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U.S. Decision-making in the Korean Conflict: "Lessons of History" from Munich to Clinton

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Abstract

This paper examines U.S. policymakers' use of historical memory in the decision-making process during three moments characterized by high tension: the U.S. response to the North's invasion of South Korea in 1950, the U.S.S. *Pueblo* crisis of 1968, and the successive nuclear standoffs of 1993-1994 and 2002-2003. Using government records and interviews with U.S. officials, I demonstrate how diverse "lessons of history" help constrain the formulation and implementation of some policy options while enabling others by shaping (1) the diplomatic and military options presented to policymakers, (2) policymakers' responses to setbacks on the ground, and (3) the extent of U.S. involvement. I suggest that historical memory is a *constitutive* part of the decision-making environment and a *significant* part of the internal setting of the decision-making process. I also conclude that the selective use of historical memory (analogical reasoning) in the process outlined above is more acute in time of crisis. In these situations, the decision period is shorter; the search for information is less thorough than during the normal course of events; the degree of urgency is high; and the decisions may be irrevocable. Because accurate intelligence on North Korean intentions has been a serious problem dating back to the Second World War, U.S. policymakers have been obliged to rely on their cognizance of past North Korean behavior in order to derive policy options and make decisions. If we suppose that policymakers sometimes unconsciously reach for "lessons of history" when confronting situations in which "objective" information is scarce, then the Korea conflict, with all its uncertainties, ought to afford us a way of testing out this assumption.

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I. INTRODUCTION¹

“Our action in Korea reflected...a recognition that aggression of any sort must be met early and head-on or it will have to be met later and in tougher circumstances. We had re-learned the lessons of the 1930’s – Manchuria, Ethiopia, the Rhineland, Czechoslovakia.”

- *U.S. Department of State Bulletin*, February 1965²

If the U.S. imperialists ignite another Korean war, oblivious of lessons of history, the Korean people including school, youth and children will mercilessly punish them with resentment and hatred that have been pent up for half a century.

- *Korean Central News Agency*, June 2001³

Presidents and their advisors vary greatly in their intellectual formations. Some have been derided as “naïve historians” – Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson – while others hail from academia itself – Woodrow Wilson and Henry Kissinger.⁴ One of the common denominators among them is their use of history to frame and justify policy decisions. If policymakers imagine that history repeats or replicates itself, it may be because they are practical-intuitive historians who reinforce their perceptions of world events by “learning” from “lessons of history.” As the epigraphs above suggest, historical memory

¹ The impetus behind this paper came during a summer spent interning in the Office of the Secretary of Defense (Negotiations Policy). What struck me most when listening to top policymakers debate the options before them was the prominence of historical “lessons” in informing and justifying decisions. I am especially grateful to Professor Emily S. Rosenberg, my thesis advisor, and to my former supervisor, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Guy Robert R. Roberts, for his candid remarks on both current U.S. policy and the 1994 Agreed Framework negotiations. Numerous other former and current U.S. officials provided color and context to my analysis through oral, written, and telephone interviews. Thank you also to Professors Andrew A. Latham and Paul D. Solon for reading and commenting on early drafts.

² *Department of State Bulletin*, 8 February 1965, p. 171.

³ Korean Central News Agency, 23 June 2001. <www.kcna.co.jp/item/2001/200106/news06/23.htm>.

⁴ Vertzberger, Yaacov. “Foreign Policy Decisionmakers as Practical-Intuitive Historians: Applied History and Its Shortcomings.” *International Studies Quarterly* 30, 2 (1986): 223-247. p.224.

might provide a useful tool in examining decision-making because it colors the way policymakers assess risk, predict success, view current developments, and justify their actions rhetorically.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the effect of analogical reasoning at the highest levels of the U.S. foreign policy establishment on policy *formulation* and *implementation* in Korea during three distinct historical moments: (1) the Korean War, 1950-53, (2) the 1968 U.S.S. *Pueblo* crisis, and (3) the nuclear crises of 1993-1994 and 2002-2003. In each instance, I will make the case that top U.S. policymakers' intuitive use of historical analogy constrained some policy options and enabled others, affecting (1) the diplomatic and military options presented to them, (2) their response to setbacks on the ground, and (3) the extent of U.S. involvement.

Although the use of history has been adequately criticized as an effective basis for sound foreign-policy making,⁵ it remains both an inevitable attribute of politicians' cognitive behavior and a highly attractive antidote to the immediate political pressures of crisis management. "Lessons of history" present ready-made conceptual frameworks for the unknown or the complex.⁶ For all their appreciation of complexity, uniqueness, and nuance, there is little evidence that professional historians make "better" policy than professional politicians when they enter the proverbial Situation Room.⁷ "Most historians

⁵ May, Ernest R. *"Lessons" of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973; Record, Jeffrey. *Making War, Thinking History: Munich, Vietnam, and Presidential Uses of Force from Korea to Kosovo*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2002; Jervis, Robert. *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976.

⁶ Zashin, Elliot, and Phillip C. Chapman. "The Uses of Metaphor and Analogy: Toward a Renewal of Political Language." *The Journal of Politics* 36, 2 (1974): 290-326. p.312

⁷ Vertzberger, 224.

cringe at talk of the ‘lessons of history.’ Trained as specialists and wary of sweeping comparisons, they flinch from attempts to make past events speak directly to current policy. They often remind us of what makes circumstances unique, highlighting differences where others see similarities.”⁸ The decision-making process – the imperative to act based on imperfect information – turns academic historians and homespun politicians alike into “practical-intuitive historians.”⁹ Whereas academic historians research texts in the past in the context of a given historical moment, practical-intuitive historians retrieve them solely in terms of their worth for the present. While the selective use (and abuse) of the history in framing and justifying the present is sometime regrettable, “[i]t would be foolhardy for decision-making to ignore the history of a crisis or the past behavior of an opposing leader...It would also be foolhardy to ignore past, similar cases, even if they are not identical.”¹⁰

I hope that my examination of the Korean Conflict, which operates at the intersection of diplomatic history, international relations theory, and organizational behavior theory, might add to an exciting dialogue that confronts the “grand narrative” that has long dominated the history of U.S. foreign relations.¹¹ By giving emphasis to the ways in which individual actors’ gave meaning to language, my analysis is meant to be taken as part of a much broader look at the use of language and scripts as vehicles for communicating meaning in foreign relations. In the conclusion, I will comment on what

⁸ Cohen, Eliot A. “History and Hyperpower.” *Foreign Affairs* 83, 4 (2004): 49-63. p.49.

⁹ Vertzberger, 223.

¹⁰ MacDonald, Scot. *Rolling the Iron Dice: Historical Analogies and Decisions to Use Military Force*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2000.

¹¹ Immerman, Richard H. “Psychology.” In Hogan, Michael J. and Thomas G. Paterson. *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004; Leffler, Maylvyn P. “National Security.” In *Ibid*, pp. 123-136; Costigliola, Frank. “Reading for Meaning: Theory, Language, and Metaphor.” In *Ibid*, pp. 279-303.

the evidence the Korean case offers us towards the formulation of a theory of historical analogies.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

I will first review the contributions of historians, international relations theorists, and psychologists in helping us understand the “why” and “how” of using history in formulating foreign policy. Second, I will examine the historiography of the Korean Conflict and identify gaps in our understanding of the *Pueblo* and nuclear crises, particularly with regard to the influence of historical analogies on U.S. decision-making.

Interdisciplinary Theory

A number of disciplines have added to our understanding of history and foreign policy formulation and have adequately problematized the concept of the rational actor model in analyzing decision-making. Ernest R. May's “*Lessons*” of *the Past* revealed how, in conflicts ranging from the Second World War to Vietnam, policymakers have used historical metaphors to frame and justify their decisions. In addition, he prescribed a role for professional historians in righting the wrongs of policymakers' use of history.¹² More recently, a number of scholars have dusted off May's tome and applied it to a broader array of historical moments and deepened the analysis. Yuen Foon Khong (*Analogies at War*),¹³ Jeffrey Record (*Making War, Thinking History*),¹⁴ and Scot MacDonald (*Rolling*

¹² For a treatment of Sino-Korean and Soviet-Korean relations, see Westad, Odd Arne, ed. *Brothers in Arms: The Rise and Fall of the Sino-Soviet Alliance*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

¹³ *Bulletin of the Cold War International History Project* 5 (1995); Weathersby, Kathryn. “Soviet Aims in Korea and the Origins of the Korean War, 1945-1950: Evidence from Russian Archives,” *Working Paper No. 8*, Cold War International History Project, 2005.

¹⁴ Weathersby, Kathryn. “The Korean War Revisited.” *Wilson Quarterly* 23, 3 (1999): 91-96. pp.92-94.

the Iron Dice: Historical Analogies and Decisions to use Military Force in Regional Contingencies)¹⁵ have chosen to examine the decades-long competition between the Munich and Vietnam analogies in conflicts ranging from Korea to Kosovo. In his cross disciplinary work *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Robert Jervis examines the dynamic relationship between events, lessons, and future behavior.¹⁶ He laments that “the lessons learned [from history] will be applied to a wide variety of situations without a careful effort to determine whether the cases are similar or crucial dimensions.”¹⁷

The most common “lessons of history” have often been divided into metaphors and analogies. In their analysis of political language, Zashin and Chapman distinguish between the two and analyze the effect of each on learning processes. Historical metaphors do not serve merely as descriptors; they “add meaning to statements” and “[have] capacities that are distinctive.”¹⁸ Metaphors such as Neville Chamberlain’s ill-fated 1938 Munich meeting with Adolf Hitler have two subjects – “a principal and a subsidiary.”¹⁹ “Metaphors are used, then, to persuade and to influence attitudes, as well as to assist in the interpretation of experience.”²⁰ Historical *analogies*, on the other hand, rely upon the explicit association of two subjects. “The user of an analogy is *normally*

¹⁵ Cumings, Bruce. *The Origins of the Korean War: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes 1945-1947*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981.

¹⁶ Weathersby, 93.

¹⁷ Foot, Rosemary. *A Substitute for Victory: The Politics of Peacemaking at the Korean Armistice Talks*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990.

¹⁸ Mazarr, Michael J. *North Korea and the Bomb: A Case Study in Nonproliferation*. New York: St. Martin's, 1995; Sigal, Leon V. *Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998;

¹⁹ May, Ernest R. *“Lessons” of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

²⁰ Khong, Yuen Foong. *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.

obliged to announce his purpose and seek the conscious co-operation of his audience in working out the parallelism that he claims will illuminate his subject.”²¹ In the collective mind of the intended audience, analogies facilitate the extrapolation of future outcomes based on causal relationships.²²

Jervis and Khong both suggest that metaphors and analogies can lead policymakers to miscalculate risk and view setbacks as part of the “march of history” towards eventual victory – the “perseverance effect.” Explaining the lack of swift victory in Korea, presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson wrote in *Foreign Affairs*: “There is, of course, no solution to the Korean problem, precisely because it is only a part of the whole Soviet imperialist drive – an episode, really, in the sweep of history which relentlessly confronts freedom with thralldom.”²³ Combined with a belief that the American body politic is immune to certain human frailties,²⁴ the perseverance effect has a distorting impact on the decision-making process.

Several authors have attempted to construct a more rigorous methodology around the myriad factors affecting the use of history.²⁵ Khong envisions six such rationales behind

²¹ Record, Jeffrey. *Making War, Thinking History: Munich, Vietnam, and Presidential Uses of Force from Korea to Kosovo*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2002.

