

The Impact of Media on U.S. Policy in Korea from 1945-1950: The Portrayal of Syngman Rhee

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At the end of the Second World War, there was little American interest in Korea. Most Americans wished for their soldiers to return home and focus on domestic issues. However, by the time the Korean War erupted, public support for a U.S. presence in Korea increased remarkably. There are many factors that contributed to this increase in public support, and the role of the U.S. media is a major one. By downplaying the negativity surrounding U.S. operations in Korea, U.S. media helped to maintain public support for a U.S. presence in Korea. With few concerns about U.S. operations in Korea and a new enthusiasm to confront the communist threat, Americans had little reason to protest U.S. operations in Korea. This article is the first in a series that analyzes the impact of U.S. media on U.S. Policy in Korea. This first article analyzes the case of Syngman Rhee, the first president of the Republic of Korea. The data accumulated shows that there were considerable discrepancies between U.S. newspapers and government documents concerning the characteristics and activities of Rhee. Furthermore, information from government documents suggest that the downplaying of negativity surrounding the Korean situation in U.S. media may have directly benefited U.S. policy on the peninsula.

Keywords: Government documents, media, U.S. foreign policy, Korea, newspapers, editorials, public opinion, Syngman Rhee, Korean War, policy, congress

Introduction

Prior to the Second World War, there was very little U.S. interest in the Korean Peninsula. The reason for this was that Korea held very little economic or political importance to the United States. As a consequence, the United States, with a need to appease the Japanese government, disregarded its 1882 treaty with Korea and allowed the Japanese government to occupy the Korean peninsula.² However, Korea quickly became a political interest of the United States towards the closing of the Second World War. The Soviet Union was emerging as a significant threat

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² Chong-sik Lee, *The Politics of Korean Nationalism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963).

to the United States and Korea was needed to act as a buffer state in order to prevent Soviet expansion. Initially, however, this interest was not shared mutually with the American public. After the war, Americans were more concerned with domestic issues than international issues. In a 1946 Gallup Poll, only 18 percent viewed international issues such as Russia, Peace, and the Atomic Bomb as needing to be addressed immediately.³ Even members on both sides of congress opposed having an American presence in Korea. On September 8, 1945, the first day of the U.S. occupation of Korea, Republican Representative Howard H. Buffet suggested that China would make a better proxy in Korea, as China “understood the Oriental mind” and had also suffered at the hands of the Japanese.⁴ In addition to the lack of economic and political interest in Korea, the U.S. military government was experiencing various difficulties in establishing a Korean government. From 1945 to 1950, the U.S. military government in Korea experienced ongoing problems negotiating with the Soviet Union and controlling the apprehensive and aggressive Koreans in the south. Consequently, due to the lack of interest in Korea and the fact that the occupation was often discouraging, there existed a risk that public opinion might pressure policymakers into pulling the United States out of Korea and allow for Soviet expansion throughout the Korean peninsula.

Nevertheless, despite Americans initially wishing the United States stay out of Korea, by 1949, the majority of Americans came to support the U.S. presence in Korea. In a July 1950 poll, 75 percent of Americans approved President Truman’s decision to send military aid to South Korea.⁵ Furthermore, in another July poll, 44 percent of participants said they believed the United States did not make *enough* sacrifices to support the war in Korea.⁶ Of course, this change in public opinion did not arise out of nowhere. Americans now saw the political importance of being in Korea. A U.S. government document from September 1950 explained that Americans now sensed the threat of communism and were thus willing to take strong measures to deal with the communist challenge.⁷ Yet, this new enthusiasm to confront the communist threat did not take

³ U.S. Department of State, Office of Public Opinion, *Latest Opinion Trends in the U.S.A.* (National Archives at College Park, Maryland, 1946).

⁴ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Statement of Representative Howard H. Buffet*. 91st Cong., Rec 8579, (1945).

