

The Hidden History of the Korean War

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Former heavyweight boxing champion Mohammed Ali (born Cassius M. Clay) is probably the most famous draft resister in US history. When refusing to accept the draft in 1967, during the American war against Vietnam he told the Press:

"No, I am not going 10,000 miles to help murder, kill and burn other people to simply help continue the domination of white slavemasters over dark people the world over. This is the day and age when such evil injustice must come to an end... Why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go ten thousand miles from home and drop bombs and bullets on brown people in Vietnam, while so-called Negro people in Louisville[1] are treated like dogs and denied simple human rights."

The only war in the official history of the United State that was lost, was also the first war in which Jim Crow, the apartheid regime created in the US after the Civil War and Reconstruction, was not the policy of the US military. How African-Americans came again to challenge the imperialist war machine in the 1960s cannot be understood without uncovering the decades of silence and deception that have covered the first war the US regime truly lost—although it has never officially ended.

Bruce Cumings, certainly the most authoritative if not the sole US expert on this mysterious conflict, wrote,

"Americans know the Korean War as a "forgotten war", which is another way of saying that generally they do not know it. A war that killed upwards of four million people, 35,000 of them Americans, is remembered mainly as an odd conflict sandwiched between the good war (World War II) and the bad war (Vietnam)."

This reflects what might be called an especially American form of Manichaeism—for

Americans there is only the “good” and the “bad”. The ability to judge either their own individual behaviour or that of their government is limited by this narrow dualism, a recurrent pattern in the way they perceive both domestic and foreign affairs. It is what made Jim Crow a most stringent and insidious form of social engineering: white and black, good and bad, sin and salvation, communism (without understanding it) and democracy (without having it). Bipolar disorder predates the pharmaceutical and confessional waves of the last two decades. In fact this disorder, going back to the country’s founding myth, has been a fundamental obstacle to comprehending the vicious invasion of a fiercely independent Asian country, under the pretext of preserving these supposedly clear moral categories. US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, staunch Presbyterian and corporate mercenary, declared the necessity of a “Christian war” in Asia.[2]

I.F. Stone, a unique American journalist, tried to breach the insipid and seemingly impenetrable barrier in the consciousness of Americans when he first published his *Hidden History of the Korean War* in 1952—in the midst of brutal fighting in Korea and political purging in his own land. Stone wrote:

“Writing in an atmosphere much like that of full war, I realised that I could be persuasive only if I utilised material which could not be challenged by those who accept the official government point of view. I have relied exclusively, therefore, on United States and United Nations documents, and respected American and British newspaper sources.”[3]

Stone’s history is damning although he deliberately used only published sources and not the disclosure of classified documents. His hidden history is a case study in how the control of the narrative—to use a modern term—successfully prevented and prevents obvious criminal conduct by the government and military from being recognised for what it is.

Hence Professor Cumings asserted that Stone’s non-conformist history “is a textbook on how to read... People with a built-in indifference to history are ill accustomed to retrospective digging, to lifting up rugs, to searching for subterranean forces and tendencies. Exploring the labyrinth of history is alien to the American soul, perhaps because an optimistic people find knowledge of the past too burdensome in the present”[4]

But just maybe even more problematic are the basic lies upon which the US founding myth was based and had to be enforced upon every new wave of cheap immigrant labour imported to dilute the poison of Negro slavery and Native American annihilation from which the hypocritical optimism was born. The US war against Korea was only possible because the US regime had emerged from the “good war” with the only industrial economy intact and capable of fulfilling its founder’s “manifest destiny” to replace the empires of their European forebears. This manifest destiny replaced Britain’s “white man’s burden” with the war against communism and nationalism. This optimism, born from decimation of a continent filled with virtually defenceless indigenous, driven by uprooted and exploited labour, was only possible with a culture of forgetting, forgetting the mass murder, the slavery, the poverty and oppression to which immigrants had been subjected in Europe before they came to North America. Two world wars had taught Germans and Japanese their tenuous place in this white man’s republic, racially divisible under god.