²² MacDonald, Scot. *Rolling the Iron Dice: Historical Analogies and Decisions to Use Military Force*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2000

²³ Jervis, 222.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 228.

²⁵ Immerman, Richard H. “Psychology.” In Hogan, Michael J. and Thomas G. Paterson. *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004; Absent in the literature on the use of history in foreign policy is an appreciation of how policymakers attempt to forecast the effect of their decisions on the enemy’s memory. Indeed, the phrase “we’ll teach them a lesson” is a conscious attempt to defeat the enemy in the long-term by creating a short-term situation from which he or she will extract lessons that will constrain similar behavior in the future. These preemptive practical-intuitive policies attempt to make the enemy analogize the action and draw a “lesson” from it, therefore enabling or constraining a course of action.

“analogical explanation”: (1) help define the nature of the situation; (2) assess the stakes; (3) provide prescriptions; (4) predict the chances of success; (5) evaluate moral rightness; and (6) warn about the dangers associated with a situation.²⁶ Brandstrom et al. differentiate between unconscious and conscious uses of historical memory and between explicitly “political” analogies and analogies as “diagnostic tasks” designed to organize incoming information (the present) according to a prior database (memory).²⁷ Consistent with this interpretation, the past can impact policy in “enabling” (pushing a course of action) and “constraining” (warning of the dangers) capacities.²⁸

Also called schemas, frames, conceptualizations and plans, scripts are “descriptions of a complex object, situation, process, or structure” that concretize thought patterns such as metaphors, analogies, extrapolations, and cognitive/political uses of the past.²⁹ Khong proposes four such scripts of historical “lessons” in U.S. foreign policy: (1) fascist aggression, (2) communist aggression, (3) superpower confrontation, and (4) superpower cooperation. The Korean Conflict has involved “learning” from “lessons of history” that fall under all four categories, as we shall see.

²⁶ Ibid, 106.

²⁷ “Dinner menu from the June 25, 1950, Blair House meeting.” 25 June, 1950. [Electronic Records], Records of the Truman Presidential Museum and Library.

²⁸ Declassified documents relating to the Agreed Framework talks have been used where available. The most comprehensive memoir detailing the process of negotiations is Wit, Joel S., Daniel B. Poneman, and Robert L. Gallucci. *Going Critical: The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004.

²⁹ In some cases, information was proffered off the record to be able to provide a more candid assessment of ongoing intra- and inter-agency debates on the issue. I have note this in each case.

Historiography of the Korean Conflict

Diplomatic historians' interest in "historical memory,"³⁰ or exploring the past in relation to the ways in which it remembered in the present, has rarely extended into the study of decision-making at the highest levels.³¹ In Korean Conflict historiography, particularly those works dealing with the *Pueblo* crisis and the nuclear standoffs, this gap is especially evident.³² The slack left by historians has been taken up increasingly by international relations theorists, although there have been some recent efforts to reclaim this lost territory.³³ In this vein, Richard Immerman points out the value of psychological variables in analyzing decisions in a variety of historical settings, most notably the Cold War. "Psychological theories can help to explain how and why decision makers act in this manner [relying on "lessons of history, drawing analogies to define a situation or identify a phenomenon], and in the process they can provide clues for locating errors in judgment or perception."³⁴

Korean Conflict historiography since the end of the Cold War has been able to explore previously obscure aspects of the Korean War, but has not adequately taken into account

³⁰ For an excellent example of the ways in which historical memory helps shape contemporary understandings of the past, see Rosenberg, Emily S. *A Date Which Will Live: Pearl Harbor in America*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

³¹ Schulzinger, Robert D. "Memory and Understanding U.S. Foreign Relations." In Hogan, Michael J. and Thomas G. Paterson. *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004: "Memories take place in the present, but they are related in complex ways to things that happened in the past. By explaining what happens when the present collides with the past through the lens of memory historians can better comprehend what has been important about foreign affairs and how and why notions of what is important have changed."

³² Lerner, Mitchell. *The Pueblo Incident: A Spy Ship and the Failure of American Foreign Policy*. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002.

³³ This is roughly based on the difference elucidated in Snyder, Richard C. and Glenn D. Paige. "The United States Decision to Resist Aggression in Korea: The Application of an Analytical Scheme." In Snyder, Richard C., H.W. Bruck, and Burton Sapin. *Foreign Policy Decision-Making: An Approach to the Study of International Politics*. New York: Free Press of Glencoe/Macmillan, 1962. p. 241.

³⁴ Zashin and Chapman, 296.

the use of historical memory, particularly on the U.S. side.³⁵ Instead, the debate hinges on the extent of the relationship between the Chinese, Soviets, and North Koreans. Scholars have been greatly aided by the emergence of previously classified documents on the other side of the communist divide. Kathryn Weathersby of the Cold War International History Project has been able to gain access and sort through an impressive new documentary trail.³⁶ This new “counter-revisionist” school seeks to demonstrate that Soviet- and Sino-Korean links were much closer than envisioned by the so-called revisionists, lead by noted Korea scholar Bruce Cumings, who Weathersby charges with “[viewing] America’s intervention in Korea, like its involvement in Vietnam, as unjustified and counterproductive.”³⁷ Cumings, who published his seminal two volume work *The Origins of the Korean War* before many of the documents in question became available, remains deeply critical of the American failure to conceptualize the Korean War as a *civil* conflict rather than a test of the U.S. security parameter.³⁸ Weathersby counters with the assertion that “[t]here is now no doubt that the original North Korean attack was a conventional military offensive planned and prepared by the Soviet Union. While Kim Il Sung had pressed Stalin for permission to reunify Korea by force, North Korea was not at that time capable of mounting such a campaign.”³⁹ She largely ignores how the U.S. itself was responsible for assigning importance to this phenomenon. A scholar concerned with historical memory might have focused the archival analysis on U.S. policymakers’ use of “metaphor wars”⁴⁰ to define the threat posed by Stalin and

³⁵ Ibid, 298.

³⁶ Ibid, 309.

³⁷ Ibid, 311.

³⁸ Khong, 220.

³⁹ Stevenson, Adlai E. “Korea in Perspective.” *Foreign Affairs* 30, 3 (1952): 349-360. p.354.

⁴⁰ Schulzinger, 338.

Kim Il Sung. In his excellent and all-encompassing study *The Korean War*, William Stueck claims that the Korean War substituted for a third World War between the two superpowers.⁴¹ This book goes a long way in framing our discussion of the importance of U.S. conceptualizations of the conflict – not as a localized war, but as a possible prelude to a final showdown. In other words, wars are not fought purely, or even mostly, on the basis of objectively-derived “interests.” Two works by Rosemary Foot warrant our attention, for they treat the U.S. decision-making process in detail during moments of great crisis: *A Substitute for Victory* addresses the supposed U.S. inflexibility at the Armistice talks, while *The Wrong War* delves into the differing relationships between presidents and their secretaries of state. *Wrong War* embodies the bureaucratic politics method of analysis.⁴² Neither of these works, however, deals explicitly with historical memory. The literature on the 1993-1994 nuclear crisis remains mostly geared towards policy audiences, owing to the paucity of available documents.⁴³

III. A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

Before proceeding with the substantive sections, it might be useful for me to comment on the methodological approach employed, spell out the importance I have given to theory in this analysis, and address potential concerns the reader may have regarding a study which operates on the margins of diplomatic history, international relations theory, and organizational behavior theory.

⁴¹ Stueck, William. *The Korean War: An International History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

⁴² Wubben, H.H. “American Prisoners of War in Korea: A Second Look at the “Something New in History” Theme.” *American Quarterly* 22, 1 (1970): 3-19. p.3.

⁴³ Two books stand out from this genre, however: Michael J. Mazarr’s *North Korea and the Bomb* and Leon V. Sigal’s *Disarming Strangers*.

There exist notable differences in the way I have gathered evidence related to the three historical moments that form the crux of my analysis. Government documents, most of them found in the National Archives or published in the official *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS) series, informed most of the analysis for the Korean War and *Pueblo* incident. The picture of policy debate leading up to and through the Korean War is remarkably complete; we even know that President Truman was served “battered asparagus” and “Russian [salad] dressing” during the crucial 25 July 1950 Blair House meeting.⁴⁴ The formulation of military and diplomatic options during the Korean War and *Pueblo* incident is illustrated by the records of the Departments of State and Defense; the decision-making environments at each step are documented by the records of the Executive Office of the President. The student of diplomatic history is well served by the declassification of documents related to these two events. However, the nuclear crises of 1993-1994 and 2002-2003 leave us with no comparable paper trail. It is in this instance that I have turned to interviews with former and current U.S. officials to provide a comprehensive look at the internal decision-making dynamic during the respective nuclear crises in order to shed light on the individual actors’ thought processes.

Skeptics may claim that the inclusion of recent history and, in some cases, events that are still unfolding, muddies the analysis. Furthermore, it might be argued, relying too heavily on the actors’ own accounts, especially on such a salient and topical issue, does not offer the same “unvarnished” look as material that has long been in the public domain and therefore open to greater historiographic debate. Historians, however, are forced to make do with the sources at hand. I am confident that the questions posed and the answers

⁴⁴ Khong, 10.

rendered have generated descriptions which reflect the historical record that will emerge as documents are declassified.⁴⁵ This is because I am concerned mostly with how the past is represented in the present as *historical memory* rather than what events transpired behind closed doors. I have received information on the 1994 talks from a list of officials that I believe touches on every relevant agency and policymaker involved in the decision-making process at that time: a Director of Central Intelligence, various ambassadors, National Security Council staff members, and senior (under secretary rank) and policy level (deputy assistant and assistant secretary rank) Department of State officials. In some cases I have substantiated the veracity of one account by following up on it with another interviewee.

Since little has been written in the academy on the subject of the 2003-2004 North Korean nuclear crisis, my approach has been to rely upon newspapers and policy-oriented publications to buttress the insights offered by an extensive round of interviews with current U.S. officials involved in U.S. policy vis-à-vis the Korean Peninsula. As with the Clinton Administration case, I have gathered material from representatives of various agencies and at diverse levels of the policy chain: two assistant secretaries of state, senior and policy level Department of Defense officials (off the record), and various working level officials in the Department of State. Once more, I feel that the information I have gathered provides a candid representation of the variety of views on what should constitute current U.S. policy and, more to the point, what cognitive elements entered the

⁴⁵ Brandstrom et al., 194.

decision-making process.⁴⁶ In all cases, interviewees were asked to respond to a uniform set of questions regarding their use of historical “lessons” in informing policy debate.

In this paper the reader may detect more theory than is perhaps commonly found in diplomatic history. The U.S. decision-making process is highly formalized and has involved the same set of actors in the hierarchy (represented by different individuals) in myriad crises over time. Thus, it makes sense to examine in a theoretical context how these actors make and carry out decisions. I make an important distinction between “objective” information, derived from situation-specific intelligence and other reports, and “personal” information, supplied by the policymaker him/herself prior to entering the decision-making environment. It is immeasurably more difficult to assess the effect of the latter on the decision-making process, for it is rarely explicitly stated in policy deliberations.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, I have undertaken to accomplish just this task.