⁵ National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago. Foreign Affairs Survey, July 1950 [survey question]. USNORC.500287.R04. National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago [producer]. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, n.d.) iPOLL [distributor], accessed September 18, 2018.

⁶ Gallup Organization. Gallup Poll (AIPO), July 1950 [survey question]. USGALLUP.50-458.QK09A. Gallup Organization [producer]. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, n.d.) iPOLL [distributor], accessed Aug-25-2018.; National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago. Foreign Affairs Survey, July, 1950 [survey question]. USNORC.500287.R08. National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago [producer]. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, n.d.) iPOLL [distributor], accessed August 25, 2018.

⁷ U.S. Department of State, Office of Public Opinion, *Public Attitudes on Dealing with the Soviet Union’s Role in Communist Aggression* (National Archives at College Park, Maryland, 1950).

away from the fact that the Korean situation was at times discouraging. The United States and Soviet Union were unable to agree on establishing a unified Korean government, Koreans from both the left and right were uncooperative and violent in their demand for independence, and South Korea's most promising leader, Syngman Rhee, despite his achievements, proved to be on many occasions unsuitable for the United States as leader of South Korea. The most likely reason for American support of the U.S. presence in Korea, despite these discouraging developments, was that the developments were not adequately reported in U.S. media. There are many factors that go into policymaking and public opinion plays an important role.⁸ Not everyone is involved in foreign affairs and accordingly, most in the public must rely on the media for information on an international topic. American media during the late-1940's, for its part, may have played an important role in downplaying the discouraging developments in Korea and in doing so helped maintain American support for the U.S. presence in Korea.

This is the first research article in a series on the impact that U.S. media coverage about the Korean situation had on U.S. policy in Korea from 1945 to 1950. There are three goals for this research. The first goal is to assess the level of discrepancies between the portrayal of the Korean situation in U.S. editorials and U.S. government documents. These documents include U.S. government correspondence, memorandums, reports, and other official records. The second goal is to analyze how these discrepancies impacted U.S. foreign policy. Specifically, it analyzes whether the Korean situation in U.S. media may have played a role in preventing negative sentiment from jeopardizing U.S. policy in Korea by downplaying the discouraging developments that were occurring on the peninsula during this period. The final goal of this research is to determine whether the U.S. government tried to manipulate the portrayal of the Korean situation in order to serve its national interests. This article and the following two articles in this series will provide evidence that point towards the impact of U.S. newspapers on U.S. policy in Korea. This first article examines the case of Syngman Rhee, the first president of the Republic of Korea. The second and third articles in the series will examine the United States' relationship with the Soviet Union in Korea and its handling of the South Korean populace, respectively. The fourth and last article of the series will examine government input in U.S. media, how media was used in congressional hearings, and what U.S. government documents discussed concerning the media and public opinion about the Korean situation.

⁸ Eugene R. Wittkopf, Christopher M. Jones, and Charles W. Kegley Jr., *American Foreign Policy: Pattern and Process* (Boston, Massachusetts: Cengage Learning, 2007).

U.S. Policy Interests in Korea and the Importance of Syngman Rhee

In the post-war world, the overarching U.S. objective was to prevent Soviet expansion and Korea was a vital region. Approximately nine months after the United States began its occupation of Korea, Edwin Pauley, in a letter to President Truman, wrote that despite Korea being a small country, it may be an important region for the United States' overall success in Asia. Pauley points out that the outcome of Korea will demonstrate whether a democratic system or communist system will prevail in a post-feudal Asia.⁹ This sentiment was further reinforced after trusteeship with the Soviet Union failed in 1947. A September 1947 Report to the President stated:

Soviet literature, confirmed repeatedly by Communist leaders, reveals a definite plan for expansion far exceeding that of Nazism in its ambitious scope and dangerous implications. Therefore in attempting a solution to the problem presented in the Far East, as well as in other troubled areas of the world, every possible opportunity must be used to seize the initiative in order to create and maintain bulwarks of freedom.¹⁰

