Hello and welcome history friends patrons all to episode 15 of the KW. Last time we saw how the Soviet Union and PRC engaged in a genuine race to launch one another’s policy end goal. Despite lacking the key equipment, Mao Zedong was determined to invade Taiwan before the KW broke out, no matter what it cost him. On the other hand, Stalin was keenly aware that if Mao captured Taiwan before the KW could be ignited, then Moscow would lose a major point of pressure from which Beijing could be coerced. Furthermore, as Moscow well knew, the loss of Taiwan would mean the loss of the American friction in the Sino-American relationship. Since Taiwan and Chiang Kai-Shek remained a sensitive issue, the elimination of it would surely pave the way to peaceful relations in the future, and also lessen Mao’s dependence upon the USSR. Such an outcome was intolerable for Stalin to accept, and so he brought his plot to plunge a troubled peninsula into war for his own ends, with horrific consequences for all involved.

In the previous episodes we’ve learned the extent to which Kim Il-Sung and Stalin were connected, and in the next two episodes, we’ll examine the other side of the border, as the American relationship with the South, and Washington’s stark treatment of Seoul during this time period, spoke to a sinister, perhaps even conspiratorial motive which none of those uninformed officials at the time could have believed. The voluntary ignorance of the Truman administration was about to make its presence felt, as such public antipathy contributed towards that juicy end goal of luring the North Koreans in and generating a costly war of attrition. Without further ado then, I will now take you to spring 1950…

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Philip Jessup was a busy man. Acquiring the post of ambassador at large for the US government in 1949, Jessup had made his way in January 1950 to the republic of Korea, as part of a tour of East Asia that had begun the previous October. A graduate of Columbia and of Yale, Jessup was a respected figure in diplomacy, and had served on several commissions representing the US, including the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) in 1943, the United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference in 1944 and as a member of the American delegation to the UN in San Francisco in 1945. In 1947, he was the U.S. representative to the United Nations Committee on Codification of International Law, which suited him since his degrees were all in law, and international law especially. From 1948-1952, he was prolific in several roles at the United Nations: as U.S. representative to the General Assembly for the second, third, and fourth special sessions, as deputy U.S. representative to the Interim Committee of the General Assembly and Security Council, and deputy chief of the U.S. Mission to the United Nations. In the future, Jessup would be selected to serve as a judge of the ICJ in The Hague, where he would stand from 1961 to 1970.

This brief bio of Philip Jessup should go to show that few figures in American diplomacy or law had such a glittering career, and had been trusted with such high profile tasks, as Jessup was. Jessup was also personally recommended by President Truman to sit as America’s delegate to the UN in 1951, yet in that case, he had to find a workaround because the Senate wouldn’t approve it. Why wouldn’t the Senate approve it you may ask, since Jessup had demonstrated a great ability to get the job done and represent America abroad? Well, one can look no further than the person of Joseph McCarthy. Philip Jessup, as it happened, was one of nine public figures blacklisted by McCarthy in the Tydings Committee, which itself formed one of many parts of the Red Scare. Alger Hiss, arguably one of the most famous persons to be nabbed by McCarthy’s witch hunt, had worked with Jessup in the past, as Hiss had led the delegation to the UN in 1945 which Jessup had served on. This among many other suspicious activities, were enough to seriously damage Jessup’s reputation. ***Have a listen here to the moment when Hiss was convicted for perjury in 1950, and sentenced to five years in prison.***

The event launched the political career not merely of McCarthy, but also of Richard Nixon. The Red Scare and the unfortunate American reaction to the terrifying image of communism and its inescapable presence are not topics we really have time to get into here, since McCarthyism can itself form a podcast all by itself.[[1]](#footnote-1) For his part, Jessup had to return from Pakistan in May 1950 to answer the charges put forward by McCarthy, and he would certainly have regarded the whole affair as one of intense annoyance, since it interfered in his work abroad. Jessup, as we have seen, was a busy man. In fact, his stay in South Korea lasted only four days, between 11th to 14th January 1950, and only a few days after he left, Dean Acheson’s speech was released in its doctored form to the media in South Korea, erasing in the process any goodwill Jessup may have fostered with Syngman Rhee. You see, Jessup’s tour of SK took him to the DMZ along the 38th parallel, to the barracks of active SK soldiers, and to the HQ of General Lynn Roberts, the chief of the Korean Military Advisory Group or KMAG. Remember KMAG guys, because it’ll become very important in the next few episodes.

