of this paper.


27. FRUS, 1945, 6:657–60; America’s, chap. 8.


29. For a detailed treatment of Soviet operations in the war against Japan, see Socialism, chap. 3. For the argument, with which Van Reen concurs, that the Americans had the capacity to move units to Korea quickly, see America’s, 252.

30. For correspondence regarding American pressure on the Soviet Union to retreat from demands on the Nationalist government regarding Dairen and other issues involving the Soviet position in Manchuria and Stalin’s ultimate concessions, see FRUS, 1945, 7:957–73.


32. America’s, chap. 8.
2. Reluctant, 84–96. For a rich account of the process of alienation between Rhee and the Americans during 1945–46 by a Rhee partisan, see Rhee, 16–45.
3. FRUS, 1946, 8:774–82.
4. Ibid.
10. These events are covered in greater depth in Road, 84–105.
13. See, for example, XXIV Corps, G-2, Historical Section, “G-2 Summary, Period January 19 to 26, 1947,” RG332, NAIL.
14. The principal primary source on these activities is SDR.
15. Headquarters, United States Armed Forces in Korea, Office of the Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2, “Dr. Rhee’s Lobby in America and Its Recent Activities,” Box 7129, RG59, NAIL; John Carter Vincent (director of the Office of Far Eastern Affairs) to Secretary of State George Marshall, January 31, 1947, Box 3825, and Memorandum of Conversation, by John Z. Williams, January 20, 1947, RG59, NAIL.
18. E. S. Larsen, “Korea: Potential Leadership of Koreans Outside Korea,” May 28, 1945, Box 12, Records of the Office of Assistant Secretary and Under Secretary of State Dean Acheson, 1941–1948, RG59, NAIL.
19. See Rhee, 95–98.
20. Hilldring to Hodge, n.d. (clearly July 1947), Box 3, Records of the Office of the Assistant Secretary of State for Occupied Areas, 1946–1949, RG59, NAIL.
21. On the relationship between Oliver and Hilldring, see Rhee, 95–98.
22. For a listing of his articles during 1947, see Rhee, 494.
25. Ibid., 608–18.
26. See, for example, Dean Acheson’s account in Present, 217–19.
27. Petersen to Patterson, March 1, 1947, 092, RG319, NAIL.
28. Summary of Conclusions of Staff Meeting in the State Department, April 8, 1947, and Edwin M. Martin to Wood, March 31, 1947, Box C-213, RG59, NAIL; Vincent to Acheson, April 8, 1947, Vincent to Hilldring, March 27, 1947, and Hilldring to Vincent, March 25, 1947, Box 3827, ibid.
32. NYT, March 25, 1947.
34. Congressional Record 93 (April 16 and 25, 1947): 3482, 3774.