Accordingly, U.S. interests and objectives in Korea increasingly became more about not only making Korea united and independent, but to also establish it as an anti-communist nation. Furthermore, as relations between the Soviet Union and the United States worsened, U.S. officials began discussing Korea as a vital military location. A CIA document from 1949 discusses the ramifications if Korea fell under the Soviet sphere of influence. First, the communist would gain a significant advantage: by gaining full access to the seas surrounding the Korean peninsula, the Soviet Union would have a considerable military advantage in the region. This would immediately pose a threat to Japan and make it difficult for the U.S. to conduct operations in the Asia-Pacific. Furthermore, the Japanese Communist Party would have easier access to communist forces across the Tsushima straits. Second, the United States' sincerity would be questioned and people of Asia might become more supportive of the Soviets. According to U.S. government documents, Korea was a symbol of U.S. determination to resist further Communist encroachment in Eastern Asia. If the United States were to abandon Korea, other Asian countries might also come under Communist influence.¹¹

⁹ The White House. "Letter to the President from Pauley". Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum in Kansas City, MO (1946).

¹⁰ Department of State, "Report to the President: China-Korea," RG 54, Box 27, (National Archives at College Park, Maryland, 1950).

¹¹ Central Intelligence Agency, "Consequences of US Troop Withdrawal From Korea in Spring, 1949," Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum in Kansas City, MO, February 28, 1949,

Thus, in order to achieve its national objectives in Korea, it was essential for the U.S. that a Korean government both anti-communist and friendly was established. Syngman Rhee was seen as the only Korean with the educational and professional background, as well as the anti-communist ideology, required to lead such a government. In post-war Korea, there were five notable political leaders vying for power: Syngman Rhee, Kim Ku, Kim Kyu-sik, Yo Un-hyong, and Pak Hon-yong. Pak and Yo were progressives, leaders of the leftist, and would have likely led Korea towards communism. Furthermore, if Pak and Yo led South Korea to unify with the North, there was a danger that all of Korea would become subservient to the Soviet Union. Therefore, Pak and Yo were far from ideal options for Washington. Kim Ku, like Rhee, was anti-communist and renowned among Koreans – Ku was successful in assassinating several Japanese generals. Therefore, when Kim Ku arrived in Korea in August 1945, Hodge originally hoped that he would be an alternative to the uncooperative Rhee, but Ku turned out to be even worse. Within three months after his arrival, Ku attempted to overthrow the U.S. Military Government in Korea.¹² After being humiliated by Hodge after the incident, he and his provisional government not only lost popularity, but any hope of achieving power in Korea.

Initially, Kim Kyu-sik was favored by the U.S. Military Government as he was cooperative and would generally support U.S. policy in Korea. However, Kyu-sik was the least popular of the three Korean leaders. The CIA reported that Kyu-sik and the moderate parties did not have the demographic appeal to stand up against the extreme rightist nor the nonspiritual efficiency to take on the extreme left.¹³ As a consequence, despite his excellent characteristics, it was unlikely that he would become leader of the new Korean government. The only other Korean that could replace Rhee was Phillip Jaisohn, whom U.S. officials acknowledged as being a good alternative to Rhee.¹⁴ Jaisohn, like Rhee, lived in the United States and was a key figure in the fight for Korea's independence for many years. However, unfortunately for the United States, Jaisohn had expressed little interest in becoming president of the Korean people. As the only anti-communist and favorite to become the first president of the Republic of Korea, Washington and the U.S. military government had little choice but to accept Rhee's path to the presidency.

https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/koreanwar/documents/index.php?docu mentid=kr-9-1&pagenumber=1.

¹² Bong-jin, Kim, "Paramilitary Politics under the USAMGIK and the Establishment of the Republic of Korea," *Korea Journal* 43, no. 2 (2003): 289-322.

¹³ Central Intelligence Agency, "The Situation in Korea," Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum in Kansas City, MO, January 3, 1947,

https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000256989.pdf.

