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The Pillars of American Imperialism: Rationalizing U.S. Cold War Involvement in the Republic of Korea

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Abstract

Developmental economists refer to South Korea's economic "miracle" - contrary to North Korea's economic disaster - as a shining example that glorifies the ultimate victory of American capitalism. It is precisely that logic in which many people hasten to call direct U.S. interventions in third world nations during the Cold War a function of imperialism. After all, unlike the European model of imperialism, American involvement in Korea ultimately benefited both sides. The purpose of this paper is to uncover the truth,

often covered under decades of Cold War rhetoric. For example, while Americans did not "colonize" Korea, Americans fundamentally altered the historical fate of Korea. It was precisely the State Department's paranoia of "Red Expansion" that triggered the division of Korea, which created a breeding ground for friction that would develop into one of the bloodiest armed conflicts in human history - The Korean War. In the end, it was the Koreans, among other citizens of the "hot" regions around the globe, who disproportionately paid the price for the Cold War.

Introduction

American history prides itself on the liberties and freedom guaranteed under the “exceptional” nature of American democracy. Evident in the Declaration of Independence, this notion has roots in the early American disgust with the corrupted “old” world (Stephanson 4). Despite this seemingly firm belief in an idealized vision of freedom and equality, a contradictory nature of American foreign policy emerged during the Cold War. Although not widely known, the United States, for example, played an integral role in installing a series of authoritarian right-wing regimes in South Korea throughout the latter half of the 20th century (Cumings 355). The so-called American “containment strategy” in Korea was only one of the widely deployed American foreign policy tactics of the Cold War, which aimed at restraining communist movements with whatever means necessary.

While there appears to be a contradiction between the core American values of freedom and democracy and the U.S. Cold War strategies, a closer examination of the “subjects” of American ideology suggests that the American cold war policy was not a mere lip service used in times of need. While installing right-wing dictators in Korea went against the democratic principles of America, the sacrifice of Koreans' freedom and democracy was overlooked for the sake of preserving *America's* liberties and freedom. After all, Americans saw the Soviet Union as the biggest threat to their exceptional “way of life.” This was especially true given that the culture of Red Scare diffused a pandemic fear among Americans that leftist regimes would win over the world without U.S. intervention. The American economy, which heavily depended upon open access to world economy, also added incentive to install right-wing regimes around the globe. Without having to formerly govern a nation, the right-wing regimes in Korea – who were often military dictators – served as viable tool for Americans when it came to suppressing the left and promoting liberal capitalism. Finally, American intervention in Korea was legitimized by the manifestation of Orientalism, which provided the United States with the justification necessary *to apply* different standards to “different” people. Throughout the history of America, the emphasis placed on preserving the exceptionalist ideological foundation for “white” Americans – intermingled with geo-political, economic, and ideological factors – rationalized the costly and

paradoxical nature of American intervention in Korea during the Cold War.

The Soviet Union as an Ideological Threat

The American intervention in Korea was embarked under a banner of preserving the "American way of life." In order to understand why the United States perceived the expansion of Soviet Union as a big threat – and not the western colonial powers, who dominated the world in the 19th and early 20th century – it is necessary to grasp the founding ideologies at the inception of American nationhood. From the first-hand experience with "tyrannical" rulings under the British Empire, early Americans placed a great emphasis on securing individual liberty and liberal capitalism (Stephanson 15). That vision was guided by protestant millennialism, which led Americans to proclaim themselves as the "chosen people" to carry out God's mission to eradicate corruption. America was paralleled to a "City upon a Hill," as John Winthrop puts it, "[that] shall be made a story and a byword through the world" (Winthrop).

The religious foundations of the society, which viewed the Soviet's atheism as polar opposite to the United States, necessarily compelled the United States to be paranoid at Soviet advancement. The NSC documents, for example, suggest that Soviet Union, unlike previous aspirants to hegemony, "[was] animated by a new fanatic faith, antithetical to our own, and seeks to impose its absolute authority over the rest of the world" (May 25). This discourse was widely dispersed to ordinary Americans through the culture of the Red Scare. In everyday life, Americans encountered articles from magazines like *Look*, where religious adjectives like "sinister" and "serpentine" were frequently used to portray the Soviets. (Metcalfe). As the "chosen" people of God, it was almost seen as a duty for Americans to embark on a global crusade against communism. Living an everyday life of Red Scare, many Americans in the 1950s feared they were "losing" Asia just as they had "lost" China. This intense fear of loss fueled an almost obsessive public desire that centered on securing the allegiance of decolonizing nations and binding them to America (Klein 27).