IV. STARTING AND ENDING THE KOREAN WAR

Recounting his thoughts when he learned that North Korea had invaded the South, Harry Truman wrote:

“In my generation, this was not the first occasion when the strong had attacked the weak. I recalled some earlier instances: Manchuria, Ethiopia, Austria. I remembered how each time that the democracies failed to act it had encouraged the aggressors to keep going ahead. Communism was acting in Korea just as Hitler, Mussolini, and the Japanese had acted ten, fifteen, and twenty years earlier.”⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ibid, 195.

⁴⁷ Winograd, Terry. “A Framework for Understanding Discourse.” In Just, Marcel Adam, and Patricia A. Carpenter, eds. *Cognitive Processes in Comprehension*. Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1977. p.72.

⁴⁸ Truman, Harry S. *Memoirs, Vol. 2: Years of Trial and Hope*. Garden City, NJ: Doubleday Press, 1956. p.333.

Below we will see that this account was not simply a rhetorical device, but a representation of the actual cognitive processes of many in U.S. policy circles. How did the apparent determination to avoid repeating the mistakes of appeasement affect standing U.S. objectives in the peninsula? How did policy options proposed before the start of hostilities reflect Truman's choice of historical analogy? How did avoiding another Munich shape the management of the conflict when the going got tough? We will see how the Munich analogy enabled the initial use of force while constraining the U.S.'s ability to disengage. By now, the word "aggression" borders on being a metaphor with forgotten meaning; its rhetorical application is so ubiquitous as to make us forget the series of historical events from which the meaning of the 1930s was extracted. Shortly after the Second World War, however, the 1930s had not yet taken on the characteristics of a defined script.

Prior to the Outbreak of Hostilities

On the eve of North Korea's unannounced invasion of the South, the U.S. government had a standing policy not to intervene militarily on the Korean Peninsula. From the 8 April 1948 decision to withdraw U.S. forces from Korea until the invasion on 24 June 1950, President Truman had been overseeing the implementation NSC 8/2. The Army command was downsized to the lower profile United States Military Advisor Group to the Republic of Korea. By February 1950, \$56 million in military equipment had been

donated to the Korean Army, Coast Guard and Police, with \$9.8 million more on the way.⁴⁹

Clearly, President Truman and the Joint Chiefs of Staff wished to avoid a military commitment to an area which had been designated outside the sphere of strategic threat to core U.S. national security objectives.⁵⁰ In addition, domestic politics strongly favored limiting engagement. The Senate Republican Policy Committee, while recognizing a “moral commitment to South Korea,” warned that the U.S. had no “obligation to go to war on its behalf.”⁵¹ NSC-68, which moved significantly beyond deterrence and containment strategy, had been submitted to the President on 14 April 1950, only a month and a half before the invasion.⁵² By the spring of 1950, the U.S. had occupied Korea for almost six years, moving from a few American officers stationed in strategic locations such as Pusan, to a broader occupation by tactical troops, and finally to a full-fledged occupation by civil affairs teams by the end of 1945.⁵³ The troops’ presence would ensure a U.S. interest in any invasion from the North, although how that interest would be manifested would remain to be seen.

Deciding to Intervene – the Power of Munich

The speed with which the U.S. decided to respond militarily following the North’s invasion belies the menu of options policymakers had in front of them. While the U.S.

⁴⁹ “Progress Report by the Under Secretary of State on the implementation of the Position of the United States with Respect to Korea,” 10 February 1950. (microfilm). Records of the National Security Council. p.2.

⁵⁰ May, 67.

⁵¹ As quoted in May, 74.

⁵² Record, 37.

⁵³ Cumings, 289.

could have placed unilateral (or sought multilateral) economic sanctions against the North, it chose military action. The latter was clearly not a “last resort.” Two days after the initial invasion by the North, Truman reportedly remarked to an aide that “Korea is the Greece of the Far East. If we are tough enough now, if we stand up to them as we did in Greece three years ago, they won’t take any next steps. But if we just stand by, they’ll move into Iran and they’ll take over the whole Middle East. There’s no telling what they’ll do, if we don’t put up a fight now.”⁵⁴ This analogy would have prescribed enunciating the “Truman Doctrine” by drawing a highly public line in the sand. The stakes were just as high as Greece, as the memoirs of Dean Rusk and Dean Acheson make clear. Korea, in their view, was not merely a civil war, but a test of U.S. postwar influence and possibly the beginning of a third world war. “The North Korean attack seemed a direct challenge to the entire concept of collective security won at such cost during World War II.”⁵⁵ Rusk, then an Assistant Secretary of State under Secretary Dean Acheson, expressed the classic security dilemma that faced U.S. policymakers: with imperfect information about the North’s intentions, the U.S. had to plan for the worst, a major theater war:

“When the North Koreans first attacked, we didn’t know if this was a single offensive or the opening shot in a much broader Communist offensive in Asia. Consequently, in addition to landing troops in Korea, we took other steps to deter our opponents from expanding the Korean Conflict into other parts of Asia.”⁵⁶

There was certainly no shortage of historical antecedents to the original Korean Conflict between North and South: the Spanish, Greek, and Chinese civil wars were all probably

⁵⁴ May, 71.

⁵⁵ Rusk, Dean. *As I Saw It*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990. p.162.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 166.

more apt situations that would have prescribed different courses of action than that which was taken: neutrality regarding Spain in 1937; covert action/military assistance regarding Greece in 1947; and financial aid to the opposition in the Chinese case.⁵⁷ Instead, Munich conveniently lumped together the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931-32, the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935, and even the German remilitarization of the Rhineland.⁵⁸ The historical analogy helped define the situation (the strong attacking the weak), assess the stakes (regional security), and provide prescriptions (early U.S. intervention). Truman's personal memories of the 1930s acted as an enabling force on his decision-making a decade and a half later. Indeed, there was little debate regarding the validity of these analogies, or more importantly, their momentous prescriptive power. This is significant, because the fewer times an analogy, which assumes a certain discontinuity between the past and the present, has to be made explicitly in speeches or in policy coordination meetings, the more the message has been internalized and accepted by the audience.⁵⁹ The 1930s, with its implied meaning of "weakness breeds defeat," ruled the day and would live on in future policy deliberations.

A dinner meeting at Blair House on 25 June 1950 provided the first substantive and high level discussion of the options for resolving the Korea situation. The only major factor constraining the decision to respond militarily on behalf of the friendly South Korean government was uncertainty regarding the U.S.S.R's reaction. While the service chiefs favored sending the U.S.S.R a clear message, since "the Korean situation offered as good an occasion for action in drawing the line as anywhere else," they demonstrated

⁵⁷ MacDonald, 78.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

considerable unease with South Korean capabilities and feared the possible intervention of mainland China as well as covert support from the U.S.S.R.⁶⁰ The State Department and civilian leadership in the Pentagon, however, saw the event through 1930s-tinted lenses. The secretary of the Air Force repeatedly sought to draw a parallel to the two wars for the President's benefit, concluding: "We should take calculated risks hoping that our action will keep the peace."⁶¹ During a separate State-Defense Department meeting, a member of the State Policy Planning Staff argued that "if they [can] get away with this move they would probably move in other areas."⁶² Truman shared this view and made it clear that the very success of the nascent U.N. was at stake.⁶³ To this end, he approved substantially increasing military support to the outnumbered and overpowered South Korean forces.⁶⁴ On 30 June, Truman decided to commit U.S. ground forces, beginning the Korean War.⁶⁵

In the diplomatic sphere, the U.S. tried to paint Korea with the brush of Munich (and its implicit connotations for thwarting future aggression militarily) from the very beginning. The day after news of the North's action, the U.S. Mission at the U.N. (USUN) quickly organized a series of bilateral meetings with U.S. friends and allies to coordinate diplomatic action within the world body. The U.S. was adamant in trying to assign full

⁶⁰ Philip C. Jessup, Ambassador at Large, "Memorandum of Conversation," 25 June 1950, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1950, vol. 7, Korea, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, pp.157-61 (hereafter *FRUS* followed by appropriate year). The U.S. saw Korea as only one of a number of steps the Communist world was likely to take in order to test the U.S. security parameter, the next likely test case being Formosa (Taiwan).

⁶¹ Philip C. Jessup, Ambassador at Large, "Memorandum of Conversation," 25 June 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, vol. 7, p.160.

⁶² Lincoln White, "Notes on *Korean Conflict* (from *FRUS* Editorial Note), 26 June 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, vol. 7, p.143.

⁶³ Philip C. Jessup, "Memorandum of Conversation," 26 June 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, vol. 7, Korea, p.183.

⁶⁴ Philip C. Jessup, "Memorandum of Conversation," 25 June 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, vol. 7, Korea, p.158.

⁶⁵ "Editorial Note," *FRUS*, 1950, vol. 7, Korea, p.255.

blame to the North, attempting to include the phrase “unprovoked act of aggression” in an early U.N. Security Council draft resolution.⁶⁶ Other Security Council members were nervous about striking such a combative tone based on so little information.⁶⁷

Thus, the decision to “draw the line [U.S. security parameter]” with Korea represented a departure from previous strategic thinking. To briefly indulge in a counterfactual scenario will allow us to see the full effect of the “act of aggression” mindset on U.S. diplomatic and military activity. If the U.S. had viewed the invasion as a domestic Korean affair rather than a 1939-like *blitzkrieg* by Communism upon the free world, USUN would not have pushed for strong condemnatory language, and, most importantly, the view that U.S. credibility was on the line would not have prevailed at the White House. Without the emotional power of the State and Defense Departments’ portrayal of this crisis as only one of many to come, it is possible to imagine that Truman would simply have restricted action to an evacuation of U.S. persons.

A month after U.S. troops entered the Korean War with the approval of the United Nations Security Council, the National Security Council (NSC) undertook a review of U.S. policy objectives. Acknowledging that “a global war has not necessarily begun in Korea and may not eventuate,” the NSC analyzed the probability that Korea was a local testing ground for a global scheme that could also involve other countries not covered by

⁶⁶ Charles P. Noyes, Adviser on Security Council Affairs, U.S. Mission to the U.N., “Memorandum of Conversations,” 25 June 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, vol. 7, Korea, p.144-45. The actual resolution that was adopted by the Security Council was much more restrained, merely calling for an immediate cessation of hostilities.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 145-46.

NATO: Iran, Turkey, Yugoslavia, Greece, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Finland.⁶⁸ Contrary to previous assessments undertaken before the war, Korea now fell squarely within the U.S. security purview.

Dealing with Setbacks

Having so convincingly endowed the Korean War with the clear moral purpose of preventing world war by stopping expansionist aggression dead in its tracks, the U.S. quickly ran up against the realities on the ground. By 5 July, it was already obvious to U.S. policymakers that South Korean forces weren't necessarily up to the task, that U.N. forces were facing unknown terrain, and that Russians and Chinese intentions were still unclear.⁶⁹ Worse yet, significant setbacks or total failure in Korea (Korean unification under communism) after having pledged to stop communist hostility would be worse for the U.S. position in the Cold War than having never intervened at all.⁷⁰ The State Department restated the end goal: "[W]e must be unequivocally clear that we shall press the Korean issue through to a successful conclusion, subject to a reexamination of general strategy if the Soviet Union enters the fighting."⁷¹ By late July, the U.S. made clear to its allies that the conflict risked being "very long" and that it had "no intention of fighting a major war in Korea."⁷²

⁶⁸ "The Position and Actions of the United States with Respect to Possible Further Soviet Moves in the Light of the Korean Situation: A Report to the National Security Council by the Executive Secretary." (microfilm). 8 August 1950.