¹⁴ "CG USAFIK Jinsen Korea (Hodge sends for Langdon Thru Cincapac Tokyo: To SCAP TOKYO (pass to State Dept)," RG 165, Box 249, National Archives at College Park, (September 29, 1945).

The Allure and Distaste of Syngman Rhee – Analyzing the Portrayal of Rhee in U.S. Government Documents

By the time Korea was becoming an increasingly important issue among policymakers, Rhee had already established himself as the voice of the Korean people in Washington.¹⁵ For three decades, Rhee promoted the Korean situation by meeting with politicians and writing op-eds concerning the Korean situation. For this reason, in October 1945, the U.S. brought Rhee to Korea with the hope that he would be useful to the military government in an advisory capacity, and more importantly in bringing stability to the region.¹⁶ Rhee possessed all the qualifications needed to be an excellent adviser to U.S. military Governor John Hodge. He received his education in the United States and could speak English and Korean fluently. When Hodge introduced him to the Koreans, he had hopes that Rhee would help ease tensions and encourage the Koreans to appreciate the Americans.

However, Rhee was far from helpful to the U.S. Military Government and his characteristics and personality made it difficult for the U.S. military to make any progress with the Soviet Union. Rhee was loud, over-zealous, conceited, impatient, and uncooperative. He was publicly critical of the U.S. military government, orchestrated sit-downs and demonstrations, and generally made all U.S. military government operations in Korea more difficult.¹⁷ The primary issue with Rhee was that he was seeking to achieve personal goals and ambitions, rather than pursue the interests of the Korean populace. It was clear to the U.S. military government that Rhee sought to gain power.¹⁸ Other U.S. government entities also reported on the dangers of a Rhee presidency. For example, in 1947, the CIA warned that if Rhee were to become president of the Republic of Korea, he would likely become an authoritarian ruler by ruthlessly suppressing opposing parties.¹⁹

Table 1 analyzes the level of negativity and criticism Rhee received in U.S. government documents from 1945 to 1950. These documents include U.S. correspondence, memorandums, reports, and other official records. The table examines whether the documents depict U.S. officials expressing concern towards Rhee, report on negativity Rhee from outside of the U.S. government, or express no sense of negativity or concern towards Rhee. Based on the availability of data regarding Syngman Rhee from 1945-1950, 125 documents were identified and

¹⁵ Chong-sik Lee, *Syngman Rhee: The Prison Years of a Young Radical* (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 2001). See also: Young Ick Lew, *The Making of the First Korean President: Syngman Rhee's Quest for Independence, 1875-1948* (Hawaii: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013).

¹⁶ Charles M. Dobbs, *The unwanted symbol: American foreign policy, the Cold War, and Korea, 1945-1950* (Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1981).

¹⁷ James Irving Matray, *The Reluctant Crusade: American Foreign Policy in Korea 1941-1950* (Hawaii: University of Hawai'i Press, 1985).

¹⁸ Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War Vol. 1: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes, 1945-1947* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981). See also Matray, *The Reluctant Crusade*.

¹⁹ CIA, "The Situation in Korea".

Table 1. Number of Government Documents that Expressed Concern Towards Rhee from 1945 to 1950

| Year | No Negativity or Concern | Negative Information Outside of Government | Expressed Concern by Officials |
|----------------------|-------------------------------------|---|---|
| 1945 | - | - | - |
| 1946 | 5 | 2 | 1 |
| 1947 | 20 | 2 | 19 |
| 1948 | 42 | 15 | 5 |
| 1949 | - | - | - |
| 1950 | - | 1 | - |
| No Clear Date | 9 | - | 4 |
| Total | 76 | 20 | 29 |

analyzed.