The struggle against communism was further justified by the Cold War language that depicted the Soviet Union as an "empire," which preyed upon a general loathing of authoritarian dominance. As a primary illustration, the NSC 68 cites the "concentration camp" to depict the Soviet Union as a "slave" state, whose sole mission is to extend by coercion through "eliminating any effective opposition to their authority" (May 26). While there are disputes as to whether or not the North Korean invasion of South Korea during the Korean War was prompted by an order from Stalin, the attack was widely *perceived* by top U.S. officials at the time as the launch of Soviet aggression (Cumings 260, Matray 25). Since they interpreted the attack as Soviet Empire expansion, the American intervention to rescue South Korea was, ironically, understood as an "anti-colonial" effort, aimed at building a defense-wall for freedom. In fact, the underlying mission of the Truman Doctrine, according to Ernest May, was to, "support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by outside

pressures" (May 2). Under such framework of thinking, a lack of intervention to support anti-communist movements would have been labeled "soft on crime," which was politically detrimental during the age of McCarthyism (McCann 220). This intense fear of loss fueled an almost obsessive public desire that centered on securing the allegiance of decolonizing nations and binding them to America (Klein 27).

The Political Economy of Hegemony

In a bi-polar world, the economic well-being of a nation is intricately linked with security of that nation. This notion is well explained by Joanne Gowa's security externalities thesis, which argues that economic engagement between two states can affect not only real income but also the security of the state concerned. Essentially, economic engagement between two states increases *potential* military power for the nations involved in it, and in doing so, it can disrupt the preexisting balance of power among the contracting states (Gowa 1246). In the bi-polar world created by the Soviet-American conflict, initial choice of an alliance partner was thus explicitly linked with the economic and security well-being of the United States. Stabilizing South Korea's political economy, for instance, was an important objective that would provide the United States with the strategic flexibility to disengage from the peninsula (Lee, Stevens 31). Thus, giving monetary and military aid to Korea was economically rational, since the more economic growth Korea experienced, the more potential military power it could contribute to the American side.

The discourse of the Domino Theory, which hypothesized that one fall would lead to another fall, further linked the national security of the United States with supporting anti-communist regimes in East Asia. The paranoia is primary illustrated by State Department's reasoning that communism "will surely spread and will ultimately threaten our own homes" (Matray 4) Korea, being geographically sandwiched between the Soviet Union and Communist China, while being in the immediate proximity to Japan, was a pivotal region to prevent Communist spillover to the Asian continent. An apprehension of this situation is noticeable in a way the United States dealt with the aftermath of Korean independence from Japan. Before the United States secured surrender from Japan, the Soviet army was already in a position geographically to move into Korea, when the nearest American forces available for movement into Korea were 600 miles away (Back 32). The United States was willing to divide Korea with the Soviets precisely because they were afraid that the Soviet army would push too far down the Korean peninsula. After the liberation of Korea, the United States immediately secured an international guarantee for a complete control of South Korea in the form of U.S. military governance (*US Imperialist* 45).

Similar to the U.S. occupation period in Japan, the American Military Government in Korea changed the fundamental political landscape of Korea by installing "democratic institutions" that suppressed the left. According to Klein,

this was guided by an American perception that, “new nations [had] emotional urge for a completely independent existence that they constructed barriers…to the flow of trade, [which] create a breeding ground for communism” (Klein 52). Her analysis was, in fact, not far from the truth. In Korea, where the land-holding Yangban class exploited the peasant class for centuries, everyday forms of peasant resistance were widespread throughout the nation. The situation was exacerbated by the architectonic nature of Japanese colonialism, which permitted Korean landlord to retain their holdings and encouraged them to, “continue disciplining peasants” (Cumings 151).