Yet, my point here is, even while Jessup travelled to these places, met these people, and noted the positives and negatives about the SK position, he was utterly powerless in the end to do anything to change the manifest deficiencies present in SK. By the time he had left, wheels were already turning, and by the time his reports and recommendations for greater investment and attention to be paid to SK were properly digested at the end of the month, President Truman had begun to affect a fundamental change in America’s policy towards SK. Where once Seoul had been a resolute if troubled capital of American interests in Asia, second only to Tokyo, by the time Jessup left for new Asian pastures, the country had been reduced to that of a goat, tethered to a post, with the sole intention being to trap the tigers which came to feast. Since Jessup’s trip occurred in the twilight era of American support of SK, Jessup’s observations in the ground prove very interesting.

Commenting on the high morale of the SK troops, and of the positive work done by the Korean Military Advisory Group or KMAG, Jessup was still quick to comment on the technological deficiencies of the SK army; their inherent lack of proper artillery, tanks, planes or strong defensive positions. Remember these impressions, because they were to remain unchanged in the reports home by General Roberts or the American ambassador in Korea, John J. Muccio (MUCHO) for the next six months. The only difference in the reports of the latter was the decline in morale among the soldiery of Syngman Rhee – one of the few advantages which the SKA was said to possess. Indeed, Jessup’s messages home to Washington resembled a pattern which was to be repeated right up until the outbreak of the KW on 25th June.

Another striking difference was that in mid-January, Dean Acheson may have been inclined to listen, but a fortnight after Jessup had left the country, he was not. In fact, following Jessup’s cables home and a subsequent vote on an aid bill for SK immediately thereafter, Acheson fought for SK security for what would prove to be the final time. Even more interestingly, when the amended Korean Aid Bill did pass through the House of Representatives on 9th February 1950, it contained a new provision for the delivery of aid not merely to SK, but also to Chiang Kai-Shek’s regime in Taiwan. The first public signal that something had changed in Washington had been made. Consider the fact that only on 5th January had Truman declared the intention of his administration to terminate military assistance to Taiwan in the hope that it would appease Mao Zedong, here he was a month later approving the provision of aid. We know now of course that in the space of that month, many things had happened to shake American foreign policy to the core.

The Sino-Soviet treaty had been learned of, Soviet approval for a NK strike at the South may well have been intercepted, and the cumulative impact of several setbacks in Asia had all served to change the American outlook on the world. Richard C. Thornton noted how the additional public storm created by Senator McCarthy intertwined with this alteration, writing that:

The three week’s between the bill’s defeat and resurrection spanned the period when the US changed strategy, and served to divert attention away from that crucial decision. Also at this time, in early February, Senator Joseph McCarthy began to publicise claims of communists in the government, particularly in the State Department, which precipitated Senate hearings and further muddled public perceptions. During this same period, on January 31st, President Truman secretly authorised the formulation of a new strategy, NSC 68. That strategy would, of course, incorporate Taiwan and SK into to the US defence perimeter in the Western Pacific, but that step would not be taken publicly until after war erupted on the Korean peninsula.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Washington was still tied to some of commitments to SK it had made in previous months. One of these was the Mutual Defence Assistance Program or MDA, approved in October 1949. This Program didn’t just address SK defence though, it also applied to a bunch of countries, including the Philippines and Iran, and approved a lump of funding for all of them, without specifying how much each country would receive. This would prove especially convenient later on, because although over $27 million had been approved, SK’s share was never explicitly stated, and so from February 1950 Acheson was able to affect a kind of workaround. Initially expecting the sum to go to SK more than any other state, since this was the country most in need considering the circumstances, Acheson had planned following NSC 68 to attribute only $10 million of this sum to SK.