According to Table 1, the majority of government documents regarding Rhee were primarily informative. These documents discussed Korean public opinion towards Rhee, his political activities, his standing in the election, and his political ideology, to name a few. Yet, approximately 39 percent of all documents examined expressed either negativity (16 percent) or concern (23 percent) towards him. Even before the future South Korean president proved to be a problem for U.S. officials, he was already being discredited. For example, in February 1946, Kilsoo K. Han of the Sino-Korean People's league told Hodge in a letter that Rhee was difficult to work with and would likely interfere in the operations of the United States and Soviet Union.²⁰ Two other noteworthy figures that criticized Rhee were Joseph Paul-Boncour and Yu-Wan Liu of the United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea.

Paul-Boncour warned that Rhee was a dangerous man and needed to be disposed of.²¹ Likewise, Liu called him an indulgent tyrant interested in his own enrichment and crazed with the desire of becoming the first president of the Republic of Korea.²² Another topic that was discussed frequently was Rhee's tendency to be impractical. In one instance, a document reported Rhee having trouble explaining to a crowd of Koreans (which included his supporters) how he would receive the support of the United States if he did not have a good relationship with Hodge as well as how he could reunify Korea with a lack of resources.²³

²⁰ "Letter to General Hodge," National Archives at College Park, Maryland, (February 26, 1946).

²¹ Records of the American Delegation, U.S.-U.S.S.R. Joint Commission on Korea, and Records Relating to the United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea 1945-1948, "Memorandum for the Record: Subject: Rhee's Alleged Call for War with USSR," National Archives Microfilm Publication M 1243, roll 23.

²² "Interview with Dr. Yu-Wan Liu, Chinese Delegate." National Archives Microfilm Publication M 1243, roll 23.

²³ Records of the American Delegation, U.S.-U.S.S.R. Joint Commission on Korea, and Records Relating to the United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea 1945-1948, "Memorandum for

By late 1946, U.S. officials began discussing their concerns about Rhee more frequently. Most of these concerns were related to his obstructive activities. These obstructive activities included planning and carrying out demonstrations and riots to hinder U.S. operations, being uncooperative with U.S. officials, and scheming against the U.S. military government to seize power, among other things. Of the 125 documents examined, 11 of them expressed concern towards his obstructive activities. Additionally, some documents expressed concern regarding his suitability as president of the Republic of Korea. One problem was that Rhee would frequently say things that would jeopardize the U.S. mission in Korea. In one incident that troubled U.S. officials, Rhee allegedly called for war with the Soviet Union during a public address just months before the establishment of the Korean government.²⁴ Rhee would say anything to build up his prestige among the Korean people. In a September 1947 document, Hodge stated that when Rhee received permission from Washington to travel to China, he wanted Rhee to go by boat. Hodge's reasoning was that he feared that Rhee would exaggerate that his return to Korea by Army plane was a sign he received the backing of the U.S. government. Rhee's notorious penchant for lying was even felt in Washington. For example, when Hodge took a trip to Washington, he had to explain to several congressmen and officials that Rhee was not a communist.²⁵ Due to these incidences, Rhee and his entourage were not well liked within the U.S. government. As Hodge put it:

They have sold themselves as being enemies of Communism. True, they are enemies of Communism, but they are also enemies of the United States in dealing with the Korean problem. This is what it amounts to.²⁶

Accordingly, with much concern towards Rhee, the U.S. military government frequently attempted to prevent, or at the very least delay, Rhee from achieving full power. For example, in December 1946, Hodge elected Kim Kyu-sik, the moderate Korean leader that leaned more towards the right, as president of the South Korean Interim Legislative Assembly.²⁷ Syngman Rhee, of course, did not respond well to inconveniences to his power grab. Rhee was further dismayed when the United States turned to the United Nations to solve the Korean problem

General Hodge: 2. The subcommittee interviewed Rhee, Syngman and Kim, Koo," National Archives Microfilm Publication M 1243, roll 23.

²⁴ "Memorandum for the Record: Subject: Rhee's Alleged Call for War with USSR," National Archives Microfilm Publication M 1243, roll 23.