⁶⁹ Dean Rusk, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, "Memorandum to the Secretary of State," 5 July 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, vol. 7, Korea, p.303.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 303: "Furthermore, unless we act resolutely, the political effect upon the Soviet Union will not be what we hoped to produce in the opening days of the Korean Conflict."

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 303.

⁷² "Agreed Memorandum, Summary of United States-United Kingdom Discussions on the Present World Situation, July 20-24, 1950, Washington, DC," 24 July 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, vol. 7, Korea, p.463.

In August 1950, the CIA illustrated the risk of failure in a classic intelligence understatement: "Although an invasion of North Korea by U.N. forces, could, if successful, bring several important advantages to the US, it appears at present that grave risks would be involved in such a course of action. The military success of the operation is by no means assured..."⁷³ Far from nipping "aggression" in the bud, the U.S. risked losing face internationally and ceding ground to the communist world with little to no military expenditure on the Soviet Union's behalf. Despite these pronouncements, the State Department remained enchanted with the possibility of far-reaching benefits a clear victory would bring: "The bonds of Manchuria, the pivot of this complex outside the U.S.S.R, would be weakened...the Chinese Communist regime...might be inclined to question their exclusive dependence on the Kremlin. Throughout Asia, those who foresee only inevitable Soviet conquest would take hope."⁷⁴

From the beginning of the war until the conclusion of the armistice agreement, U.S. leaders assumed North Korea was an agent of Soviet global ambitions. The aggression was Soviet in nature and origin and its victim was the entire free world. The CIA understood that the Soviets intended to "eliminate Anglo-American influence in Europe and Asia...establish Soviet domination over [these areas]...[and] weaken and disintegrate the non-Soviet world generally."⁷⁵ "The North Korean Government is completely under Kremlin control and there is no possibility that the North Koreans acted without prior

⁷³ "Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency," 18 August 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, vol. 7, Korea, p.601.

⁷⁴ John M. Allison and John K. Emmerson, Office of Northeast Asian Affairs, "Draft Memorandum," 21 August 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, vol. 7, Korea, p.620.

⁷⁵ "Memorandum by the Central Intelligence Agency: Conclusions Regarding a Possible Soviet Decision to Precipitate Global War," 12 October 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, vol. 7, Korea, p.937.

instruction from Moscow. The move against South Korea must therefore be considered a Soviet move," the State Department intelligence branch warned.⁷⁶ This axiomatic postulation precluded the possibility that the U.S. would come to view the conflict as simply a civil war for Korean unification.

The localized war scenario was thrown out the window on 28 November when General Douglas MacArthur, Commander in Chief of the U.N. in Korea, cabled the Joint Chiefs of Staff: "We face an entirely new war...This command has done everything humanly possible within its capabilities but is now faced with conditions beyond its control and strength."⁷⁷ The new crisis in question was the direct and unmistakable intervention of communist Chinese forces in the U.N.-Korean Conflict. During an emergency meeting of the National Security Council, General Marshall emphasized to the president that Chinese military action was "dictated in large measure by the [Soviet] Politburo."⁷⁸

The Munich metaphor rang loudest in moments of true crisis. The fear of "appeasing" an aggressor had a unique ability shape policymakers' calculus. The analogy had two policy implications: (1) it made a seemingly small, localized conflict seem like a trigger for world war and (2) it significantly increased the perceived cost of negotiating a cease-fire, which the Joint Chiefs of Staff said was needed to ensure that the U.S. did not enter into

⁷⁶ "Intelligence Estimate Prepared by the Estimates Group, Office of Intelligence Research, Department of State." 25 June 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, vol. 7, Korea, pp.148-49.

⁷⁷ General Douglas MacArthur, Commander in Chief, Far East, "The Commander in Chief, Far East (MacArthur) to the Joint Chiefs of Staff," 28 November 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, vol. 7, Korea, pp.1237-38.

⁷⁸ Philip C. Jessup, "Memorandum of Conversation," 28 November 1950, *FRUS* 1950, vol. 7, Korea, p.1243.

full-fledged conflict with mainland China.⁷⁹ In December 1950, when the U.S. faced the clear possibility of an expanded, regional war involving both major communist powers, Acheson told the generals in attendance: “[W]e must consider the security of our troops and the effect on the position of the United States in the Far East and the whole world. There is danger of our becoming the greatest appeasers of all time if we abandon the Koreans and they are slaughtered.”⁸⁰ General Bradley told the Pentagon meeting participants that “we must weigh that [a proposed cease-fire] against Korea and against the loss of prestige in Asia and Europe. We would lose Indochina and Formosa. The Germans are already saying we proved that we are weak. Appeasement is gaining in Europe.”⁸¹ Without the U.S. fear of appearing weak before the world, the decision to negotiate a cease-fire would likely have been weighted towards avoiding engaging China and the Soviet Union. Acheson’s and others’ historical biases considerably prolonged a conflict that conceivably could have ended in late 1950 before the Chinese intervention. The generals were nervous about their ability to fight the Chinese and at one point suggested calling the whole matter off and bringing the troops home; Acheson rejected this proposition outright.⁸²

Policymakers also invoked history, especially the experience of the last two wars, for reassurance. The great minds of the cold war – George Kennan, Averell Harriman, Paul Nitze, Dean Rusk, and Dean Acheson – found themselves in a worse predicament than

⁷⁹ General Omar Bradley, “The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Bradley) to the Secretary of Defense (Marshall),” 4 December 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, vol. 7, Korea, pp.1347-48.

⁸⁰ Philip C. Jessup, “Memorandum of Conversation,” 3 December 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, vol. 7, Korea, p.1324.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 1326.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 1326.

anything they had envisioned prior to the U.N. intervention. Allies were becoming nervous about the possibility of a spectacular defeat of U.N. forces.⁸³ The unity that had prevailed at both the U.N. General Assembly and the Security Council (minus the Soviet Union) during the first act of communist “aggression” could not be mustered for this latest round of Chinese “aggression.” Kennan told the group that “we [are] in a very difficult position—one which [is] similar to the one the British had been in the last two wars when they held on when there was no apparent reason for it.”⁸⁴

The Decision to Negotiate

By early 1951, an exit strategy was already being discussed with a sense of urgency that exceeded discussions the previous fall. Several options were discarded at the State Department working level as so unfeasible or dangerous they didn’t warrant further consideration: military action with the end goal of unifying all of Korea by force; military action that would bring about a change of the communist regime in China; holding the 38th parallel in an indefinite stalemate, and prompt withdrawal “with or without a pretext.”⁸⁵ The last alternative was judged to harbor the most dangerous implications in the long term: “the world-wide political effect of a demonstration of U.S. irresolution would be disastrous...a major aggression by communism would result in a clear communist victory...[it] would be unacceptable as a matter of national honor and

⁸³ George Ignatieff, Counsellor of the Canadian Embassy, “The Counsellor of the Canadian Embassy (Ignatieff) to the Secretary of State for European Affairs (Perkins).” 3 December 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, vol. 7, 1339; Dean Acheson, Secretary of State, “The Secretary of State to the Embassy in India,” 4 December 1950, *FRUS*, vol. 7, Korea, p.1377; David K. E. Bruce, “The Ambassador in France (Bruce) to the Secretary of State,” 5 December 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, vol. 7, Korea, pp.1387-88.

⁸⁴ Lucius D. Battle, Special Assistant to the Secretary of State, “Memorandum,” 4 December 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, vol. 7, Korea, p.1345.

⁸⁵ Dean Rusk, “Memorandum: Outline of Action Regarding Korea,” 11 February 1951, *FRUS*, 1951, vol. 7, Korea and China, pp.165-67.

morality.”⁸⁶ Although the conflict would drag on for more than two years, the contours of the cease-fire debate had emerged. The benefit, according to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, would be the end of a war that had no foreseeable end, freeing U.S. forces necessary for other commitments worldwide, mainly the defense of Japan and Western Europe.⁸⁷ The cost of unilateral U.N. withdrawal as outlined above was the unspecified “serious repercussions on [the] position of freedom-loving peoples around the world.”⁸⁸

The argument that U.N. forces would be perceived as bowing to tyranny if they negotiated a cease-fire agreement carried the day and the Defense Department prepared a presidential statement announcing that “[u]ntil satisfactory arrangements for ending the aggression and for concluding the fighting have been reached, United Nations military action against the aggressor must be continued.”⁸⁹ On 24 March General MacArthur, in a move that would eventually lead Truman to fire him, recklessly preempted Truman’s planned statement by warning of an all-out attack on mainland China: if sufficiently threatened, the U.N. command would “depart from its tolerant effort to contain the war to the area of Korea, through an expansion of our military operations to its coastal areas and interior bases [that] would doom Red China to the risk of imminent military collapse.”⁹⁰

Direct bilateral negotiation between the U.N. Command and the North Koreans began

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 165.

⁸⁷ “Memorandum for the Record of a Department of State-Joint Chiefs of Staff Meeting,” 13 February 1951, *FRUS*, 1951, vol. 7, Korea and China, pp.174-75.

⁸⁸ Dean Acheson, “The Secretary of State to the United States Mission at the United Nations,” 17 February 1951, *FRUS*, 1951, vol. 7, Korea and China, p.179.

⁸⁹ George Marshall, Secretary of Defense, “Memorandum by the Secretary of Defense (Marshall) to the Secretary of State: [Annex] Draft Text of a Proposed Presidential Statement of Korea,” 21 March 1951, *FRUS*, 1950, vol. 7, Korea and China, p.254.

⁹⁰ U.S. Congress. *Military Situation in the Far East, Hearings Before the Committee on Armed Services and the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, Eighty Second Congress, First Session, To Conduct an Inquiry into the Military Situation in the Far East and the Facts Surrounding the Relief of General of the Army Douglas MacArthur From His Assignments in that Area*. Washington, DC: GPO, 1951. pp.3541-42.

only after the U.S. attempted to publicly distance itself from any intention of invading China, labeling the very idea communist propaganda. The cease-fire talks, led by Vice Admiral Turner Joy, began on 10 July 1951. We will see in the penultimate section how the outcome of these talks was analogized by U.S. participants in the nuclear talks with North Korea in 2003-04 and, to a lesser extent, in 1994.

Rhetoric and the Korean War

If historical analogies serve a cognitive purpose – to give shape to uncertainty – then they also are used towards explicitly political ends – to give shape to and justify an uncertain outcome. The Munich-Korea analogy was used *ex post facto* by politically-embattled presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson to evaluate the moral rightness of the Korean War, which by 1952 was being derisively called “Truman’s War”:

“What would have happened if the United States and the United Nations had ignored the Korean aggression?... [W]ould not the Soviet Union, having challenged us successfully in Korea, have followed that challenge with another? And still another? Munich would follow Munich.”⁹¹

The above argument involved the use of precise language intended to associate the uncertainties of Korea with the clear objectives and overwhelming victory of the Second World War.

