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The War for Korea, 1945–1950: A House Burning (review)

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Korean Studies, Volume 31, 2007, pp. 93-97 (Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ks.2008.0005>



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While it would hardly be surprising if the Korean Americans were indeed made scapegoats, Ahn's contention that they were is not entirely convincing. It is true that the Korean American interpreters were fired after the incident, but the white officers involved were also apparently disciplined, although whether they were actually dismissed is unclear based on the evidence that Ahn provides. While racism may have played a role in the differing level of punishment, it is also true that the interpreters were on a temporary six-month assignment, while the white officers involved were permanent employees of the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Throughout the book, there are intriguing hints of where Ahn could have followed his research, but didn't. One is his uncovering of lists of Korean Americans compiled by U.S. military intelligence in February 1921, which included notes about their language skills and reliability. This strongly suggests that the U.S. military was considering using Korean Americans for some sort of intelligence role at a time of growing American concerns about Japanese expansionism leading up to the Washington Naval Conference. Indeed, Ahn claims to have seen some documents that suggest just that, but fails to include them in his book, stating in a footnote that the line at the copy machine in the National Archives was too long.

Another interesting fact unearthed by Ahn's research is that, of the seven interpreters he identifies by name, four later worked for the U.S. Military Government in South Korea, and a fifth provided language training to U.S. military officers assigned to Korea. This raises interesting questions about the role of Koreans with American backgrounds in the building of South Korea, but Ahn does not explore these questions at all, consigning this rather intriguing information to the biographical sketches in the appendix. Surely it would have been more valuable to explore this further than to provide a detailed accounting of the goings-on of the Young Korean Club in Butte, Montana, as Ahn does in chapter 3.

From the interviews he conducted with the survivors, Ahn discovered that "Korean interpreters at the INS detention centers considered their jobs to be temporary, trivial, and unchallenging" (p. 71). Sadly, the same adjectives could also be applied to this book.

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The War for Korea, 1945–1950: A House Burning, by Allen R. Millet.
Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2005. 376 pp. \$39.95 cloth.

Big books on the Korean War are no longer a rarity, but one must nonetheless take note of Allan R. Millet's ambitious effort in *The War for Korea, 1945–1950*,

the first of a projected two-volume set dwelling upon the decade of Korean military history from 1945 to 1954. Bringing Korea's nascent civil war to the foreground, the book authoritatively chronicles the growth of, and challenges to, American-sponsored security forces in South Korea. Although its ambitious narrative arc is hampered by a lack of Korean-language sources, the book is comprehensively researched and worthy of attention.

The author's diligence in pursuing and unearthing source material is impressive. Private papers, diaries of missionaries in Pyongyang, and reams of documents from the U.S. National Archives, the Truman Library, the Army Institute of Military History at Carlisle Barracks in Pennsylvania, and the U.S. Army archives in Yongsan, Seoul, add to the rich *mélange* of textual sources. At its best, the book offers details of the various campaigns that foreshadowed the outbreak of all-out war in June 1950. Millett's account of the Autumn Harvest Uprising of 1946 is useful, and the rebellions at Cheju and Yosu in the pivotal year of 1948 are depicted in swift and accurate strokes. Within the maelstrom of ROK politics, Millett turns unrelentingly upon the South Korean Labor Party, successfully describing how the U.S. and ROK forces slowly strangled Kim Il Sung's capabilities to marshal a guerilla movement in South Korea. By emphasizing ongoing partisan warfare in South Korea's hills, mountain ranges, and polling places, Millett seeks to shift the historical periodization of the war backwards, arguing that the Korean War in fact began in 1948. This gambit is not wholly successful, but Millett succeeds in adding empirical weight to similar contentions made in volume 1 of Bruce Cumings's *Origins of the Korean War* and John Merrill's *The Peninsular War*.