²⁵ "Orientation for Undersecretary of the Army Draper, and Party, By Lt Gen Hodge at 0900 23 September 1947." National Archives Microfilm Publication M 1243, roll 6.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ James Irving Matray. "Hodge Podge: American Occupation Policy in Korea, 1945-1948," *Korean Studies* 19, no. 1 (1995): 17-38.

when trusteeship with the Soviet Union failed. Turning to the UN threatened Rhee, as a potential inter-Korean election may have resulted in him not becoming president. Rhee once again tried to interfere so that he could secure power. Rhee attempted to persuade the United Nations to allow him to create the delegation, presumably in his favor. When that failed, he tried to urge the U.S. to hold an election, increasing his chances of becoming the president-elect.²⁸

Ultimately, Syngman Rhee succeeded in creating an environment that would ensure him power. Rhee became the first president of the Republic of Korea on July 24, 1948. Predictably, Rhee was not cooperative with the U.S. government despite gaining power over half of Korea.²⁹ Thereafter, many U.S. officials did not look towards Rhee favorably. Joseph Jacobs wrote to Secretary of State George Marshall that “Rhee has a messiah complex”, acts irrationally, and is irresponsible with the domestic economy. In some documents, U.S. officials pointed out that Rhee was failing to develop an adequate South Korean government. Ambassador John Muccio remarked that Rhee was unequipped to govern, corrupt, unable to address major problems, and was oppressive and violent to his own people.³⁰ Lieutenant General Hodge, upon his return to the United States, warned Washington to be weary of aiding Rhee. Hodge feared that Rhee would use Washington’s financial assistance irresponsibly and use it for reinforcing his political stability rather than for the economy. More worrisome, Hodge saw Rhee becoming a dictator and warned that military aid might even be used for invading the north.³¹

Analyzing the Prominence of Syngman Rhee in U.S. Newspaper Articles

Syngman Rhee was an important figure in Korea from 1945 to 1950. He was a prominent scholar in Korean affairs, the favored future leader of South Korea, and one of the major sources of the U.S. military government’s many problems in South Korea. Accordingly, Rhee should have appeared frequently in U.S. newspaper articles, especially when the topic concerned Korea during this period. This section analyzes the prominence of Syngman Rhee in U.S. newspapers, from 1945 to 1950, prior to the Korean War. The articles, editorials, and op-eds analyzed for this research come from the Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times, New York Times, and the Washington Post. The Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times, New York Times and Washington Post were selected due to their positions as the top circulated newspapers in the United States as well as their frequent usage among policymakers. Additionally, by using articles from four different regions (the U.S. capital, East Coast, Midwest, and West Coast), this analysis reveals different interests and concerns from

²⁸ Dobbs, *The unwanted symbol*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Matray, *The Reluctant Crusade*.

Table 2. Number of Mentions of Syngman Rhee in U.S. Newspapers (1945 to 1950) *

| Newspaper | 1945 | | 1946 | | 1947 | |
|-------------------|-------|------|-------|------|-------|------|
| | Korea | Rhee | Korea | Rhee | Korea | Rhee |
| Chicago Tribune | 320 | 18 | 348 | 14 | 383 | 18 |
| Los Angeles Times | 286 | 3 | 270 | 2 | 264 | 2 |
| New York Times | 722 | 25 | 720 | 36 | 754 | 47 |
| Washington Post | 257 | 1 | 242 | 2 | 356 | 22 |
| Newspaper | 1948 | | 1949 | | 1950† | |
| | Korea | Rhee | Korea | Rhee | Korea | Rhee |
| Chicago Tribune | 342 | 38 | 273 | 29 | 156 | 17 |
| Los Angeles Times | 334 | 29 | 274 | 24 | 140 | 11 |
| New York Times | 877 | 97 | 848 | 106 | 418 | 38 |
| Washington Post | 487 | 42 | 345 | 37 | 180 | 22 |

*The number of mentions of Korea is an estimation based on search results. † Prior to the Korean War.

each region.