Peasant exploitation in Korea grew into strong populist movements after the liberation. In the North, peasant activism translated into an indigenized form of socialist revolution that executed sweeping land reforms in 1946 (Armstrong 32). In the South, however, popular uprisings in 1946 were ruthlessly crushed by reactionary forces under the auspices of the American military government. Adopting the Japanese model of ruling, the United States found it convenient to “reestablish [the] colonial system by restoring to key positions Koreans who had collaborated with the Japanese” (Shin 65). In fact, there was nothing “democratic” about South Korea's authoritarian regimes that frequently relied on the U.S. military and clandestine KCIA operations to suppress dissidents. President Rhee Syngman, for example, used National Security Laws to arrest members of the National Assembly and frequently utilized the army to suppress leftist movements. Rhee ruthlessly crushed leftist movements in areas like Cheju Island, where, “one in every five or six citizens in the island perished” (Cumings 221). It is important to note that due to the military command structure in Korea, where the Korean military was directly responsible to the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff – not the Korean president – the political suppressions were unambiguously a byproduct sanctioned by the United States (Back 42). To the United States, supporting the Rhee government was widely understood as the only way of securing a sphere of pro-Western influence and containing the extension of the Soviet core in Asia.

The Economics of Intervention

There was, of course, more at stake in the Cold War for America than simple ideological and political struggle. The involvement in Korea also incorporated, to a large extent, shrewd economic calculations. Communist expansion was a great threat to American political economy, precisely because it hindered upon American economic dominance. Americans understood the Soviet bloc as an “iron curtain” which was a threat to the American economy that relied heavily on free trade with foreign economies (Small 193). The Soviet aspiration to become an economic hegemony via closing off its economy was an especially frightening concept under the overproduction and under-consumption thesis, which installed a belief that, “the nation's economy, in order to remain healthy, had continually to expand and integrate new markets and sources of raw material” (Kramer, “New”). This ideology especially gained momentum when conservatives succeeded in linking the Great Depression with

a lack of free trade. This was not entirely a false alarm especially in the post-war period, since the share of trade in the U.S. economy rose to an unprecedented level in the 1950s.

Many critics point to the lack of “anything” in Korea to deny any claims of American economic benefits involved with intervention in Korea. Specifically, they refer to the massive U.S. economic and military aid poured into South Korea, which peaked at a tune of about $1 billion a year, when the total U.S. federal budget was under $70 billion (Woo-Cumings 66). There were, nevertheless, economic benefits involved with the generosity. Similar to the political economy imperialism, U.S. involvement aimed at not only securing raw materials, but also securing cheap labor and markets to sell finished goods (Guevara). The American support for pro-capitalist regimes in South Korea effectively stifled labor movements for four decades. Korean workers, as Hegan Koo puts it, were infamously known for suffering the world's longest work hours – up to eighteen hours a day – in some of the most inhumane working conditions the world had ever seen (Koo 78). In addition to the strong discursive environment that denounced labor movements as “communists,” blacklisting labor movement leaders effectively obliterated the collective identity of workers. Unsurprisingly, American leverage over the right-wing regimes granted the United States exclusive rights to take advantage of such labor practices. Namely, South Korea became one of the first nations that the United States established a Free Trade Zone, where American businessmen could import Koreans good unhindered by domestic rules and regulations (Kramer, “Whose”). Free Trade Zones in South Korea emerged in early 1960s as part of the First Economic Development Plan, which strikingly correlated with the rise of labor-intensive industries in Korea (“Recent”).

According to classic economic models set forth by trade economists, such increase in trade, at an aggregate level, should have benefited both countries involved. From a purely economic standpoint, the American involvement in Korea, thus invariably benefited Korea. Yet, such premise hardly signifies American altruism, because benefiting Korea was the means through which Americans benefited. As President Eisenhower articulates, the “flow of U.S. dollars abroad would be matched by a corresponding flow of [other goods] into the nation” (Klein 42). Many Marxist scholars criticize such unbalanced relationship between states, because the capitalist system of world order induces the economy of smaller states to inevitably depend on larger economies, which is the very logic of imperialism. More importantly, Korea served as a primary exemplar that glorified America's reassurance in providing a military umbrella for post-colonial nations (Williams et al. 52). The “symbolic” model that established America as a reliable bulwark against communism was an important American economic strategy that deterred other nations from joining the communist movement.

The Politics of Orientalism

The contradictory U.S. foreign policy tactics that emerged during the Cold War cannot be explained by a mere U.S. interest in having a stable non-communist government in the region. After all, scholars do not dispute the existence of a *genuine* American interest in securing the values of democracy. Furthermore, the underlying vision behind the "City on a Hill" project implied isolationism, where America was to become a separate, untouchable role model. The ideologically contradicting intervention in Korea was not only legitimized by political and economic interests, but also by the politics of Orientalism. Orientalism, by drawing boundaries between being "American" and being "other," effectively alleviated America of its burden to promote freedom in other regions.