The Korean War generated numerous “lessons of history” that have been applied rhetorically by policymakers to situations ranging from the Vietnam War to the 1994 Agreed Framework talks and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. A State Department document drafted in 1965 with an eye towards Vietnam policymakers enumerates the “lessons” that

⁹¹ Stevenson, 353.

had informed Korea and, in turn, that could, it is implied, be applied to other Asian crises. “[O]ur action in Korea reflected three elements...a recognition that a defense line in Asia, stated in terms of an island perimeter, did not adequately define our vital interests, that those vital interests could be affected by action on the mainland of Asia...[and] an understanding that, for the future, a power vacuum was an invitation to aggression, that there must be local political, economic, and military strength in making aggression unprofitable, but also that there must be a demonstrated willingness of major external powers both to assist and to intervene if required.”⁹²

Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld, justifying the 2003 U.S. intervention in Iraq after the fact, wrote of an encounter with a young Korean reporter:

“I told her about a satellite photo of the Korean peninsula, taken at night, that I keep on a table in my Pentagon office. North of the demilitarized zone there is nothing but darkness — except a pinprick of light around Pyongyang — while the entire country of South Korea is ablaze in light, the light of freedom. Korean freedom was won at a terrible cost — tens of thousands of lives, including more than 33,000 Americans killed in action. Was it worth it? You bet. Just as it was worth it in Germany and France and Italy and in the Pacific in World War II. And just as it is worth it in Afghanistan and Iraq today.”⁹³

This represents an attempt to place the Korean War squarely in the camp of the classic U.S. victories over fascist aggression, a successful application of the “lessons” of Munich. The emotive power of the 1930s aggression analogy invites us to consider the components of the analogy and how they structure language and, by extension, thought. The author’s binary opposition of (physical and symbolic) light and darkness evokes a clear moral imperative to intervene on the side of freedom. The last two sentences’

⁹² *Department of State Bulletin*, 8 February 1965, p.171.

⁹³ Rumsfeld, Donald H. “The Price of Freedom in Iraq.” *The New York Times*. 19 March 2004.

syntaxes condense disparate geographical locations across a wide swath of time into one prescriptive script: from aggression to U.S. intervention to thriving, democratic society.

V. THE U.S.S. *PUEBLO* CRISIS

The second historical moment I will examine involved a powerful analogy that served to constrain rather than enable the use of military force. Whereas the “lessons” of the 1930s “taught” policymakers to avoid appeasing acts of aggression because the tyrant’s lust for expansion could never be fulfilled, the analogies used in the debate surrounding the North Korean capture of the spy ship U.S.S. *Pueblo* warned policymakers of the pitfalls of a swift military response. The incident was only one of several North-Korean instigated incidents that helped shape a narrative of supposed North Korean irrationality or twisted rationality that took hold in policy circles as well as in American popular culture.

North Korea before the Pueblo

The military stalemate between North and South Korea did not give rise to any of the analogies generated by the Korean War. During the 1960s, a dual narrative of irrationality/twisted rationality gradually was built around North Korea’s seemingly erratic actions during the Cold War, particularly from 1966 to 1969. The North played outside of the rule set of conventional diplomacy and military action, sponsoring airplane hijackings, commando team beach landings, and assassination attempts.⁹⁴ Admiral Turner Joy had written in 1952: “[A] primary Western characteristic the Communists rely upon in executing their delaying technique is our concern for human suffering. Since they are

⁹⁴ “North Korean Aggression against the South.” March 1969. [Electronic Records], Records of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, Record Group 263; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD. pp.3-5.

totally unaffected by human considerations, Communists are willing to impose delays or negotiations even if such delays mean greatly increased human suffering and loss of life.”⁹⁵ Joy represented an important formulation of the twisted rationality narrative. The brief period leading up to the U.S.S. *Pueblo* crisis has received little attention from historians of U.S. foreign relations.⁹⁶ However, the inability of U.S. policymakers and the intelligence community to grasp the motivations behind the skirmishes that occurred between U.S./South Korean and North Korean forces in the 1966-1968 timeframe significantly contributed to the difficulty of quickly formulating a response to the *Pueblo*'s capture. In order to understand U.S. policymakers' historical frame of reference at the time of the *Pueblo*, we now turn to the undeclared war along the DMZ. Intelligence on North Korean acts of aggression during the two year period preceding the *Pueblo* set the backdrop for the U.S. reaction in a time characterized by high tension.

A 1969 CIA report titled “North Korean Aggression against the South” began: “Korea is so removed from much of the world, both culturally and geographically, that it is something of a problem to focus world attention on potential trouble there.”⁹⁷ The report went on to recommend analogies policymakers might use in order to shore up support for anticommunism efforts worldwide. The schema, or “description of a complex object, situation, process, or structure,”⁹⁸ was communist expansion,⁹⁹ and the intended effect was to frame local insurgencies as disingenuous communist plots: “It might be profitable

⁹⁵ Joy, C. Turner. *How Communists Negotiate*. Santa Monica, California: Fidelis, 1952. pp.39-40.

⁹⁶ Sarantakes, Nicholas Evan. “The Quiet War: Combat Operations along the Korean Demilitarized Zone, 1966-1969.” *The Journal of Military History* 64, 2 (2000): 439-457. p.439.

⁹⁷ “North Korean Aggression against the South.” March 1969. [Electronic Records], Records of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, Record Group 263; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD. p.1.

⁹⁸ Winograd, 72.

⁹⁹ Khong, 217.

in many areas to point out these similarities between North Korea's efforts to infiltrate troops with the aim of creating a picture of a genuine rebellion and the efforts of North Vietnam and Cuba."¹⁰⁰

The South Koreans referred to activity along the DMZ from 1966-1969 as the "Quiet War."¹⁰¹ In the fall of 1966, the "stale, but semi-dangerous, state of affairs" was punctured by a series of raids across the eastern, central, and western sectors of the DMZ, killing dozens of South Korean soldiers.¹⁰² U.S. and South Korean leaders conceived of a direct relationship between U.S. involvement in Vietnam and the attacks of the North Koreans, which culminated in the bold 18 January 1968 attempt to assassinate the South Korean president. President Park had speculated two years earlier that "[i]f fighting increases in Vietnam, there may be increased and more sustained pressure at the DMZ."¹⁰³ The link between North Korean actions and force levels in Vietnam would dominate much of U.S. policymakers' analysis of the North Koreans' rationale behind the *Pueblo*.

Tonkin Gulf...or Cuba?

On 23 January 1968, a small Navy trawler-class surface ship conducting surveillance allegedly in international water, the U.S.S. *Pueblo*, was fired upon and towed to Wonsan

¹⁰⁰ "North Korean Aggression against the South." March 1969. [Electronic Records], Records of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, Record Group 263; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD. p.1.

¹⁰¹ Sarantakes, 439.

¹⁰² Ibid, 441.

¹⁰³ "Meeting between President Johnson and President Park (with staffs), in Seoul, November 1, 1966," 7 November 1966, Asian Trip 17 October – 2 November 1966, box 48, Appointment File [Diary Backup], Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library.

harbor by North Korean naval craft.¹⁰⁴ Betraying his sense of exhaustion after seven years on the job, outgoing Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara told his designated successor, Clark Clifford: “this is what it is like on a typical day. We had an inadvertent intrusion into Cambodia. We lost a B-52 with four H-bombs aboard. We had an intelligence ship captured by the North Koreans.”¹⁰⁵ The *Pueblo* predicament came just four years after a similarly ambiguous attack on a U.S. vessel – the Gulf of Tonkin incident involving the U.S.S. *Liberty* that launched the Vietnam War. The last major crisis with nuclear ramifications prior to 1968 was the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. What policy implications might each of these two analogies carry? The initial matters to be resolved in an impromptu White House meeting on the *Pueblo* were: (1) attempt to divine North Korean intentions behind the capture, (2) estimate the regime’s probable future actions, and (3) formulate an immediate diplomatic response and assess future options.¹⁰⁶ The CIA and the embassy in Seoul, despite their lack of hard information, saw the *Pueblo* as the latest in a string of aggressive moves designed to distract the effort in Vietnam and/or provoke renewed hostilities.¹⁰⁷ It was judged too difficult to guess what North Korea would do with the sailors it now had in its possession.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ “Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in the Soviet Union,” 23 January 1968, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 29, Korea, p.459.

¹⁰⁵ “Notes of the President’s Tuesday National Security Lunch,” 23 January 1968, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 29, Korea, p.460.

¹⁰⁶ “Summary Minutes of Pueblo Group,” 24 January 1968, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 29, Korea, p.469.

¹⁰⁷ Richard Helms, Director of Central Intelligence, “Memorandum to Secretary of Defense McNamara,” 23 January 1968, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 29, Korea, p.464; “Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State,” 24 January 1968, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 29, Korea, p.481.

¹⁰⁸ “Notes of the President’s Meeting With the National Security Council,” 24 January 1968, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 29, Korea, p.479.

Johnson suggested the various options at hand: “[1] hitting the North Koreans with U.S. forces, [2] [g]etting a thorough explanation, [3] [c]apturing one of their ships.”¹⁰⁹ Conceiving of the situation according to the scripts of previous crises caused policymakers to lean towards different alternatives. The White House task force favored a strong diplomatic push before considering the first and third options. Participants decided to take the matter to the U.N. Security Council in order to provide stronger grounds for any eventual military retaliation, although Secretary of State Dean Rusk doubted a resolution could be passed.¹¹⁰ Walter Rostow, Special Assistant to the President, was the first to reach for the Cuban crisis analogy to frame the discussion, which included the Secretaries of Defense and State as well as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. The conversation that followed quickly became a rhetorical battle of analogies. Rostow said: “In the Cuban missile crisis we faced the danger that the U.N. would freeze the status quo. The U.N. resolution might state that actions were to be taken without the use of force. This could prevent or hinder our freedom of action.” Rusk warned the group about falling prey to the easy prescriptions of the comparison by pointing out obvious contrasts: “This is somewhat different from the Cuban crisis. Then, the presence of the missiles was not generally known. We were able to announce the presence of the missiles at the time we announced our action. Here, the basic facts are already known concerning the *Pueblo* affair.”¹¹¹ Joseph Sisco, an Assistant Secretary of State, suggested “the analogy is closer to the Tonkin Gulf incident. We convoked the [U.N.] Security Council, made statements, but asked for no formal action.” An Under Secretary of State in

¹⁰⁹ “Notes of the President’s Tuesday National Security Lunch,” 23 January 1968, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 29, Korea, p.461.

¹¹⁰ “Minutes of Meeting: Meeting on Korean Crisis Without the President,” 24 January 1968, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 29, Korea, p.485.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 485.

attendance reminded the group that, in Cuba, when the U.N. vote had failed, the U.S. had at least had cover from the Organization of American States, which was not presently an option.¹¹² Cuba was clearly on everyone's mind. It represented a recent and compelling example of a crisis that had successfully and carefully been managed to a peaceful resolution by resorting only to measured diplomatic steps. On 26 January, McNamara suggested that a group organized by the State Department meet periodically "like we had in the Cuban Missile Crisis."¹¹³ Johnson agreed: "All of you should meet regularly and get as well organized in this situation as we were in the...Crisis...Let's not have us charged with failure to deal with the situation properly."¹¹⁴ McNamara even made a reference to the number of airplanes used during the Cuban crisis when discussing air-cover for the *Pueblo's* replacement.¹¹⁵

A day later, on 25 January, Johnson, who was still ambivalent on the use of force, remained preoccupied by the Gulf of Tonkin image. He asked McNamara: "Was the *Turner Joy*¹¹⁶ an intelligence ship?" The Defense Secretary, not anxious to draw the same parallel, replied: "The *Turner Joy* and the *Pueblo* are not the same type of ship. They do not have the same collection devices."¹¹⁷ Given the Cold War setting, the more fundamental question facing the group was how the Soviet Union would respond to any U.S. retaliatory action. What "lessons" did Cuba or other historical analogy carry

¹¹² Ibid, 485.