Table 2 analyzes the amount of exposure Rhee received in Newspapers when the Korean situation was reported on. Rhee does not necessarily need to be the main subject of the article examined, it simply needs to show that Rhee exists and is meaningful. Tables 3, 4, and 5 analyze the level of prominence of Rhee when mentioned in U.S. articles. These tables observe how many headlines his name appeared in, the number of times he was mentioned on the front page, and on average how close to the front page his name occurred. Over 5,000 articles were analyzed and based on available data, the table below should be considered largely representative of articles related to Syngman Rhee during this time period.

From 1945 until the start of the Korean War, the Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times, New York Times, and the Washington Post published approximately 1,200 articles about the Korean situation. However, Rhee was only mentioned 134, 71, 349, and 126 times in each article, respectively, during that time span. To put this into perspective, Cuba was mentioned in the Chicago Tribune approximately 3,900 times and mentions of Fidel Castro numbered 1,000 during the guerilla war between

1956 and 1959 (prior to him assuming power). In other words, Castro was mentioned in approximately 25 percent of the articles pertaining to Cuba while Rhee was mentioned in approximately 11 percent of articles pertaining to the Korean situation. This suggests that Rhee did not receive high exposure despite being a very important figure in Korea. The reason for this is likely due to the Chinese Civil War, the democratization of Japan, Europe's rehabilitation and most importantly, the Soviet threat, all being perceived as far more important international issues. Consequently, Korea-related issues used less article space. However, as tensions increased between the United States and the Soviet Union, domestic violence emerged throughout South Korea, North Korea's belligerence towards the South increased, and the collapse of the Republic of China appeared imminent, the level of importance of Korea seemingly increased in newspapers. From 1947 to 1948, the Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times, New York Times, and the Washington Post increased the amount of times they mentioned Rhee from 18 to 38, 2 to 29, 47 to 97, and 22 to 44, respectively. Nonetheless, the number of articles was still considerably low.

From 1945 to 1950, the importance of Rhee and the Korean situation was overshadowed by other international concerns in U.S. newspapers. Yet, even when Rhee was mentioned, he still did not receive considerable exposure. First, Rhee's name rarely appeared on article headlines. In 1945 and 1946, only the Chicago Tribune and New York Times included Rhee's name in article headlines for a total of 4 and 9, respectively. In 1947 and 1948, Chicago Tribune, New York Times, and Washington Post had 14, 11, and 8 headlines, respectively, that included Rhee's name. After Rhee became president of South Korea in 1948, the number of headlines increased to a more respectable number. Between the four newspapers, there were 43 headlines in 1949 and 24 in 1950 before the Korean War featuring Rhee. In addition to not appearing in many headlines, Rhee rarely appeared on the frontpage of newspapers. From 1945 to 1947, Rhee never reached the frontpage. However, after he became president in 1948, this changed. Yet, the total number from 1948 until the Korean War was still low at five frontpage appearances. Of course, there were many domestic and international issues occurring during this period and justifiably there was less space to include news on the Korean situation in the frontpage. Even so, articles including Rhee were typically more towards the back of articles. From 1945 until the start of the Korean War, the Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times, New York Times and Washington Post had articles about Rhee, on average, around pages 12, 7, 16 and 8, respectively.

As mentioned previously, there were many important domestic and international issues after the Second World War and it is understandable that Syngman Rhee was not reported on to the same extent. Nevertheless, the Korean peninsula, especially after the collapse of Nationalist China, was seen by U.S. officials as a strategic region to