According to Edward Said, formation of national identity involves the dichotomy of constructing the opposites and others (Said 332). As Christina Klein explains it, Orientalism worked as an instrument of Western domination by presenting the West as rational and progressive, while portraying the East as irrational, backward-looking, and feminine (Klein 10). During the initial period after Korea's independence from Japan, mainstream American accounts of Korea – which were mainly based on ignorance – established Koreans as a "distinct" race by highlighting the binary differences between them and the Americans. For example, due to the extreme poverty widespread in Korea, it was immediately classified as a, "land mired in traditional and hopeless backward values" (Ekbladh). The discourse reinforced the notion of a hierarchical relation between the West and the East, giving Americans a paternalistic attitude towards Korea.

This popular understanding, infused with the firm belief that the United States was the ultimate solution to mankind's long search for the proper way to organize society, compelled American involvement Korea. While the puritan ideology indirectly implied an isolationist policy, the "model" community implied America being a leader for the world. This is a particularly important concept to grasp, because the discourse of idealism and righteousness compelled the Americans to get restless in everything that went against this value. As Historian Bill Williams puts it, "the behavior of other people was judged by its correspondence with the American Way...The weaker the correlation, the greater the urge to intervene to help the wayward find the proper path to freedom and prosperity" (Williams 53).

The politics of Orientalism further legitimized the installation of dictators, because Americans essentially concluded that Koreans were incapable of ruling themselves. This is evident when examining the American literature's attitude of the Korean people. One article described Korean men as, "certainly the most inefficient of human creatures, lacking all initiative and achievement, and the only thing in which he shines is the carrying of burdens on his back" (Lee, Sang-Dawn 13).

An article published in *San Francisco Examiner* went further by describing

Korean food as filth, dirt, indescribable, and highlighting to American readers that, “the Korean was so barbarous as to eat dog” (Lee, Sang-Dawn 2). Under such arrogant attitudes, any Korean conduct was understood to be irrational. In particular, frequent leftist movements in Korea only reassured America's judgment that Koreans were indeed illogical.