¹¹³ "Notes of President's Friday Morning Meeting on the Pueblo Incident," 26 January 1968, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 29, Korea, p.521.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 529.

¹¹⁵ "Minutes of Meeting on Korean Crisis Without the President," 24 January 1968, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 29, Korea, p.490.

¹¹⁶ The *Turner Joy* was one of the ships that the North Vietnamese reportedly torpedoed in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964.

¹¹⁷ "Notes of the President's Breakfast Meeting," 26 January 1968, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 29, Korea, p.529.

regarding the signaling of strength? Johnson raised the contents of a cable from the Moscow embassy, reading “[t]hey [the Communists] always react negatively to a show of force,” effectively warning the group against the military options in front of them. Walter Rostow countered: “Mr. President, this was not the lesson of the Cuban missile crises or the Berlin crises [sic].”

The Cuba/Berlin analogy delivered a clear script for all those in attendance: a strong show of force by the U.S. – the Navy’s “quarantine” that had diffused a potential nuclear powder keg between superpowers – resulted in the Communists backing off. The Gulf of Tonkin analogy provided a competing script: the hasty decision to respond to a Communist threat military had later angered Congress and produced a strategic situation in 1968 far removed from the one intended in 1964. State Department officials implored Johnson to avoid a military response. Seemingly aware of the latter analogy’s cognitive effect, Secretary Rusk told the president: “I have reservations making the Tonkin Gulf resolution [course of action] unless the other side [North Korea and/or the Soviets] forces our hand.”¹¹⁸ Under Secretary of State [first name] Katzenbach informed the president that “the only way to get that ship out with the crew is talking through diplomatic channels.”¹¹⁹ Rusk also counseled against Rostow’s earlier Cuba “lesson” that a strong show of force was needed: “We cannot shoot the men out of there. The North Koreans do not have vessels on the high seas that we can seize.”¹²⁰ The lines in the military response debate were drawn. McNamara, uneasy with Johnson’s repeated references to the Tonkin

¹¹⁸ “Notes on the President’s Luncheon Meeting,” 25 January 1968, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 29, Korea, p.508.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 509.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 509.

Gulf, favored a symbolic military buildup in the area: “We would like to move certain forces to the area. We need to place ourselves. The Chiefs [of the armed services] would like to move 26 B-52s, 15 to Okinawa and 11 to Guam.”¹²¹ Despite the objections of Clark Clifford, who worried that if “we pose a threat to North Korea and do nothing, we are in a very difficult situation,”¹²² the president moved the group to send B-52 bombers to South Korea. The group ruled out Johnson’s third proposed option – the retaliatory capture of a North Korean ship.

On the evening of the same day, 25 January, the White House task force convened again, to consider the various options on the “show of force” menu. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs proposed a somewhat narrow range of alternatives to the group: mining various North Korean ports, interdicting costal shipping, striking targets by air or from a ship, and replacing the *Pueblo* with another ship supported with sufficient air and naval cover.”¹²³ In the Cold War, where many diplomatic or military incidents regardless of regional context were immediately and invariably interpreted as a test of U.S. strength in the face of aggression, most of the “lessons of history” that U.S. policymakers used publicly and privately relating to the *Pueblo* revolved around previous situations that involved successful or failed shows of strength. McNamara told the group: “[t]he great danger that we must avoid is that the Soviets and the North Vietnamese will interpret something that we do as a sign of weakness.”¹²⁴ The president responded that “the Communist[s] never react well to a show of force. That was not the lesson learned in the

¹²¹ Ibid, 509.

¹²² Ibid, 511.

¹²³ “Notes on the President’s Thursday Night Meeting on the Pueblo Incident,” 25 January 1968, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 29, Korea, p.514.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 516.

Middle East and in the Cuban Missile Crisis. We must not let them misjudge our strength so that they will be encouraged to do this type of thing again.”¹²⁵ In these initial hours of the crisis, policymakers favored at least a moderate show of force to support their diplomatic efforts; only later would the constrictive power of the Tonkin script weigh on their minds. A posture enabled by the Cuba “show of force” analogy would be aimed at “[striking] back in retaliation for this ship seizure,” while a posture constrained by possible pitfalls associated with the Tonkin incident would limit action to merely “[getting] the ship back,”¹²⁶ something that could more likely be resolved diplomatically. Responding to Johnson’s allusion to the “lessons” of Cuba and implicitly referring to Vietnam, Clark Clifford said: “I can stand a minor set back [sic] to our position rather than to take action which may lead us into another war. The capture of a spy ship is not worth us going to war.”¹²⁷

Johnson soon became worried that the seizure of the ship might compel him to act militarily in order to save political face before Congress and diplomatic face before the world. The U.S.S. *Liberty* analogy served to constrain U.S. policy options by warning of the dangers involved. Clark Clifford told the president: “I am concerned about using this incident as the basis for major military actions. As in the case of the U.S.S. *Liberty*, this is not a clear case. If we can find a way out of this with face, we should do so.”¹²⁸ In addition, Johnson was aware that members of Congress were likely to make the mental parallel to the Gulf of Tonkin incident, and he was determined to avoid the mistake of not

¹²⁵ Ibid, 516.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 517.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 519.

¹²⁸ “Minutes on Korean Crisis Without the President,” 24 January 1968, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 29, Korea, p.487.

fully informing Congress before taking action. "The Tonkin Resolution wasn't very effective," Johnson told his advisors, "If they [Congress] murder us on Vietnam with...the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, what are we going to do in a situation like this[?]"¹²⁹ "[I]f the Tonkin Gulf means nothing, what do we do here[?] We do not want to exercise power and authority without the support and approval of the Congress."¹³⁰

The president recommended to McNamara that a special naval investigative panel be set up like the one that testified before Congress in 1964.¹³¹ "I think you should set an independent board to investigate this whole matter to head off any investigations by the Congress or other groups. Have you checked this Gulf of Tonkin theory?" Johnson asked the Defense Secretary.¹³² Through an intermediary, the president then turned to former President and General Dwight Eisenhower for advice: "What actions could be taken; how should the Congress be associated with these actions (the experience in the Dominican Republic and in Vietnam [*U.S.S. Liberty*] is pertinent)."¹³³ Eisenhower thought it important to "act 'while the iron is hot' and while the *Pueblo* affair is fresh in peoples' minds... we should be careful not to demand or threaten anything that we can't back up."¹³⁴ In Congress, there was suspicion about "another *Liberty*" on the one hand and partisan accusations that Johnson had left the sailors stranded on the other hand. "The mistreatment of the *Pueblo*'s men is but the latest in a long list of cases which prove

¹²⁹ "Notes of the President's Breakfast Meeting," 25 January 1968, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 29, Korea, p.503.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 503.

¹³¹ "Notes of the President's Meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff," 29 January 1968, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 29, Korea, p.495.

¹³² *Ibid*, 495.

¹³³ "Department of Defense Memorandum for Record, Subject: Telephone Conversation with General Eisenhower, 27 January 1968." (microfilm). 29 January 1968.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, 1.

beyond a reasonable doubt the basic inhumanity of communism,” said Congressman John Ashbrook. “[W]e as Members of Congress want to know and I think the American public is deserving of knowing just who were those responsible in varying degrees for nakedly exposing this ship and making those decisions which obviously led to this most sorry chapter in our naval history.”¹³⁵ In the end, the U.S. was forced to issue an official apology in order to secure the sailors’ release. The lesson was clear in the minds of policymakers: seizing U.S. ships was a deliberate attempt to humiliate the U.S. and escalate a conflict.¹³⁶

By 30 January, five days after the first series of emergency White House meetings, Captain Bucher, the commanding officer onboard the *Pueblo*, had issued a number of inflammatory anti-American “confessions” from captivity in North Korea. There was substantial disagreement on whether he had “turned” or had been drugged and forced to write something. Johnson believed the captain to be a traitor and disagreed with the military, which had found “little instability in [Bucher’s] background,”¹³⁷ and he once more leaned towards escalating the military response.

Privately, Rostow told General Wheeler, the Joint Chiefs Chairman, that he found the president “trigger-happy.” Wheeler responded that “[p]ersonally, I find none of the military courses of action particularly attractive.”¹³⁸ Reading the *Pueblo* documents for the *meaning* conveyed by meeting participants’ use of language yields a very different

¹³⁵ Hon. John M. Ashbrook, *Congressional Record*, 30 January 1969.

¹³⁶ Khong, 5; Neustadt and May, 58-62.

¹³⁷ “Notes of the President’s Foreign Affairs Luncheon,” 30 January 1968, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 29, Korea, p.572.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, 574.

interpretation than any attempt to present a “just the facts” account emphasizing cause and effect. In this mode of analysis, the very mention of “another” Cuba, Berlin, or Tonkin Gulf portends powerful and sometimes clashing policy prescriptions based on their emotive power. Each analogy, with its implied “lesson of history” for the *Pueblo* crisis, defined the situation according to fixed scripts in the individual actors’ memory: brinkmanship, resolve, credibility, menace, and entanglement. Johnson’s *Pueblo* response, unlike Truman’s 1950 Korean intervention, involved a sequence of events carried out with little clear idea of the future state of affairs policymakers wished to bring about. Whereas in the Korean War, the 38th parallel debate notwithstanding, Truman was unequivocal in his desire to see a repulsion of Communist aggression, Johnson was throughout the crisis unsure about his aims and uneasy with the options laid out before him.

VI. TWO NUCLEAR CRISES: COMPETING ANALOGIES

The post-Cold War era engendered two remarkably similar nuclear crises on the Korean peninsula, both related to the North’s spotty record with the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). I will attempt to demonstrate how analogical reasoning affected outcomes in the 1993-1994 Agreed Framework talks under the Clinton administration, and the 2002-2003 multi-party talks under the Bush administration. What historical analogies did actors in each moment employ privately and publicly to weigh the benefits and risks of negotiating with North Korea? What policy prescriptions did each analogy provide? I am operating under the assumption that a series of interrelated mini-crises constituted the much larger deterioration in relations between the U.S. and North Korea collectively

known as the 1993-1994 nuclear crisis: (1) the 1993 North Korean withdrawal from the NPT, (2) the negotiating setbacks the U.S. suffered during the 1994 Agreed Framework talks in New York, and (3) the 1994 “Bobby Hall” hostage incident that almost derailed the Agreed Framework.¹³⁹ I have chosen these three “snapshots” of the 1993-1994 nuclear crises because they represent moments during which the decision period was particularly short, the number of policy actors was limited, and available information was considered even more scarce than usual.

1993: How to Respond?

A brief look at the developments that lead to the 1993-1994 crisis will allow us to place policymakers decisions in context. Encouraged by the U.S.S.R, North Korea joined the NPT in 1985 and the U.N. in 1991.¹⁴⁰ The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) first reported “inconsistencies” in the North’s nuclear program during an ad hoc inspection in July 1992. Less than a year later, the regime announced its intention to withdraw from the NPT, sparking the first East Asian crisis for the incoming Clinton administration. The administration chose the path of bilateral negotiations with North Korea in order to freeze the reprocessing of nuclear fuel rods, preserve the integrity of the NPT, and prevent future North Korean proliferation efforts. I will focus on the decision of whether to engage North Korea constructively or pursue a series of activities that would have laid the groundwork for a military response.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Morris, Scott R. “America’s Most Recent Prisoner of War: The Warrant Officer Bobby Hall Incident.” *The Army Lawyer* (September 1996): 3-33.