Because South Korean anti-guerrilla efforts are his primary concern, Millett frequently turns his gaze to specific American military advisors, or, as he calls them, "the unsung heroes in the victory over the Communist partisans" (p. 317). His portraits of the American officers of the Korean Military Advisory Group are sympathetic and humane. In particular, Millett presents a layered portrait of James Hausman, an officer whose private papers depict South Korean battlefields from a discrete and significant U.S. perspective. Beyond identifying with his American subjects, Millett is also eager to counter Cumings's critical assessment of Hausman. Aiding in the task are Millett's interviews with participants, or, more often, the scholarship produced by former Korean graduate students such as Huh Nam-Soon, Lee Young-woo, and Chung Too-woong.

While the book deals extensively with the growth of the ROK officer corps (and keeps the shadow of Manchukuo at arm's length), the American army in Korea more often stands at center stage in this text. John R. Hodge, MacArthur's man in Korea, is cast as an earnest and talented administrator hamstrung by a lack of support from Washington. When Hodge warns the Koreans in his inau-

gural statement of ominous “punishment for disorder,” Millett eschews the potentially offensive direct quote, noting that Hodge’s “only commitment was to protect everyone . . . who remained peaceful” (p. 58). Hodge’s haste in endorsing Korean trusteeship and his tolerance for Japanese police at the outset of the occupation are, to Millett, less notable than the general’s subsequent initiative to place Korea under UN auspices (pp. 111–13). When Hodge asserts that the Korean people were “ignorant of the political facts of life so far as representative government [was] concerned” (p. 128), Millett hardly offers a caveat and moves on to another of his densely packed sources. When Millett uses the phrase “rabid Korean nationalism” more than once (p. 86), it becomes apparent that Hodge’s perspective is, for the most part, not one that the military historian wishes to doubt.

Millett’s supportive treatment of Hodge points to a larger and all-too-familiar feature of the text: here, the Koreans are the acted upon, the passive, the hopelessly factional, while Americans are united in their irreproachable desires for active reform and political stability. While Korean police were, Millett admits, prone to abuses, U.S. troops “curbed bad behavior by the police” (p. 77) and probably acted as a curb on atrocities. Similarly, American perspectives trump Korean experience in evaluating the U.S. Military Government in Korea, a government which, Millett writes, “attempted to bring some order and public well-being to the Korean people—against the opposition of the Korean political elite.” Were Korea’s problems really too great to be left to Koreans alone to solve? It appears unclear for whom Millett is speaking when he writes: “Honesty and efficiency seemed to be unknown in the Korean political lexicon” (p. 75). Lexicons are indeed a problem in this text, which draws upon disappointingly few Korean sources. Korean names for such basic things as political parties are almost entirely absent; the single Korean political party described by its Korean name, Chongwudang, is somewhat oddly described as “a northern mutant” of Chongdogyo (p. 103). According to his gregarious introduction, Millett has annually visited Korea since the mid-1980s, making the omission of Korean all the more curious. Perhaps Millett’s avoidance of the Korean language is part of the author’s desire to avoid what he calls the excessive “Koreanization” of the “Cumings school” (p. 321).

While American advisors receive extended eulogies, the biographical sketches of important Koreans are slight by comparison and certainly more dismissive. The charismatic Christian Cho Man-sik and the nationalist Kim Kyusik receive relatively short shrift, while Millett displays little sympathy for the long-exiled, politically adept, and irreproachably anti-Japanese Kim Ku. Millett describes Kim Ku as “a man of unpleasant looks and personality” (p. 24), dismissing his political support as “pathetic” (p. 154) and branding Kim as an “appeaser” of North Korea (p. 191). Although Syngman Rhee is once cut down

as a “betrayal” of Hodge (p. 118), Millett displays respect for the abrasive South Korean statesman, perhaps reflecting the panegyric perspectives of the Robert Oliver papers.