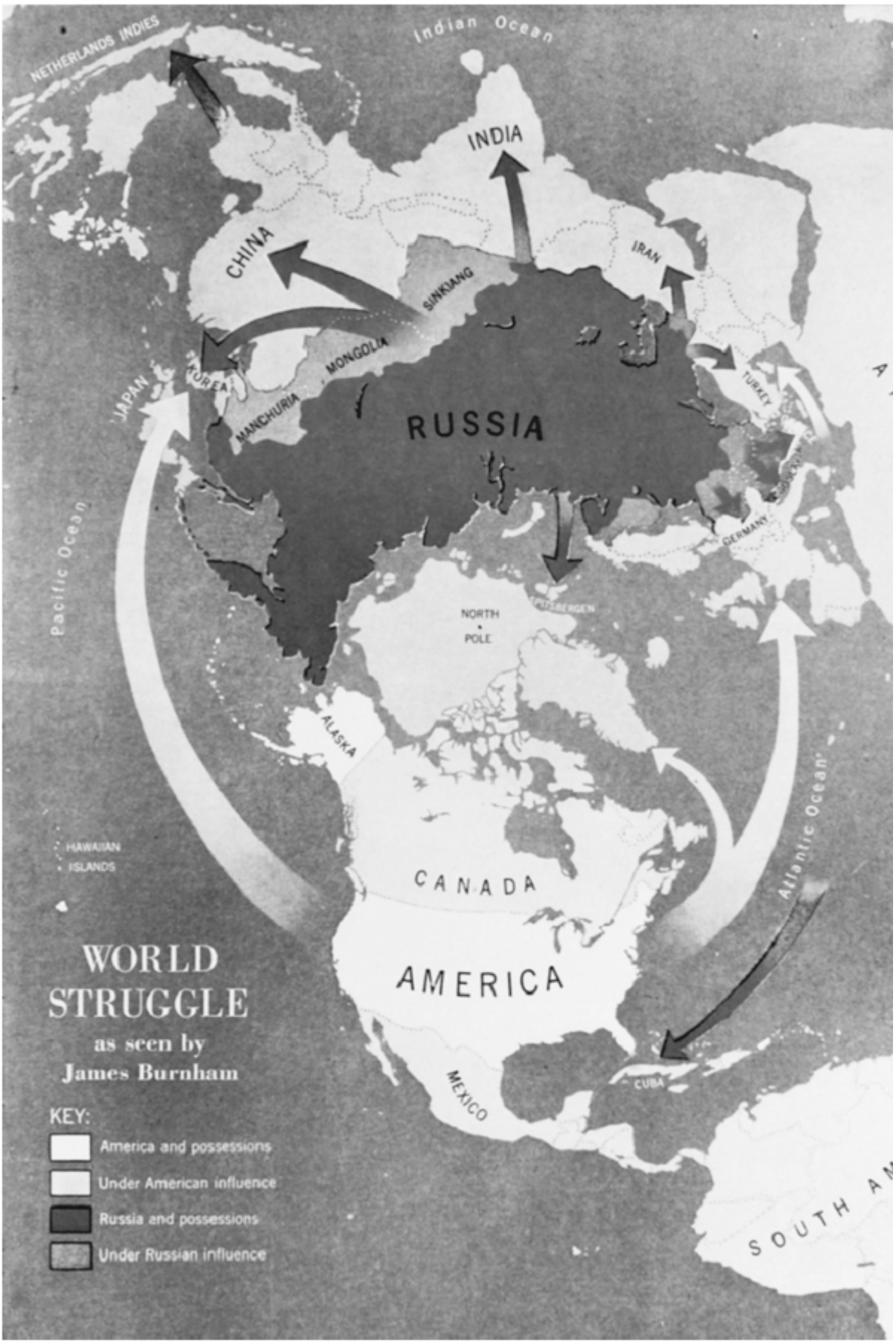
Similar to the domestic American racism in the 1950s, which was rooted in the discourse that blacks were *biologically* inferior, early American stereotypes of Korea infused the notion that Koreans were innately inferior beings (Sears). The best-known American political phrase conveys that, “all men are created equal with certain unalienable rights,” yet fundamental rights were denied to African Americans because racism categorized blacks to a sub-human category. Similarly, while Americans were convinced of the superior nature of American democracy, grassroots democratic institutions were not implemented in Korea because Americans were convinced that Koreans were not “exceptional” enough to rule themselves.

Conclusion

South Korea ultimately developed into one of the richest countries in the world, after recording world's fastest growth rate for a quarter-century. Many developmental economists refer to South Korea's economic “miracle” – contrary to North Korea's economic disaster – as a shining example that glorifies the ultimate victory of American capitalism. It is precisely that logic in which many people hasten to call direct U.S. intervention a function of imperialism. Unlike the European model of imperialism, American involvement in Korea ultimately benefited both sides. *But did it?* While Americans did not “colonize” Korea, Americans fundamentally altered the historical fate of Korea. It was precisely the State Department's paranoia of “Red Expansion” that triggered the division of Korea, which created a breeding ground for friction that would develop into one of the bloodiest armed conflicts in human history. From conservative estimates, the Korean War (1950-1953) was responsible for 3 million deaths, 7 million displaced civilians, and a permanent division of a five thousand year old nation-state (Cumings 293). In the end, it was the Koreans, among other citizens of the “hot” regions around the globe, who disproportionately paid the price for the Cold War that allowed the United States to secure world dominance. The contemporary world, where the residues of Cold War discourse and strategies are arrogantly used in regions like Iraq, gives a chilling testimony that illuminates the maturity of an “American empire.”

Appendix

Figure 1: Mapping the Cold War—the global imaginary of containment. (Klein 2003)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Pacific Ocean
NORTH POLE
SPITSBERGEN
ALASKA
HAWAIIAN ISLANDS
CANADA
Atlantic Ocean
AMERICA
MEXICO
CUBA
SOUTH AM
WORLD STRUGGLE
as seen by
James Burnham
KEY:
America and possessions
Under American influence
Russia and possessions
Under Russian influence

About the Author

The author is a third year student attending the University of Michigan, concentrating his studies on business and political science. He is thankful for the privilege of working with Professor Penny Von Eschen and Professor Paul Kramer at Michigan for their enthusiastic support for this project, which has been deeply personal to him.

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