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## The Atomic Bomb and the First Korean War

By Charles Pierson  
September 8, 2017



North Korea now has a hydrogen bomb. Maybe. Even if the bomb North Korea detonated on Sunday was not a hydrogen bomb, it was North Korea's most powerful bomb yet.

So far, President Donald Trump has not said (or tweeted) anything that comes close to the threat he made on August 8: "North Korea best not make any more threats to the United States. They will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen."

What did President Trump mean? On August 11, NPR asked Dr. Sheila Smith, senior fellow for Japan Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations and an adjunct professor at Georgetown University. Smith replied: “The President didn’t say nuclear, but it sounds nuclear.”

The US has threatened to use nuclear weapons against North Korea before. I have just finished H. W. Brands’ 2016 book, *The General vs. the President: MacArthur and Truman at the Brink of Nuclear War*. Brands, a professor of Government at the University of Texas at Austin, is the author of bestsellers on Andrew Jackson and Franklin Roosevelt.

*The General vs. the President* is an odd book. When a book has a picture of a mushroom cloud on its cover and the words “nuclear war” in its subtitle, readers will expect...oh, I don’t know...a book about nuclear war? However, only 35 pages in this 400-page volume mention the atom bomb. Many of those 35 pages contain only passing references to the bomb.

Rather than an edge of your seat real life thriller about Korea “at the brink of nuclear war,” Brands ladles out a conventional retelling of the history of the 1950-1953 Korean War. Brands’ focus is the clash between President Harry Truman and General Douglas MacArthur, the US/UN commander in Korea, which culminated in Truman firing MacArthur. This story has already been told many times before.

The Korean War began on June 25, 1950 when forces of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea crossed the 38th parallel of latitude into South Korea, a US client regime.[1] On June 30, President Truman illegally ordered American ground troops to Korea without consulting Congress.[2]

Unmentioned by Brands, Truman sent two groups of B-29 bombers to the UK and Guam in July. The planes carried atom bombs which were complete except for their fissile plutonium cores which remained in the United States. (At no time during the war were there “live” atom bombs in Korea.) If Truman decided to resort to the bomb, the UK bomber group would target the USSR and the group in Guam would target North Korea and China.

The war turned against UN forces after the entry of Chinese troops in late October. At his November 30 press conference, Truman terrified the world. Truman answered a question about potential use of the atomic bomb by saying that use of the bomb in Korea had always been under “active consideration.” Brands treats Truman’s answer as a blunder (page 223). More probably, Truman was consciously signaling to the Chinese Communists and the Soviets.

As Kim Jong-un is signaling today. Every bomb test, every missile fired over Japan or towards Guam, is a message addressed to the US. Kim knows what the US does to states, like Iraq and Libya, which do not have nuclear weapons. Sometimes, I wish I could tell Kim: “*All right. We get it. You have nuclear weapons and you will defend your country. You don’t have to keep proving it.*”

Except the US *doesn’t* get it. Secretary of Defense James Mattis has threatened a “massive military response” should North Korea continue on its present path. UN Ambassador Nikki Haley has declared that there is “no more road left” for negotiations. President Trump threatens

to cut off trade with all nations which do business with North Korea and accuses South Korea of “appeasement” because it wants to negotiate with the North.

Maybe this is all bluff. If not Trump, the two generals, Secretary of State Mattis and National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster must know that military action in Korea would not be of benefit to anyone. Even Trump may realize that he has little freedom to maneuver. That would explain the kicking and screaming coming out of Washington. As they say, it’s a chained dog that barks the loudest.

Brands covers the period from the start of the war through Truman’s alarming November 30 press conference in the first seven pages of the book. Brands does not mention the atom bomb again until page 40.

### *MacArthur and the Bomb*

General Douglas MacArthur had opposed dropping the bomb on Japan. MacArthur believed that the Japanese were ready to surrender and would have done so if assured that they could keep their Emperor.

Korea was a different story. A mere two weeks into the war, MacArthur requested atomic bombs from the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS),[3] a request which was denied.

If China and the USSR entered the war, MacArthur proposed dropping atom bombs on the tunnels and bridges connecting North Korea to Manchuria and Vladivostock.[4]

On December 9, 1950, “MacArthur requested authorization to use atomic bombs at his discretion.”[5] MacArthur followed up this request on December 24 with a “‘a list of retardation targets’ for which he required 26 atomic bombs. He also wanted four to drop on the ‘invasion forces’ and four more for ‘critical concentrations of enemy air power.’”[6] These requests were denied.

