

Was the Korean

David McGill debates to what extent the Korean War was a victory for the USA

YES

The Korean War was a clear victory for the USA. It was fought to protect a democratic country from totalitarianism and to contain the global ambitions of the Soviet Union. Victory in Korea saved Japan and other Asian countries from communism. It also signalled the USA's and its allies' resolve to resist the expansionism of Stalin's Russia. The nature of the contemporary North Korean regime and the success of South Korea as a thriving democratic nation give it further legitimacy. After the Second World War, the USA had committed itself to protecting the 'free peoples' of the world and it had shown that it was able to do so.

Source A

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Background

Korea had been annexed by the Japanese in 1910 and at the end of the Second World War had been divided along the 38th Parallel. In the north the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) emerged under Kim Il-sung, while in the south the Republic of Korea was governed by Syngman Rhee.

Both sides were supported by rival superpowers, but it was Stalin who backed the North Korean forces when they invaded the south on 25 June 1950. North Korean forces were very successful in the initial stages of the invasion and it looked like they would destroy the Republic of Korea and unite the country under a Communist regime.

Intervention

The whole world viewed the invasion with alarm. China had just fallen to Communist forces and if Korea also followed then Japan and other countries would be directly threatened. In March 1947 President Truman had outlined his 'doctrine' and the invasion of South Korea put this commitment directly to the test.

President Truman felt the USA had to intervene and quickly mobilised support to do so. He also realised he should do so through the United Nations organisation, which had been created in 1945 to deal with exactly this kind of situation. UN Resolution 83 sanctioned the use of force to protect South Korea and by July 1950 a US-led coalition was fighting in South Korea.

Victory

By October 1950 UN forces had pushed North Korean troops back across the 38th Parallel. South Korea had been saved from North Korean aggression. General MacArthur had led coalition forces northwards in pursuit of the retreating North Korean army and this sparked Chinese intervention which escalated the conflict considerably. Although this was a major setback, after fierce fighting the front between the two coalition armies stabilised around the 38th Parallel and an armistice ended the conflict on 27 June 1953. The war, although costly, was a clear victory both for Truman's policy of containment and for the newly created United Nations organisation.

War a US victory?

NO

The Korean War was complex and brought various combatants into conflict with each other. In some ways it appeared that the USA had won and that its policy of containment had been a success, but in reality this was only partly true. The USA congratulated itself in 1953 on winning a war, but the war had also seen the US army and its allies humiliated by Chinese forces in 1950. Although the US coalition and its South Korean partners recovered and stabilised the line along the 38th Parallel, the USA had experienced a rude awakening after its victories in the Second World War.

Syngman Rhee and General MacArthur

The Americans argued they were defending a democratic state, but the president of South Korea, Syngman Rhee, was extremely authoritarian. He had brutally suppressed any opposition to his regime. By 1950 up to 30,000 opponents were imprisoned and a further 300,000 were in 're-education camps' (run by the Bodo League). At the end of the war Syngman Rhee also tried his best to torpedo armistice negotiations. Even the Americans admitted he was something of a 'rogue ally'.

General MacArthur was also a liability. His actions once US forces had crossed into North Korea in 1950 bordered on the reckless and once Chinese forces were engaged MacArthur wanted to escalate the conflict and use nuclear weapons to attack China. The Korean War could easily have escalated into a nuclear conflict.

US military performance

The US amphibious landing at Inchon in August 1950 had shown the US military at its most competent, but other indicators were less positive. Initial fighting around the Pusan pocket had been tough and as the Americans moved north they became complacent. Massive intelligence failings led to disastrous defeats along the Yalu River in November 1950 and the retreat south has been described as the worst military debacle the US military suffered in the twentieth century. The Chinese suffered



heavy casualties, but the fact that they were able to take on the Americans and defeat them in several engagements was an early indication that the global balance of power was shifting.

Vietnam

Not only had the war led to China emerging as a new regional and then a global power, but it also led to US intervention in Indochina and the Vietnam War. Success in Korea convinced the Americans that containment had worked. As the French withdrew from the Indochina region the Americans stepped up their support for the South Vietnamese regime and committed themselves to trying to contain North Vietnamese Communist forces from uniting the country. This proved to be an impossible task and led to American defeat and Communist victory. At best the Korean War could be seen as a draw for the Americans. The war left the North Korean regime intact and it still survives today, threatening the whole region with nuclear war. [HS](#)

Source B

US artillerymen fighting in the Korean War, April 1951