



## *Korean Showdown: National Policy and Military Strategy in a Limited War*

by Bryan R. Gibby.

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In *Korean Showdown*, US Army Colonel Bryan Gibby offers a rare fresh perspective on what he argues is the most important transformational period in American strategic thinking—the eighteen-month “year” spanning the period July 1951 to December 1952 (6-7). Up to mid-1951, the operations in Korea of the US-dominated United Nations Command (UNC) had conformed closely to their Second World War antecedents, featuring “generally unimpeded use of conventional military weaponry in all dimensions of conflict to defeat the [Korean People’s Army] ...” (282). By late 1952, however, American leaders both in Washington and the Far East acknowledged their inability to achieve their political objective (an armistice) through military action alone. Short of risking a larger conflict and the possible use of atomic weapons, further ground and air operations “were doomed to fail by virtue of the American policy and strategy of limited war settled by negotiation” (287).

*Korean Showdown* is neither just another single-volume history of the Korean War, nor simply a chronological recitation of the lesser known battles against the North Korean and Chinese Communists up to December 1952. Instead, it concentrates on the interplay of politics and military action as each enhanced or constrained options in the other. After a short discussion of the “limited war problem” and a summary of the first year of the war, Gibby analyzes the five principal issues that dominated armistice negotiations at various times: to set an agenda for talks; to establish a demilitarized zone; to formulate concrete arrangements for a cease-fire and durable armistice; to arrange for the disposition and exchange of prisoners; and to encourage stakeholder governments on both sides to convene a political conference to settle the Korean problem. (48)

Surprisingly, the POW issue became the greatest obstacle to concluding an armistice, a result of the Truman Administration’s reversal of its 1945 support for involuntary repatriation of prisoners. Stung by accusations of inhumanity for forcibly repatriating Soviet and other East European nationals after World War II, Truman now “felt strongly [that] the United States has a moral obligation not to return POWs who faced an uncertain future in the home territories” (154). Unfortunately for the UNC’s commanders and negotiators in Korea, this decision came only in February 1952. Prior to that, Truman had sought to maintain a dynamic and flexible strategy in Korea, whose downstream effects distracted the UNC armistice negotiators:

[We] never knew when a new directive would emanate from Washington to alter our basic objective of obtaining an honorable and stable armistice agreement.... It seemed to us that the United States Government did not know exactly what its political objectives in Korea were or should be. As a result, the United Nations Command delegation was constantly looking over its shoulder, fearing a new directive from afar which would require action inconsistent with that currently being taken. (130)

As Gibby notes, the rigid stance against forcible repatriation protracted the armistice negotiations, which could have ended the war as early as May 1952. Though not explicit in Gibby’s narra-

tive, this issue at this point in time marked a paradigm shift in Truman's understanding of the utility of military force. Disillusioned that he could not superintend the war to a satisfying military conclusion, Truman nevertheless felt the Communists "needed to pay a military and political penalty" (155). Thus, the war of attrition persisted as each side sought the illusory tactical victory that would deliver them from an unpalatable conclusion.

Gibby provides a perceptive analysis of the various ground and air strategies the UNC used in trying to compel the Communists to agree to an armistice. He draws parallels between the Allies' early experiences with the Combined Bomber Offensive during World War II and the evolution of the Far East Air Force's Operation Strangle and the Railway Interdiction Program. While the latter two produced spectacular destruction across North Korea, they could not in and of themselves force the Communists to a cease-fire. In fact, Gibby argues, the success of the air campaign spurred a multi-faceted renaissance in the Chinese component of the Communist coalition. Once the war of maneuver ended in summer 1951, Mao Tse-tung's generals slowly adapted their formations for limited war, inculcating a doctrine of *lingquiao niupitang* ("eating sticky candy bit by bit"). "Tactical objectives were redefined to stress the capture and use of terrain and prepared positions to inflict maximum casualties on the enemy over battles of annihilation of large units" (102-3). Together with more capable air forces and better trained and equipped artillery, air defense, engineering, and logistics systems, "Chinese flexibility in their various operational approaches to counter American firepower and maneuver formed the basis for prolonged and successful negotiations ..."—much to the dismay of the UNC and US leadership (176).

Scholars will find much to value in Gibby's work. The easy flow of the narrative belies the exhaustive primary and secondary sources underlying it. In fact, Gibby's coverage here (225-41, and *passim*) of the success of the US advisory effort with the South Korean army sets the stage for a comparative study of less successful results in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup>

The book should be carefully read by policymakers and their advisers, civilian and military. Gibby's analysis of the interdependence of battlefield and political developments reinforces the curricula of the various senior service colleges and the services' flag officer education programs. Army officers will benefit from Gibby's account of generals James Van Fleet and Mark Clark's attempt to convince President-elect Dwight Eisenhower to let them fight the war they wanted to fight instead of the one they had to end. Gibby's discussion of the many flaws of Clark's planned campaign for 1953, OPLAN 8-52, offers a textbook case of military officers failing in their duty to provide not just "best" but proper professional recommendations to elected officials. Just as important, the author's detailed coverage of the Chinese Communists' ability to mitigate or nullify American technological superiority should give pause to policymakers favoring a more confrontational policy in the South China Sea.<sup>2</sup>

With *Korean Showdown*, Brian Gibby demonstrates his worthiness to succeed his mentor, Allen Millett, one of the premier Korean War scholars in the United States. The book belongs in every university library, on every service professional's reading list, and in the syllabus of every senior service college course on national strategy and leadership.

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1. E.g. *The Will to Win: American Military Advisors in Korea, 1946-1953* (Tuscaloosa: U Alabama Pr, 2012); "The Battle for White Horse Mountain September-October 1952," *Army History* 89 (2013) 26-47.

2. See, e.g., Jim Garamone, "Official Talks DOD Policy Role in Chinese Pacing Threat, Integrated Deterrence," *DOD News* (2 June 2021). Available online.