Immediately, the uninformed General Roberts of KMAG and ambassador Muccio objected, and Roberts forwarded to Muccio his detailed recommendations for Muccio to share with Washington. Finding a loophole in the MDA Program, Roberts recommended that some additional $10 million in aid be provided. Leaving no room for imagination on where this money would go, Roberts, who was well-informed on the ground in SK to know where the deficiencies lay, recommended $4.5 million for the proper provision of equipment to SKA, $3.9 million for the creation and supply of an adequate SK air force, and $1.3 million for the supply of coastal patrol boats in SK, which would prevent any infiltration along the coastline from NK insurgents, which had occurred in the past. This well-researched and sensible report, also revealed a theme which was to be commonplace in the months to come – because there were too much soldiers for the equipment that was available, this equipment, be it in small arms, ammunition or vehicles, became worn out far quicker than was customary.

The remedy for this problem and the chronic shortages it created, was to either properly kit out all 65k SK soldiers from the offset, or the cut the SK army from 65K to 50k, and to at least properly supply that latter number. Yet as Acheson’s complete ignoring of General Roberts’ recommendations nine days later demonstrated, by mid-February 1950, the US State Department, and at least those in the know of NSC 68, were not interested in empowering the SK armed forces. Instead, the strategy was to weaken them as much as was possible, but to leave them in such a condition that they could at least hold a portion of the country in the event of war. As time would show, this dedication to ignoring the professional military recommendation of Roberts, as well as the pleas of ambassador Muccio, would have dire consequences.

In the final month of peace as we know, Stalin began supplying NK with T34 tanks, 150 of them in fact. Because Acheson’s predictions allowed for a NK advance of some measure, one may think that this only aided the US plans. Yet, the sudden appearance of these tanks, and the knowledge that Washington had done absolutely nothing to prepare SK for any kind of tank battles, aroused fears among those supporters of NSC 68 that, far from a controlled advance, NK may well push the SK government into the sea in a lightning advance before the US could even properly intervene. There was a fine line, as Acheson and his colleagues discovered to their near horror in May 1950, between serving SK up as an attractive piece of bait to the NK regime, and making that bait so attractive and tasty that they forgot SK was supposed to defend itself, at least to some extent. We’ll come to this discovery in the next episode, but for now, let’s see how Acheson planned to create in SK an attractive piece of bait for the North.

While Acheson didn’t address many aspects of General Roberts’ request for $10 million more in aid, he did manage to reply to the General and Ambassador Muccio with a request of his own. Apparently Acheson wasn’t convinced by Roberts’ figures, and wanted to know how Seoul would apportion spending for the total to come to such a high number in defence. On the surface, this request may seem reasonable, and Acheson was all about things appearing kosher on the surface. Yet in reality, Acheson knew full well that he was questioning the judgements of those men like Roberts who were far better positioned than he was to give an accurate picture of events. Roberts had no reason to conflate any figures, and Acheson certainly understood than the figures were probably accurate. Yet Acheson also understood that he needed to stall for time, and by effectively requesting that the US staff in SK double check their figures, he was ensuring that any notions of additional aid to that country could be delayed until this more detailed examination requested by Acheson was fulfilled.

