

The Korean Conflict

Korea seemed an unlikely place for American troops to be fighting. Most Americans would have been unable to locate Korea on a map at the beginning of 1950. By the end of that year, Korea was on the minds of all Americans.

For almost 50 years, the Asian **peninsula** of Korea (see map on page 85) had been under the control of the Japanese Empire. After Japan's defeat in World War II, Korea was occupied by Soviet and American troops. As the Big Three had agreed, Soviet troops occupied the northern half of Korea, while American troops occupied the southern half. The 38th **parallel** marked the border between the two Koreas. The original plan had called for elections to be held in 1948 to unite all of Korea under one government, but the Soviets failed to hold elections in the north. The northern and southern halves of Korea established their own governments, and in 1948 American and Soviet troops left. North Korea was controlled by Kim Il-Sung's communist government, while South Korea was led by Syngman Rhee.

Neither Kim Il-Sung nor Syngman Rhee was a popular ruler. Both were ambitious men who desired to rule over all of Korea, and border skirmishes between their forces were a common event after 1948. However, on June 25, 1950, Kim Il-Sung ordered a full-scale attack on South Korea. North Korean troops poured across the 38th parallel, and the South Korean army was soon in full retreat.

Today, historians believe that Kim Il-Sung acted on his own **initiative**, but American leaders did not know that at the time. They were surprised and disturbed by the North Korean invasion. President Truman and his advisors believed that the invasion was part of a larger communist plan to conquer the world. They assumed that Stalin had ordered the invasion from Moscow. The event was the first major test of the Truman Doctrine. Immediately, the United States set out to help the South Koreans.

The United States worked through the United Nations (U.N.). The U.N. had been created for just this type of situation. Its goal was to **mediate** and stop wars. The U.N. voted to order the North Korean troops to stop their invasion of the South. When the war continued, the U.N. voted to send troops to assist the South. Sixteen different countries sent troops to help defend South Korea, but the United States provided 90 percent of the troops and most of the financial aid. Led by General Douglas MacArthur, fresh American and South Korean



Douglas MacArthur

drove the communists back, and the front lines stabilized near the 38th parallel for the duration of the war.

A disagreement developed between President Truman and General MacArthur following the Chinese entry into the war. MacArthur wanted to expand the war, attacking the communists in China as well as Korea. He also wanted to use the atomic bomb against Chinese troops and cities, and first asked permission to do so on December 6, 1950. Truman seriously considered giving MacArthur permission to carry out his plans, but ultimately decided that it would be unwise to expand the war. Truman knew that America would lose the support of its allies if it dropped atomic bombs on Chinese cities, and he also believed that conventional weapons would be sufficient to win the war. MacArthur continued to ask permission to expand the war, but to no avail. In frustration, he expressed his views to American newspapers, in disobedience to Truman's orders. MacArthur was a popular general, but Truman wasted no time in removing him for insubordination. Truman wished to keep the Korean war under control. He did not want it to develop into another world war.