I.F. Stone explains the way the war was fabricated by a man William Manchester called an “American Caesar”.[5] He shows that this nominally United Nations war was a process of

transforming the continental warrior state into a full-fledged global war machine for whom the very scent of peace was deemed revolting, esp. for dividends. Repeatedly Stone refers to the threat of “peace”. Chapter 15 is called, “Peace alarms”. Chapter 28 is called “Anti-peace offensive”. Chapter 33, “Hiding the Lull” describes how MacArthur’s headquarters worked to conceal the actual decline in combat activity—except US bombing. Chapter 41 is called “Postponing Peace Again”. In fact Stone shows on numerous occasions that the worst fear of those US warlords in Asia and Washington was that “peace might break out”.[6] Even MacArthur’s field commanders lied beyond the distortions for which William Westmoreland would be grated years later. Stone writes:

“Eighth Army Headquarters claimed to have killed or wounded 69,500 of the enemy from January 25 to midnight February 9, an average of about 4,600—or as Headquarters put it, “almost” a “full division” a day. Comparisons with the peak battles of World Wars I and II will indicate what a feat this was... If the figures given out that day at Lieutenant General Matthew Ridgway’s Headquarters were correct, then the push through the no man’s land south of Seoul must rank with the Battle of Stalingrad, the climax of World War II...”[7]

This was somehow plausible—and even acceptable- to Americans since they were repeatedly told how their clean-cut American soldiers were confronting endless “hordes” of Asians. Even the British press could not swallow the official reporting. The *Daily Mirror* published a story headlined: “Fairy Tales from Korea”.[8]

Aside from the exhaustion of the belligerents during the US Civil War—from 1860 – 1865—after the horrific violence waged by the industrialised armies of the mercantile North against the feudal armies of the Southern latifundista, there has been little serious bloodshed in the history of US conquest—at least as far as whites have been concerned. Hence the optimism that prevails among the warmongering classes seems to have arisen from the exceedingly modest waste of white lives in the two hundred years of the republic’s continental and colonial expansion.

Stone repeatedly demonstrates that Douglas MacArthur always lived up to the reputation he enjoyed among his fellow general officers—as a man who knew how to stage a show. MacArthur’s wilful deceit and manipulation of the US media assigned to his headquarters in Tokyo was every bit as contrived as the embedded reporting and isolated journalist pools of the Grenada invasion (1983) and the endless Gulf Wars starting in 1991. It should be no surprise however that a third generation colonial slaughterer should follow his return to the Philippines (where his father had also been military governor) to pursue the conquest of the rest of Asia, absorbing on the way the colonies and dependencies of Europe’s bankrupt empires.

However Stone rightly distinguishes between MacArthur’s limitless egotism and the genteel ambitions of the Northeastern establishment personified in Dean Acheson, whom the British antecedents thought “was their picture of what a foreign secretary should be: cultivated, personable and superbly tailored.”[9] Where Stone becomes problematic is precisely in this aspect of his analysis. If MacArthur and the rest of the military establishment in Washington were bent on presenting the war in terms of the controlling narrative: good v. bad, communist v. democracy, Christianity v. atheism, and ultimately whites v. non-whites, who were the real targets of the propaganda—the psychological operations at the core of the war against Korea. What made the war against Korea, essentially a civil war to reunify a peninsula that had been colonised by Japan with US brokerage and then partitioned against

both Allied promises and the will of the Korean inhabitants, necessary?[10]

It could not have been the general population, including the Black Americans still targets of Jim Crow and white terrorism at home. It could not have been the socialists who emerged in the US as a potent force in the labour movement, abetted by the grudging US alliance with the Soviet Union in World War II. Nor could it have been the average working class man or woman whose claims to a peace dividend were to be foiled by America's corporate elite. Stone was not privy to *NSC 68*—promulgated just before 1950 and only declassified in the 1970s. Nonetheless Stone was well aware of the corporate forces prepared to fight against social expenditure but perfectly willing to adopt military Keynesianism if it meant windfall weapons profits.[11]

Stone's *Hidden History* leaves us with the facts of war: the total destruction of Korea, esp. north of the 38th parallel. He documents endlessly, from reports in the *New York Times* and other newspapers of record, that despite the lack of an enemy in the field that had no interest in demolishing its homeland, the Supreme Commander exercised *carte blanche* (pun intended) to saturate the entire peninsula with high explosives and napalm. The logical conclusion of Stone's story is that the US regime destroyed non-white Korea—like so many Vietnamese villages thereafter—to save it. But for whom? Stone only hints at the answer.

Today the territory of the Palestinian nation has been virtually obliterated by a US client state. However the debate in the US persists in the same way it did between 1950 and 1953. Perhaps what Stone missed—or was simply unable to say in public—is that same issue which conceals the war against Palestine: Namely the entrenched power of an elite US ruling class.