¹⁴⁰ Wit, Joel S., Daniel B. Poneman, and Robert L. Gallucci. *Going Critical: The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004. p.409

¹⁴¹ It should be noted that this was not a completely “either-or” proposition. The Defense Department drafted extensive air strike plans in the event that the president decided to use force. The U.S.

The original Korean War armistice talks framed the issue of whether to negotiate. The theatrical aspect of the 1994 negotiations, complete with repetitious television images of North Korean soldiers goose-stepping across the Pyongyang central square,¹⁴² reinforced the fact that, if undertaken, negotiations would mark the first time top officials from both sides would be meeting since the end of the Korean War. This analogy, which employed the 1952-1953 armistice talks as the subsidiary subject, presented an enemy who was cunning, shameless, inhumane, arrogant, and, above all, not to be trusted. Based on his experiences during the Armistice negotiations, Admiral Turner C. Joy wrote in 1952: “We must not negotiate merely because the enemy wants to do so. Once we have decided that to negotiate is in the best interests of freedom, we should do so with the *full* backing of the strength of the United States... We must negotiate not merely *from* strength, but *with* strength.”¹⁴³ In 1994, no doubt realizing the power of the Armistice Talks analogy to hamper U.S. efforts at constructive engagement, a staff member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) presented the U.S. delegation with a copy of Joy’s book, *How Communists Negotiate*. Robert Gallucci, an assistant secretary of state and head of the delegation, took away this message from the analogy from the JCS staffers’ comparison: “If [the North Koreans] act nasty, they are nasty, but if they act nice, they are sneaky.”¹⁴⁴ The Joy book remains required reading inside the Pentagon’s Office of Negotiations Policy to this day.¹⁴⁵

commander in chief, U.S. Forces Korea, General Luck, went to the length of requesting that a Patriot Missile Battalion (air defense system) be deployed south of the DMZ.

¹⁴² Cumings, Bruce. *North Korea: Another Country*. New York: The New Press, 2004.

¹⁴³ Joy, 178.

¹⁴⁴ Wit et al., 52.

¹⁴⁵ Roberts, Guy R, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Negotiations Policy, Oral interview by the author, 3 September 2004.

During policy debates in 1993-1994, a second analogy served to counteract the constraining analogy of 1952. This referent evoked the superpower confrontation schema to paint a picture of two equals staring each other down until one “blinked” – the 1962 Cuban missile crisis between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. In their 2004 group memoir *Going Critical*, the U.S. officials involved in the 1994 talks framed the issue this way: “This negotiation was the first critical test in the most serious crisis the world had ever experienced since the superpower confrontation over Soviet missiles in Cuba some three decades earlier.”¹⁴⁶ In early 1993, the Cuban missile crisis analogy was most likely a cognitive learning task, since the U.S. actors saw themselves as facing an enemy who posed an existential threat to U.S. security¹⁴⁷ who could be made to “blink” if sufficient tenacity were applied.¹⁴⁸ On 12 March 1993, North Korea announced its intention of withdrawing from the NPT. By June of the same year, the U.S. had sent a team to New York to sit down and negotiate an agreement that would restore North Korea’s commitments to the international non-proliferation regime. The U.S. and South Korea differed on the appropriate approach to North Korea’s withdrawal from the NPT. With Clinton just arrived in office, the South Koreans had trouble assessing how “tough” he would be with their neighbor. A working level State Department official recalls that “throughout the crisis [1993-1994], we had difficulties dealing with our South Korean

¹⁴⁶ Wit et al., xiii.

¹⁴⁷ Numerous politicians and commentators have used the term “existential threat” to mean an opponent’s ability to significantly damage the homeland and not simply U.S. interests abroad. Francis Fukuyama defines existential threats as “threats to our existence as a nation or as a democratic regime.” (Fukuyama, Francis. “The Neoconservative Moment.” *The National Interest* 76 (2004): 57-68.)

¹⁴⁸ By the time the event was committed to paper in the form of a memoir in 2004, the analogy was injected into a political debate over whether once more to pursue bilateral talks with North Korea. The authors wished to stress the enabling impact of the Agreed Framework analogy.

allies. I recall comparing this to the history of our relationship with various South Vietnamese governments during the Vietnam War.”¹⁴⁹

In writing the “definitive” account of the first Korean nuclear crisis, the architects of the 1994 Agreed Framework were no doubt following Winston Churchill’s famous remark to Joseph Stalin at the Tehran Conference in 1943: “History will judge us kindly...because I shall write it.”¹⁵⁰ The authors attempted to make unambiguous the lessons which future generations should derive from their experience: “Set strategic priorities, then stick to them...¹⁵¹ use multilateral institutions and forums to reinforce U.S. diplomacy...¹⁵² negotiated arrangements can advance U.S. interests even if the other party engages in cheating.”¹⁵³

How best to respond to a situation “different from any other”?¹⁵⁴ The debate on an appropriate U.S. response ranged from a referral to the U.N. Security Council to a strategic air strike of North Korean nuclear facilities. Defense Secretary Perry told the participants of an emergency meeting on the issue that they should be careful of a “Guns of August” situation, referencing a book by the same name in which conflicting signals ignited hostilities (the First World War) that no side wanted: “As we deploy [military forces in the region – show of force] to cover their possible reaction to a U.N. vote on

¹⁴⁹ Hubbard, Thomas, Former Deputy Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Interview via electronic correspondence by the author, 4 April 2005.

¹⁵⁰ Charmley, John. “Churchill: The Gathering Storm.” BCC Online History, 2004.
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/war/wwtwo/churchill_gathering_storm_01.shtml>

¹⁵¹ Wit et al., 396.

¹⁵² Ibid, 399.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 405.

¹⁵⁴ Samore, Gary, Former Deputy to Assistant Secretary during the U.S.-North Korea Agreed Framework Talks, Interview via electronic correspondence by the author, 4 April 2005: “The 1994 crisis was different from any other situation in my memory or experience.”

sanctions, the DPRK might respond to us prompting our reaction “a la Barbara Tuchman.”¹⁵⁵ This analogy served to constrain the excessive use of force in the early days of the conflict and warned of the dangers of brash military action. The interagency process eventually agreed upon high-level bilateral talks directly with North Korea – the negotiations leading up to the signing of the U.S.-North Korea “Agreed Framework.”

The 1994 Agreed Framework Talks

The Agreed Framework negotiations themselves constitute the second episode I will examine within the 1993-1994 crisis. Policymakers, we will see, employed a number of historical analogies to frame the uncertainties surrounding the negotiations. A number of analogies employed by policymakers during the decision-making process offered competing prescriptions based on their logic. Two months following the NPT withdrawal of 12 March 1993, the U.N. Security Council passed Resolution 825, which, on the advice of the IAEA Board of Governors, called on North Korea to comply with its NPT safeguard agreements. In May 1993, conscious of the importance the North Koreans placed on signals and protocol, the U.S. sent a junior Foreign Service officer to meet the North Korean delegation, lead by the Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, at New York’s JFK Airport. The issue of a U.S. military buildup in theater loomed over the talks in Geneva and New York. Secretary of Defense William Perry was well aware of the wide-ranging effects of even the smallest of signals on the international stage:

“We must understand that every course of action we could take has consequences. Acquiescing now to an active North Korean nuclear program would invite a future crisis. Taking military action now would invite an immediate crisis...It is possible that North Korea would misperceive these efforts as provocations. We must face that

¹⁵⁵ Gallucci, Robert L., Former Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs, Interview via electronic correspondence by the author, 3 April 2005.

possibility, comparing that risk to the far greater risk of letting North Korea develop the capability of producing a nuclear arsenal or the risk inherent in not maintaining the readiness of our forces.”¹⁵⁶

The 1994 Agreed Framework Talks illustrate the double meaning of the Cuban Missile Crisis. On the one hand and as it was often used during deliberation in the *Pueblo* incident, Cuba represents a successful “show of force” against communism; certainly, the quarantine of Soviet ships was a daring strategic feat. On the other hand and as it was employed in the 1993-1994 nuclear crisis, Cuba “taught” policymakers that they should engage in high-level diplomacy and pay strong attention to signals. “There were many occasions when we got responses from the North that were ambiguous, with negative or positive interpretations possible, and someone said it was “Bobby Kennedy time” again...as in Kennedy’s reaction to the two messages in different channels from Khrushchev during the Cuban Missile Crisis and his proposal to ignore the message we didn’t like and respond to the one we liked.”¹⁵⁷ In this instance, the meaning of “Cuba” was not that the U.S. should undertake a show of force to repel an act of aggression, but that extreme caution should be exercised and attention should be paid to conflicting signals from the other side.

The 1994 “Bobby Hall Incident”

The third snapshot I will examine within the broader 1993-1994 crisis illustrates the North Koreans’ unwavering desire to negotiate with the U.S. directly, rather than through the Military Armistice Commission (whose senior representative at the time was a South

¹⁵⁶ “Remarks by Secretary of Defense William Perry to the Asia Society,” *Federal News Service*, 3 May 1994.

¹⁵⁷ Gallucci, Robert L., Former Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs, Interview via electronic correspondence by the author, 3 April 2005.

Korean), the mechanism for implementing the Agreed Framework. The capture of U.S. Army Warrant Officer Bobby Hall provided an opportunity for the North to engage a U.S. official face to face, an event they hoped would lead to a sustained and, most of importantly, *bilateral* diplomatic intercourse with the U.S.¹⁵⁸ The North's ultimate goal was the full normalization of diplomatic and commercial relations with the U.S. On 17 December 1994, two Army officers piloted an older-model OH-58 observation helicopter that "lacked advanced navigational equipment such as a global positioning system" from Camp Page, South Korea on a routine "familiarization flight" with the purpose of orienting both crew members "to the terrain along the no-fly zone that parallels the DMZ."¹⁵⁹ The helicopter crossed far into North Korean territory, allegedly by accident, and was shot down by North Korean anti-aircraft fire. The surviving copilot, Bobby Hall, was held captive and subjected to many of the same abuses as the *Pueblo* crew. According to an Army report, "the [North Korean] interrogator lectured WO Hall about the U.S.S. *Pueblo* incident and how its crew was not released until they made a written statement after a year in captivity. Prior to this, WO Hall had never heard of the U.S.S. *Pueblo* incident."¹⁶⁰

This detail is not included merely out of intellectual interest; for U.S. policymakers back in Washington, it framed the crisis according to the outcomes of the *Pueblo* crisis. The Bobby Hall incident was hardly the first such act; separate helicopter shoot-downs and subsequent hostage-holding (when there were survivors) had occurred in 1963, 1969, 1974, and 1977. All these instances could have served to frame the range of options

¹⁵⁸ Morris, 6.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 6.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 7.

available and the pitfalls inherent in each. Instead, Deputy Assistant of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Thomas C. Hubbard, who was sent to Pyongyang to negotiate the Hill's release, cognitively retrieved the *Pueblo* crisis for applicable "lessons of the past." He recalls that, prior to his departure when devising the U.S. negotiating posture, "history weighed heavily on my mind."¹⁶¹ "I carefully reviewed the history of the *Pueblo* incident for lessons on how (or how not) to deal with what amounted to a hostage situation." With his North Korean interlocutors, Hubbard sought to create a historical analogy that would compete with the *Pueblo*, which symbolized U.S. defeat: "In my meetings with North Korean officials, I pointed out that continuing to hold our pilot who entered North Korean airspace accidentally would make them look like the Iranians who took our Embassy hostage [in 1979]. This, I argued, was incompatible with the kind of US-DPRK relationship envisaged in the Agreed Framework."¹⁶² The Iranian hostage analogy carried multiple meanings, however. In the sense intended by Hubbard, the example connoted a country that found itself cut off from normal relations with the U.S. for a quarter century following the taking of hostages.¹⁶³ In another, perhaps unintended, sense of the analogy, the Iranian students successfully engaged in saber-rattling to the point of inviting a U.S. military response and winning public support for their action. In the end, the Hall case was a public relations victory for North Korea. Just as in the *Pueblo* case, the North succeeded in publicly extracting diplomatically embarrassing U.S.