One theme which also began to emerge at this point, in mid-March 1950, was Acheson’s use of a handy excuse for why he couldn’t grant a load of military assistance to SK. Inflation, Acheson claimed, was rife in SK. Noting that the SK government was experiencing something of a deficit in its expenditure versus income, Acheson represented his perspective to the SK chargé d’affaires, who in turn managed to wrest from the SK defence chief a commitment not to spend a penny on related military institutions like the youth or reserve corps of the SKA. Yet, the chargé d’affaires did note that the SK government ‘does not recognise the grave consequences of continued deficit spending’, and repeated Syngman Rhee’s plea ‘to correct the impression that there was a financial crisis in SK.’[[3]](#footnote-3) Deficit spending, as Acheson well knew, did not automatically lead to either a recession or to inflation so long as the economy remained stable, yet he latched onto the idea of inflation, and would use it as his sword and shield to parry and block any mentions of increased expenditure in SK, until, by May, he was forced to ignore his own protestations in light of the news that large columns of tanks were massing on the 38th parallel, and Rhee’s weakened administration had nothing to counter them.

There did seem some cause for positivity when the Far East Economic Assistance Act was voted through in early March 1950, providing in the process $60 million in aid for SK. This Act was in fact the culmination of a policy from the previous year, and thus Acheson went along with it so as not to arouse suspicions. Rather than deliver the desperately needed funds to beef up the SK military though, Acheson determined to stall once again. He communicated the results of a committee of nine top US personnel who had met on 15th March, and who had collectively condemned the authoritarian style of Rhee’s rule and of the financial crisis which loomed over the country. These nine persons, predictably enough, were all clued in on NSC 68, and understood what the next phase of American foreign policy would entail. Some had put forward the belief in that committee that ‘Rhee might be more compliant with our wishes if he were made to feel a little more uncertain about US support’, adding that:

Rhee’s strongest weapon is his knowledge that the US could not let the ROK fall without incurring the greatest political repercussions. If the present trend continued very long, the time might come when the lesser of two evils would be to cut SK loose and run the risk of incurring such consequences.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This working group was therefore tasked with making it seem as though they were not in fact dependent upon SK for a foothold in Asia, and that if Rhee’s government proved too troublesome or disobedient, they would be very willing to abandon Seoul to its fate. Finding an excuse to abandon an ill-behaved regime rather than let that regime fall to an invasion under the watch of the US was seen as the lesser of two evils, yet it is highly unlikely that the findings of this working group were designed to anything more than pressure Rhee to reduce defensive spending and to stop asking America for more aid. America didn’t want to give SK aid of course, because Acheson wanted, in line with NSC 68, to make SK as vulnerable as was possible without totally endangering the American position there. Only by clawing back the ground that had been lost in the conflict that would follow could the Truman administration gain support for its herculean defence budget increases.

Rhee’s insistence that what he needed was more US $ to spend on defence complicated this new policy aim, and so these veiled and not-so-veiled threats were hoped to get him to back off, but Rhee did not back off. Instead, having been made aware of the facts of the Japanese occupation, Rhee knew that the Americans were in the process of junking its now obsolete air force in that country. These F-51 fighter jets, Rhee urged, should be used to plug the gap between the South and the North’s air force, since if they were going to be junked anyway, what was the harm? SK would provide the pilots and support the planes from hereon in, all America had to do was not bin them, and hand them to its Korean ally instead. Yet, as Acheson noted, such a handover was not so simple. Delaying his response to the actual issue at hand, Acheson feigned incredulity and insult at Rhee’s supposedly blatant and repeated demonstrations of his undemocratic tendencies, and of his ignorance of the economic situation in his own country. In a request which take effect within a month, Acheson also noted that ambassador Muccio should return to Washington in protest of ‘your government’s concern over the inflationary situation.’