This imperial consensus however is not uniform in its particular objectives or interests. It only coalesces when there is active warfare. It has only recently been acceptable in albeit limited public venues to discuss the "Israel lobby". In 1950, it was impossible for anyone to discuss the "China lobby". Stone tells us that powerful factions in the US elite could not agree whether the dictates of empire meant that US power should be focussed on Europe and the threat posed by the Soviet Union to the expansion of US corporations into European markets or—as the faction to which John Foster Dulles and his brother Allen in CIA belonged felt—directed toward the endless wealth to be plundered in Asia. The evacuation of Britain, France and the Netherlands from their plantation and mining possessions—not least of which the CIA-favoured opium trade, controlled from Shanghai until 1949—promised huge opportunities.

MacArthur's role ought to be seen in this light. The decision to attempt "rollback" in Asia, rather than "containment" was made possible by the US atomic arsenal. This fearsomely obscene weapon had already been deployed against "non-white hordes" in Japan and appeared no doubt the weapon of choice for US re-conquest of China. Sheer numbers would have made an invasion and occupation of China impossible. The victory of Mao Tse-Tung and the Chinese Communist Party resulted in the expulsion of the last of China's great warlord drug dealers from the mainland. Not only Chiang Kai-Shek but also his banking and pirate backers in the US, Japan and Britain would have profited immensely from a restoration of the status quo ante.[12] To pursue this goal MacArthur cut the Korean War out of whole cloth and deliberately created conditions which would replicate the rationale used to defend the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

The mystery with which Stone left his readers in 1952 was why did the US regime ultimately

stop its campaign to conquer China? Was it the repeated refusal of the Chinese and Russians to intervene far enough to provide objective justification for MacArthur's fake war against communism? Was it the realisation in Washington that having destroyed all of Korea they could not have fought a two front, perhaps even nuclear war? Perhaps it was precisely the outbreak of a precursor to what has been erroneously called "Vietnam syndrome", the puncturing of pride within the ruling elite and the choice in Washington and New York to make more money at home and in Europe?

According to Gerald Horne, the Korean War was a major catalyst for Truman's half-hearted attempts to abolish the US apartheid system of Jim Crow.[13] While the war in Korea served well to establish the post-war military-industrial complex, against which Eisenhower belatedly warned, it did not produce the desired domestic harmony. The Korean War was waged at home against every dissident group that had survived the New Deal and the US victory over the Axis. However, by attacking a fiercely nationalist, non-white country while attempting to preserve all the vestiges of centuries of white privilege at home, the elite was forced for a brief moment to choose. Could it crush nationalism (anti-colonialism) abroad and equality at home? Could it win an absolute ideological victory in Europe while terrorising Blacks in America? Could it arm and train segregated military units and construct the national police force which today keeps the largest prison population in the world under lock and key?

Stone does not ask any of those questions. But then these issues were not yet part of the official and respected narrative.

In 1954, the US regime was compelled to use federal authority to suppress the most atrocious practices of its racist system. It could be confronted with this domestic crime all the way through to the finish of its only "bad war". Mohammed Ali was only born in 1942, less than ten years before the war against Korea started. However he was only the most famous of those Blacks who refused to join in the annihilation of non-whites throughout the world to support liberties never respected at home. Refusing to go to Vietnam—where both the death squads and saturation bombing deployed by the US Armed Forces in Korea were enhanced and modernised—Ali put it quite bluntly. "My enemy is the white people not the Vietcong." Sometimes the US ruling elite is forced to recognise the potential hazard of such honesty in the face of their own egregious deceit.

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Notes

[1] Louisville, Kentucky, where Mohammed Ali was born.

[2] Stone, p. 25, "He helped draft a manifesto by the Federal Council of Churches that year (1947) calling for a world-wide 'moral offensive' by the United States to spread the doctrine of freedom as opposed to Soviet doctrine..." As Stone put it, "the man who in 1943 had been pleading for a 'Christian peace' with the Axis no seemed to be advocating a "Christian war" against the USSR."

[3] Author's preface

[4] Bruce Cumings, Preface to the 1988 edition.

[5] William Manchester, *American Caesar, Douglas MacArthur 1880-1964*

[6] Stone, p. 153.

[7] Stone, p. 245.

[8] Stone, p. 242.

[9] Stone, p. 203

[10] Stone, p. 302, Not only the Yalta agreement was violated but the Cairo agreement to restore Korean sovereignty. See here esp. Bruce Cumings, *Origins of the Korean War*.

[11] Stone, p. 106

[12] Stone, p. 122.

[13] see Gerald Horne, *Race to Revolution*, New York, 2014. Although Truman issued *Executive Order 9981* to end racial discrimination in the US military, it was only in 1952 that the armed forces began forming integrated units—although the allocation of command positions remained race-based well into the early 60s.

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