¹⁶¹ Hubbard, Thomas, Former Deputy Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Interview via electronic correspondence by the author, 4 April 2005.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ This analogy may be an imperfect fit because there is new evidence that the Iranian students were acting without the approval of the Ayatollah Khomeini and did not intend to provoke such a serious U.S. diplomatic and (failed) military response (Bowden, Mark. "Among the Hostage-Takers." *The Atlantic Monthly* 294, 5 (2004): 76-96).

concessions; Commander-in-Chief, United Nations Command, General Gary Luck, sent an “official letter of regret” to the North Korean government.¹⁶⁴

The Bush Administration: Learning the “Lessons” of 1994

Opponents of the 1994 Clinton strategy vis-à-vis North Korea were hard at work constructing the event as a constraining analogy to justify the multiparty approach to nuclear talks with North Korea in 2002-2003. In other words, high-level bilateral talks were out.¹⁶⁵ A favorite Pentagon cartoon shows President Clinton standing next to North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il proclaiming the achievement of the 1994 Agreed Framework, the latter standing next to a washing machine and holding the former’s clothes in a large pile (message: we were taken to the cleaners). President George W. Bush stated in the second 2004 presidential debate: “It is naïve and dangerous to take a policy that he [Senator John Kerry] suggested the other day, which is to have bilateral relations with North Korea...That's what President Clinton did. He had bilateral talks with the North Koreans. And guess what happened? He [Kim Jong-Il] didn't honor the agreement. He was enriching uranium. That is a bad policy.”¹⁶⁶ In this view of senior U.S. policymakers in the Departments of State and Defense, President Clinton is seen as the cheery and diplomatically inept Neville Chamberlain, disembarking the airplane from Pyongyang (Munich), waving the Agreed Framework (1938 agreement with Hitler), and proclaiming a freeze to the graphite-moderated Yongbyon nuclear reactor (“peace in our time”).¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ Morris, 10.

¹⁶⁵ It should be noted that the idea of high-level bilateral talks originated in 1993 within the Office of the Secretary Defense, not as a path to endless diplomacy, but as a way to push the crisis to a head.

¹⁶⁶ Commission on Presidential Debates, Transcript of Second Debate, 8 October 2004.

<<http://www.debates.org/pages/trans2004c.html>>

¹⁶⁷ Select interviews conducted off the record by the author with senior U.S. officials, Department of State and Office of the Secretary of Defense, 1 August - 3 September 2005; Policymakers are largely unaware of

The intersection of the irrationality/twisted rationality narrative dating back to 1950 with North Korea's nuclear ambitions has produced a sort of perfect storm of analogical reasoning for the contemporary decision-making environment. The mutually reinforcing "lessons" of Munich, the 1952-1953 armistice agreements, the *Pueblo* incident, and Clinton's 1994 talks collectively evoke an America that has been repeatedly tricked into acquiescence by a dangerous and unpredictable foe. In this light, North Korean nuclear activity is seen as an act of "aggression" and not merely as noncompliance with international law. The primary historical analogy informing decision-making in the 2002-2003 crisis has been the "failure" of bilateral talks in 1994.

VII. CONCLUSION

Why study the Korean Conflict and, more specifically, why have I selected the three historical moments detailed herein? Let us begin by laying out the range of factors that a student of U.S. foreign relations might profitably investigate in an attempt to analyze a particular policy outcome *ex post facto*. Among these factors we must include: the bureaucratic structures through which power is exerted; the features of the international system in which the state is an agent (polarity in the international system, for example),

the effect of historically informed analogies on their own decision-making, but they have an uncanny ability to apply strategically the heuristic structures of analogical reasoning on the enemy. When Libyan leader Moammar Gaddafi verifiably dismantled his weapons of mass destruction program in early 2004, the Bush administration launched a diplomatic initiative designed to "teach" presumed and potential Non-Proliferation Treaty violators the "lessons of (recent) history." When asked whether the "Libyan example" was worth actively communicating to the North Korean regime as a "lesson of history," one assistant secretary of state in the current Bush administration cautioned against stressing the Libyan nonproliferation success story during negotiations with North Korea. "This is not an analogy they [North Korean leadership] will make to our benefit, because the North Koreans view themselves as superior to all nations and view Libya especially as contemptible...and won't follow their example." Another assistant secretary of state responded "Yes, because it's a damn good example of what they can achieve if they choose to." Clearly, policymakers are aware of analogical reasoning among their opponents – how other countries will interpret the Libyan "lesson" is a subject of active in the nonproliferation community. Why they fail to take into full account the potentially dangerous biases implicit in their own use of "lessons of the past" is somewhat less clear.

the economic, military, and diplomatic capacities of the state itself; and the outcome of a crisis “game” with fixed “rules” observed by rational actors.¹⁶⁸ In addition to some of the broad, structural elements favored by political scientists, we must add the decision-making environment itself: organizational-individual factors (roles, rules, agencies in the foreign policy establishment), the internal setting (cultural values, public opinion), and situational properties (attributes particular to the event or problem itself).¹⁶⁹ I suggest that historical memory is a *constitutive* part of the last category and a *significant* part of the internal setting of the decision-making process. Policymakers follow a sequence of events, (1) identifying and weighing the relevance of the issue in question, (2) establishing policy *alternatives*, (3) choosing one among them, and (4) repeating the process based on the consequences of their course of action.¹⁷⁰

I also suggest that the selective use of historical memory (analogical reasoning) in the process outlined above is more acute in time of crisis. In these often stressful situations, the decision period is shorter; the search for information is less thorough than during the normal course of events; the degree of urgency is high; and the decisions may be irrevocable. We have seen how, in all three cases, overt value decisions were made at the highest levels of organizational hierarchy. Snyder and Paige have suggested that the decision to intervene in Korea in 1950 involved no more than fourteen individuals, all at

¹⁶⁸ Hollis, Martin, and Steve Smith. *Explaining and Understanding in International Relations*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1990. pp.119-23.

¹⁶⁹ Snyder, Richard C. and Glenn D. Paige. “The United States Decision to Resist Aggression in Korea: The Application of an Analytical Scheme.” In Snyder, Richard C., H.W. Bruck, and Burton Sapin. *Foreign Policy Decision-Making: An Approach to the Study of International Politics*. New York: Free Press of Glencoe/Macmillan, 1962. p.212.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 213.

the assistant secretary (for civilians) or service chief (for military) rank or higher.¹⁷¹ During crises, the effect of individual actors' preconceptions and cognitive processes on the outcome of a policy is greatly magnified. Time is compressed, raising the possibility that historical analogies might be applied "too mechanically," as Joseph Nye described it.¹⁷² There is little need to illustrate the importance of crises to international relations: the Cuban Missile Crisis had profound and long-term implications for U.S.-Soviet relations; the North's invasion of South Korea provided the first opportunity for the U.S. to test the success of militarily counteracting perceived Soviet-directed aggression; the failure to curb current North Korean nuclear ambitions has been described as significantly weakening the integrity of the international non-proliferation regime. Thus, we might conclude that policymakers' cognitive processes, especially their use of historical memory to "know" the unknown, are of fundamental importance to the study of international relations.

I have selected the Korean case in U.S. foreign relations because North Korea, as historian Bruce Cumings vividly illustrates in *North Korea: Another Country*, represents the ultimate "unknown" to U.S. policymakers, a country that operates largely outside the boundaries of international society and whose actions are often described as irrational.¹⁷³ Because accurate intelligence on North Korean intentions has been a serious problem dating back to the Second World War, U.S. policymakers have been obliged to rely on other their cognizance of past North Korean behavior in order to derive policy options

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 235.

¹⁷² Nye, Joseph, Former Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, Interview via electronic correspondence by the author, 4 April 2005.

¹⁷³ Cumings, Bruce. *North Korea: Another Country*. New York: The New Press, 2004. pp.1-40.

and make decisions. If we suppose that policymakers sometimes unconsciously reach for “lessons of history” when confronting situations in which “objective” information is scarce, then the Korea conflict, with all its uncertainties, ought to afford us a way of testing out this assumption.

I return now to the early distinction between “objective” information and “personal” information, supplied by the policymaker him/herself. The evidence we have examined suggests that “personal information,” particularly the attempt to learn from “lessons of history,” overshadowed the use of “objective” information during Truman’s decision to go to war and Johnson’s deliberations on a response to the *Pueblo*. *I have arrived at this conclusion based on the fact that we cannot fully account for the policy options that were drafted for consideration and the decisions undertaken based solely or even mostly on the information available to policymakers at the time.* Evidence of a Soviet-directed stratagem designed to lead to wider war was scanty and fragmentary at best. Instead, Truman saw the North’s attack as “clearly another example of the aggressions of the 1930s.”¹⁷⁴ *The Korean Conflict unfolded not as the result of a series of carefully constructed alternatives, but rather as the implementation of facile recommendations that flowed from an early definition of the situation according to the complementary scripts of the 1930s and the Second World War.* In the case of the *Pueblo*, we have seen how policymakers were actively reaching for some analytical framework that would provide them with criteria for judging whether the crisis was an opportunity to show strength or an entrapment scheme designed to divert U.S. troops and attention away from Vietnam. In this case as well, “objective” information was severely limited – policymakers were

¹⁷⁴ Snyder and Paige, 241.

unsure about forces acting upon the seemingly treacherous *Pueblo* Captain Bucher and the Soviet's hand in the matter was ambiguous at best. The record indicates that the White House meeting participants grappled with the potential reactions of the Soviets, Chinese, North Koreans, and wider international community with equal unease. In this light, the group's decision to demonstrate resoluteness by sending B-52 bombers to South Korea appears to stem from a desire to follow the script of an incident that weighed heavily on their minds – the Cuban missile crisis, in which the Soviets “responded negatively to a show of force.”

A Last Word on Rationality

At the very least, the evidence from U.S. decision-making in the Korean case complicates our assumptions regarding the supposed rationality of the state and the individual actors who conduct its external affairs. International relations theorists and historians of U.S. foreign relations are both sometimes guilty of writing about the decision-making process, *ex post facto*, in a way that subordinates the participants thought capacity to the course of events that actually took place. Looking back on a given historical moment or a sequence of interconnected moments, we are drawn to assign actors a level of rationality that cannot be effectively be refuted because the world is not a laboratory in which readers can “repeat the experiment” for themselves to see whether they come up with the same conclusions. *We cannot easily distinguish between the emotional and the rational in analyzing the decision-making process. “Rational” decisions, supposedly rendered based on the pursuit of objectively-defined interests, are often upon closer inspection the product of individual actors’ interpretation of language according to their own*

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