With the passage of time, MacArthur became even more giddily imaginative. MacArthur latched onto a scheme current at the time of placing a sort of nuclear fence between China and North Korea. This would be accomplished by laying nuclear waste along the Yalu River, giving a new meaning to the expression “laying waste.” MacArthur believed that this *cordon sanitaire* would render Korea free of Chinese. It would also, albeit unintentionally, free Korea from Koreans, at least in the north. It did not seem to occur to MacArthur that Koreans are no more radiation-proof than Chinese are. MacArthur never submitted the plan to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. For God’s sake, don’t mention this plan to President Trump; he may think it’s a terrific idea for the US-Mexico border.[7]

### *Exit MacArthur*

Truman fired MacArthur on April 11, 1951. That month, the US came closer than at any other point in the war to using nuclear weapons.[8] On April 5, the JCS ordered atomic retaliation in

the event of an anticipated large influx of additional Chinese troops into North Korea,[9] or an attack by Soviet bombers which intelligence sources showed were massed in Manchuria.[10]

“It is now clear,” University of Chicago historian Bruce Cumings writes, “that Truman did not remove MacArthur simply because of his repeated insubordinations [and making his disagreements with the Administration public], but also because [Truman] wanted a reliable commander on the scene should Washington decide to use nuclear weapons...”[11] MacArthur’s replacement, General Matthew B. Ridgway, fit the bill. In May, Ridgway renewed MacArthur’s request for thirty-eight atom bombs.[12]

The Joint Chiefs again contemplated use of the bomb in June 1951.[13] In September and October, Operation Hudson Harbor made simulated bombing runs on the North which dropped dummy atomic bombs.[14]

In 1953, the Pentagon recommended using A-bombs in memos issued in February, May, June, and July.[15]

Even after hostilities ended on July 27, 1953, the Eisenhower Administration was planning to use the bomb should China and North Korea violate the armistice (Strategic Air Command OpPlan 8-53).

Brands discusses MacArthur’s plan for laying nuclear waste on the border of North Korea and China, but says nothing about the many occasions when the US contemplated using the A-bomb during the war.

## II

“A nuclear war in 1950 would not be one-sided,” Brands declares on the first page of *The General vs. the President*. The US had lost its atomic monopoly the year before when the Soviet Union detonated an atom bomb of its own.

In our world, the Korean War did not go nuclear. It does in science fiction writer Harry Turtledove’s 2015 alternate history novel *Bombs Away*.

MacArthur believed that the US needed to strike Manchuria in order to cut off Chinese troops and supplies. The Truman Administration, however, wanted to keep the war limited. Consequently, Truman repeatedly denied MacArthur permission to operate in Manchuria. In Turtledove’s novel, Truman gives in to MacArthur’s entreaties and a mushroom cloud grows over Manchuria.

Russia responds by dropping A-bombs on six small cities in England, France, and Germany. The US retaliates by A-bombing the base that launched the Russian bombers. Quicker than you can say “Armageddon,” atom bombs fall on Alaska, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Kiev, Vladivostok, Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, LA (two bombs), Newfoundland, and Maine—and Leningrad and Moscow (Stalin escapes). Oh, and the Russians invade Western Europe and World War Three is on.

Turtledove's book is thrilling, terrifying, and preposterous. In an e-mail exchange, Bruce Cumings told me that there was no "chance that the Soviets would go to the nuclear level over Korea, or even a US invasion of China." Even if the Soviets had been willing to risk nuclear war, they possessed a tiny nuclear stockpile of no more than 20 or so bombs. The US had nearly 300 bombs in 1950. These facts make nonsense of Brands' declaration that "A nuclear war in 1950 would not be one-sided," a claim Brands does nothing to substantiate.