The wide chronological and geographical scope of the text is both advantageous and irksome. For instance, Millett provides extensive background on the Japanese colonial period in chapter 1, but rarely revisits the Japanese legacy as an important theme in the following years of national division. Millett also surveys the growth of conventional North Korean armed power, using intelligence estimates in American archives and well-chosen secondary literature. For graduate students brushing up on twentieth-century Korean history, Millett’s survey-like sections are helpful summaries of existing secondary works; yet, these long background chapters siphon strength away from this work’s hidden core—perhaps what the book was really meant to be—a sinewy monograph on the emergence of South Korean security forces in the late 1940s. Nevertheless, it is difficult to deny that the author’s desire for breadth and depth is redeemed, as *A House Burning* will certainly become an indispensable reference work on the lead up to the Korean War. Moreover, the wide sweep of the book allows the author to execute with felicity scenes like Syngman Rhee’s *changma*-drenched declaration of the ROK (p. 159).

Perhaps Millett’s desired audience lies beyond the realm of Korean studies, overflowing the field prepared by Korean War scholars. Although the author never broaches the point, *The War for Korea, 1945–1950* is laden with comparative value to readers preoccupied with U.S. state-building efforts in Iraq. Millett brilliantly highlights the problems associated with creation of security forces in a U.S.-occupied client state, the difficulty of negotiating with formerly exiled politicians, and the long grind of counterinsurgency campaigns. Millett exposes the problems of parsing out loyalties between metropolitan police, national police, national guard, and national army troops; he also engages with the question of whether or how to maintain U.S. political and military influence in an occupied territory that becomes an embattled national ally. Millett’s instructive work will (indeed, *should*) find a host of readers in the offices of the Washington defense establishment seeking a pedagogy more distant in time, yet no less terrible, than that currently being inflicted upon American “counterinsurgency” forces in Iraq.

In the final analysis, Millett’s work necessarily elicits praise. The author’s persistent success in hunting down the papers of American military advisors, his interviews with those individuals, and data gleaned from unpublished papers all have contributed to the creation of a compelling and comprehensive diplomatic-military history of the contested creation of the Republic of Korea. He is a rare historian who is willing to invest such intensive labor to create what is, in the author’s telling, really only a set-up for the next book. *The War for Korea, 1945–1950* is a big and exciting work, and the author’s expertise in and ar-

dor for the matter is well conveyed. I think the second book will contain a few more bombshells than did this one.

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A Troubled Peace: U.S. Policy and the Two Koreas, by Chae-jin Lee. Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. Xi, 352 pp., notes, index. \$27.95 paper.

More than fifty years ago, an armistice ended the Korean War. Chae-jin Lee, director of the Keck Center of International Studies at Claremont McKenna College, has written a valuable study describing the “troubled peace” that has been the legacy of this brutal conflict. “In order to elucidate the changing nature of U.S.-Korean relations,” he “examines the manner in which the United States has historically formulated its goals for Korea, publicly and privately articulated those goals, and selected the methods and instruments with which to implement them” (p. 6). Lee also describes how Washington, Seoul, and Pyongyang have perceived each other and have managed and mismanaged relations. Diplomatic and military issues receive primary attention, but there is coverage of economic and cultural interactions. Regrettably, Lee provides less detailed treatment of North Korea than South Korea, focusing on showing how the latter “transformed its ‘special’ relationship with the United States into a ‘normal’ interdependent partnership” (p. 280). Few can disagree with his conclusion “that the United States will continue to assume a significant role in the Korean Peninsula for many years to come” (p. 295).

In his introduction, Lee sets a pattern that concentrates on describing relations between the United States and South Korea, pointing to this as a prime example of the “asymmetrical interactions” (p. 2) that other political scientists have examined. He then briefly summarizes relations under each U.S. president after 1953, concluding that, by 2004, “U.S. policy toward the Korean Peninsula was, to put it mildly, in a state of flux” (p. 6). A fifty-five page chapter follows briskly surveying U.S.-Korean relations from the arrival of the first shipwrecked American sailors in 1853 to North Korea’s seizure of the *Pueblo* in 1968. Skillfully setting the historical stage, Lee explains why U.S.-Korean relations by 1905 “were fraught with asymmetrical interests, mutual misperceptions, and eventually profound disillusionment on the part of the Koreans” (p. 14). After forty years of indifference, the United States returned and helped divide Korea. Relying on the best primary and secondary sources, Lee provides a balanced and judicious explanation of the Korean War. Coverage of events over the next fif-