Ambassador Muccio would have been given pause for thought by Acheson’s reply, but of greater importance was the messages sent by the chief administrator of the Economic Cooperation Agency to President Rhee. The ECA was charged with administering and controlling aid to those countries where the US monies had been directed, and while he had this authority, the chief administrator Paul Hoffman was in a position to parrot his superior’s claims to the situation in SK about terrible inflation and Rhee’s rampant ignorance of it. In a scathing letter to the president of SK, Hoffman, himself a mere civil servant, wrote the following letter on 27th March 1950:

The appraisal of the present economic situation in the ROK which your letter sets forth is invalid and the optimism which the letter seems to reflect is unwarranted. Unless tax revenues are sharply increases and expenditures are drastically reduced, prices will continue to rise, probably at an accelerating rate. I can hardly believe that the true nature of the situation is not known to you. I am therefore impelled to raise with you the question of whether your government had a real intention to deal with the problem of inflation. Unless I am convinced that a forthright, immediate effort will be made to control inflation…I must consider the advisability of requesting a lesser sum from the Appropriations Committee…Similarly, I must further review the request…which the ECA is making for Korea aid during fiscal year 1950-51.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Ouch. President Rhee was certainly not accustomed to being spoken to like that, and he can’t have liked what he was hearing from his supposed allies in Washington. Knowing full well that no such inflation existed, and further angered by the fact that spending in deficit occurred all the time – and of course was occurring in Washington at that very moment – Rhee appealed to ambassador Muccio over the whole experience. After considering carefully his reply to Acheson on 29th March, Muccio did his best to represent the good and bad of SK situation, and pointed to the quite reasonable progress already made in transforming SK from a Japanese backwater to a stable and viable state in its own right. Muccio objected to the proposal of Acheson which would make a statement declaring the intransigence of the Seoul government, and alluded to the new agricultural policy, governmental subsidies program and a balanced budget in the fiscal year of 1950-51 as proof of Rhee’s commitment to maintain a stable SK society. Further, Muccio added that the elections in late May would improve Rhee’s image and standing in the country.

Acheson’s reply on 31st March was to command Muccio’s efforts, but to underline Washington’s concern about the ‘inflationary situation’ yet again. In any case, Acheson indicated that the Korean ambassador to the US would be getting an earful when he stopped by the State Department before he left for a tour of Australasia, and that Acheson would personally put forth his views to that Korean figure at that time. Unfortunately for the ROK, on 1st April Muccio innocently sent word of a disturbing new development in SK – those planned elections under the Rhee regime were now in jeopardy, as the president was threatening to delay them until November 1950 unless the SK assembly approved the new budget. Acheson leapt at the opportunity to use this new ammo, and handed it to his subordinate when Ambassador Chang of SK arrived in the State Department on 3rd April. Acheson, it seemed, had more important things to do than to meet with the Korean ambassador, and pawned the duty off to Dean Rusk, a rising star in the State Department and the assistance secretary of state for Far Eastern Affairs in his own right.

When Chang and Dean Rusk met on 3rd April, Rusk was able to present a grim picture for the naïve Korean. The twin crimes of rampant inflation and undemocratic tendencies were laid at Chang’s door, yet surprisingly perhaps in Rusk’s mind, Chang then switched to his own agenda and requested the US extend its defensive line in Asia to SK – a reference to the speech Acheson had made to the National Press Club in January, which had seemed to leave out the Korean peninsula altogether. Rusk conveniently declared that ‘this was not a subject which he was in a position to discuss’ and cautioned Chang ‘against putting too much faith in what he read in the newspapers’ by pointing out that the so-called defensive line was in actual fact an expression of the places the US held firm military commitments to, rather than any kind of frontline against communism. Chang would be present in the UN on the day of the NK invasion, and would make the following appeal in person to those nations assembled there:

***Play clip of Chang in UN.***

The convenience of being able to blame the media for its interpretation of Acheson’s speech on 19th January was thus made clear. Chang didn’t give up easily, and declared ‘the importance to which the Korean government and people attached to their apparent exclusion from the defensive plans of the US’, but Rusk retorted with the somewhat ironic note that ‘the inference that the US had decided to abandon the ROK to its enemies was scarcely warranted in the light of the substantial material aid and political support which we had furnished and were furnishing.’ At this point, Rusk’s peer jumped into the conversation and explained that:

It had been the carefully considered judgement of this government that the most efficacious means of defending against communist expansion was to bring about the creation in South Korea of a strong, self-reliant Korean government, and that it was to that end that our policy in Korea continued to be directed.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Chang then changed the subject, and went on his merry way. On 13th April, Acheson finally replied to Ambassador Muccio’s request on Rhee’s behalf for the junked planes leaving Japanese service. The Department of Defence, Acheson explained had pointed out that any notion of a Korean air force went against the provisions of NSC 8/2, which had been drafted in early 1949 by the way, and which the State Department certainly no longer paid heed to. Not only that, but Acheson communicated that in DOD’s view, he also noted its conclusion that ‘there appears no military necessity for an increase in the program of NSC 8/2.’ The breath-taking ignorance of the clear military realities by this point – the fact that Acheson knew full well that NK was being greatly inflated by Soviet shipments of arms and weapons – paints a damning picture. Acheson then claimed that ‘the whole question of aid to the ROK will be reviewed with Ambassador Muccio upon his arrival in Washington within the next few days.’[[7]](#footnote-7)

While Muccio made his way with the best of intentions to represent the SK situation to Washington, Acheson sent the final approved version of the Mutual Defence Assistance Program for SK for the fiscal year of 1950 to Seoul. Incredibly, not only would the program cover just $10 million worth of funding, half the size of the sum which General Roberts and Ambassador Muccio had wanted, but the monies wouldn’t even arrive in the country until the fiscal year 1951! This was too much for the chargé d’affaires in SK, who was clearly not clued into what the actual plan in Washington was. Writing to Acheson in response to the news, the chargé d’affaires noted that:

Korea now faced with a condition of materially lessened US military supplies with new flow not coming in significant amounts for 9 months versus enemy forth north of parallel which periodic reports put at increasing material potential…General Roberts and I request that you do everything in your power to speed dates of delivery of Mutual Defence Assistance Program materials, especially of critical items such as vehicle and weapon spare parts, powder and primers.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Incredibly enough, not only Acheson blithely ignore this alarming report, he also began a policy of unofficial radio silence. That’s right – from the moment Acheson sent this report of funding SK could expect on 20th April, until the outbreak of war on 25th June 1950, the US secretary of state didn’t engage once with the question of urgent military aid with the Seoul government. The sole piece of communication, sent to Seoul on 13th June, was to inquire about a comment made by some irrelevant issue to do with embassy staffing, in a communique only seven lines in length. Acheson was evidently determined to shut his eyes to what went on in Seoul, and not to humour the SK government any longer with promises to investigate or regulate aid. It was the twilight era of the American governance of the ROK, and since he now knew just how prepared the North was, Acheson likely anticipated an attack from the North in due course. By the time the SK can which had been so repeatedly kicked down the road had been found, a war on the Korean peninsula, Acheson imagined, would be in play.

This cynical, shocking policy line coincides with what we have learned of Acheson and the Truman administration which he served by this point. To me it provides ample proof of the theory that America wanted the conflict in Korea to erupt for its own reasons. Yet Acheson also knew that he would first have to meet with ambassador Muccio, who was himself returning from his post in SK to explain the position of the Seoul government. In the next episode, we’ll resume our story from Muccio’s arrival in Washington, to see whether that faithful public servant would be able to appeal to Acheson’s senses, or if Muccio himself would sense that something was not quite right. Until then, my name is Zack and you have been listening to episode 15 of the KW. Thanks for listening and I’ll be seeing you all soon.

1. For more on the Red Scare see Richard M. Fried, *Nightmare in Red: The McCarthy Era in Perspective* (1990, Oxford), pp. 124–125. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Richard C. Thornton, *Odd Man Out*, p. 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cited in *Ibid*, p. 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cited in *Ibid*, p. 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. All cited in *Ibid*, p. 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. All cited in *Ibid*, pp. 161-162. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cited in *Ibid*, pp, 162-163. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cited in *Ibid*, p. 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)