\* \* \*

In the end, the US did not need an atom bomb to destroy North Korea. In November 1950, while UN forces were retreating from the advancing Chinese, MacArthur, in Bruce Cumings's words, ordered that "a wasteland be created between the war front and the Yalu River." [16] What followed was the Shermanesque destruction of the North. Stone and Kuznick write: "Almost every city in North Korea was burned to the ground." [17] Dams too were destroyed. The US killed hundreds of thousands of civilians in the North with conventional explosives and napalm, wiping out an estimated 20% of North Korea's population. It would take North Korea decades to recover. [18]

Truman had many reasons for not using the bomb in Korea. US allies opposed the bomb's use. Truman worried about the "optics" of again using the bomb against Asians. [19] North Korea lacked large urban centers to target. The atom bomb was unsuited to Korea's mountainous terrain. Later, when China entered the war, Chinese forces did not mass in large targetable formations. Korea was largely a guerrilla war and nuclear weapons are not suited to guerrilla wars. The US had only about 300 atomic warheads. We were not going to waste them on China, which the US defense establishment regarded as a mere proxy for the USSR. [20] (Ah, for the days of monolithic communism.)

Finally, Truman feared escalation, which could lead to World War Three.

A consideration that did *not* stay Truman's hand: concern for human life. In his post-presidential years, Truman said that he never lost a night's sleep over his decision to drop the bomb on Japan. There is a revealing remark, not quoted by Brands, which Truman made on the eve of US entry into the Second World War. In 1941, then-Senator Truman said: "If we see that Germany is winning we ought to help Russia, and if Russia is winning we ought to help Germany, and that way let them kill as many as possible." [21]

Give 'em hell, Harry. And he did.

### *Notes.*

[1] This is the conventional account. Both North and South Korea had been conducting smaller-scale skirmishes against each other previously. Each side claims that the other struck first on June 5, 1950. Since there were no impartial observers at hand, we may never know the truth. BRUCE CUMINGS, *THE KOREAN WAR: A HISTORY* (2010), page 5.

[2] Truman relied on UN Security Council Resolution 83 (27 June 1950) for authority to conduct war in Korea. Resolution 83 called on UN member states to aid South Korea in repelling the invasion from the North.

[3] BRUCE CUMINGS, *KOREA'S PLACE IN THE SUN* (updated ed. 2005), page 272.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Bruce Cumings, *Korea: Forgotten Nuclear Threats*, *Le monde diplomatique*, Dec. 2004.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] MacArthur was still pushing this cockamamie scheme even after Truman fired him. MacArthur presented his plan in an informal meeting on December 17, 1952 with President-Elect Dwight D. Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles, the incoming secretary of state. BRANDS at pages 392-93. Ike was polite, but noncommittal.

[8] BRUCE CUMINGS, *THE KOREAN WAR: A HISTORY* (2010), page 156.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] *Ibid.* Contrary to Administration policy, MacArthur wanted to expand the war into Manchuria and to bring in Chinese Nationalist troops.

[12] OLIVER STONE & PETER KUZNICK, *THE UNTOLD HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES* (2012) at page 244 (companion book to the Oliver Stone documentary series of the same name). Ridgway's request was denied. Bruce Cumings, *Korea: Forgotten Nuclear Threats*, *Le monde diplomatique*, Dec. 2004.

[13] BRUCE CUMINGS, *THE KOREAN WAR: A HISTORY* (2010), page 157.

[14] *Ibid.* The spirit of Hudson Harbor lives on. The US dropped dummy nuclear bombs during simulated bombing runs outside Seoul on August 31 of this year. *US Sends Clear Warning to North Korea with Bombing Drills*, NY POST, Aug. 31, 2017.

[15] Charles J. Hanley & Randy Herschaft, *US Often Weighed North Korea 'Nuke Option.'* ASSOCIATED PRESS, Oct. 10, 2010.

[16] BRUCE CUMINGS, *THE KOREAN WAR: A HISTORY* (2010), page 29.

[17] STONE & KUZNICK, page 244.

[18] On the American devastation of North Korea, see also BRUCE CUMINGS, *KOREA'S PLACE IN THE SUN: A MODERN HISTORY* (updated ed. 2005), pages 293-98.

[19] Robert F Farley, *What If the United States Had Used the Bomb in Korea?*, THE DIPLOMAT, Jan. 5, 2016.

[20] Robert Farley, *What If America Used Nuclear Weapons during the Korean War?*, THE NATIONAL INTEREST, Oct. 2, 2016.

[21] Turner Catledge, *Our Policy Stated*, N.Y. TIMES, June 24, 1941, *quoted in* STONE & KUZNICK, page 96.