challenge the communist threat. Accordingly, the four newspapers' total of 680 articles (349 of which came from the New York Times) including Syngman Rhee is seemingly low. The case of Syngman Rhee is a unique case and there are few similar cases with which to compare it to. Nevertheless, from 1947 to 1950, Syngman Rhee and Konrad Adenauer of Germany were both similar in that they were both important figures in their respective countries, which were being occupied by the United States in some capacity. Adenauer was the U.S. favorite to be leader of Germany and Rhee was a U.S. favorite (likely reluctant favorite) to be leader in South Korea. However, during this period Adenauer was included in approximately 400 articles, while articles including Rhee numbered only 288. Other important rising leaders during this period that were of interest to the United States, such as Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh, had approximately 4,162 and 307, respectively.³² Rhee's low number suggests one of two likely scenarios: the U.S. military government was trying to prevent negative press concerning South Korea's likely new leader or Rhee was deemed less important by U.S. newspapers to report on. Ultimately, however, this data demonstrates that U.S. articles did not sufficiently report on Rhee enough, despite his importance in an increasingly important region.

Analyzing the Discrepancies Between U.S. Newspapers and U.S. Government Documents

The previous discussion showed that the number of newspaper articles including Syngman Rhee from 1945 until the start of the Korean War were considerably low, despite Rhee being an important figure in a vitally important region for U.S. foreign policy. The following analysis will attempt to demonstrate how Syngman Rhee was portrayed in the four U.S. newspapers, and try to determine whether newspapers adequately reported on the *negativity* surrounding Rhee. For the purposes of this research, an article that reports positively on Rhee includes details that would reasonably be considered positive *for Rhee from the perspective of the U.S. public*. This distinction is made because the articles analyzed were written for American audiences and must be judged accordingly. For example, an article that reports on Rhee's forgiving of leftists for an alleged transgression and imploring them to become positive citizens, at face value, can reasonably be considered positive for Rhee's image in the eyes of the U.S. public and is therefore denoted as "positive" in the table below. On the other hand, an article that negatively reports on Rhee includes details that would reasonably be considered negative *for Rhee from the perspective of the U.S. public*. For example, an article which reports that Rhee planned riots to sabotage the U.S. military government would be

³² Number of articles for Konrad Adenauer, Mao Zedong, and Ho Chi Minh is based on search results by the New York Times search archive results. Search engine result approximations for Adenauer are likely overestimations of up to 5% based on the author's research of articles on Syngman Rhee

Table 3. Number of Headlines with Syngman Rhee in U.S. Newspapers (1945 to 1950)

| Newspaper | 45' | 46' | 47' | 48' | 49' | 50' |
|--------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Chicago Tribune | 1 | 3 | 6 | 8 | 8 | 5 |
| Los Angeles Times | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| New York Times | 4 | 5 | 6 | 5 | 29 | 15 |
| Washington Post | 0 | 0 | 2 | 6 | 5 | 2 |

Table 4. Number of Frontpage Appearances with Syngman Rhee in U.S. Newspapers (1945 to 1950)

| Newspaper | 45' | 46' | 47' | 48' | 49' | 50' |
|--------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Chicago Tribune | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Los Angeles Times | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| New York Times | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Washington Post | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 |

Table 5. Median Page Number for articles on Syngman Rhee in U.S. Newspapers (1945 to 1950)

| Newspaper | 45' | 46' | 47' | 48' | 49' | 50' |
|--------------------------|------|------|------|-------|-------|-------|
| Chicago Tribune | 7.9 | 11.5 | 15.1 | 14.2* | 11.9 | 12.7* |
| Los Angeles Times | 4.7 | 3* | 1.5 | 7.5* | 10.45 | 13.7* |
| New York Times | 17.2 | 17.2 | 16.4 | 18.7 | 15.5 | 14.4 |
| Washington Post | B1 | 6* | 9.2* | 9.4* | 8* | 8.1* |

**Occasionally, articles were inconsistent and used lettering for their paging (ex: A3, B2, M5, etc.). For this reason, these calculations use estimations.*

Table 6. Number of Negative and Positive Portrayals of Syngman Rhee in U.S. Newspapers

| Newspaper | 1945 | | 1946 | | 1947 | |
|-------------------|------|------|------|------|-------|------|
| | Neg. | Pos. | Neg. | Pos. | Neg. | Pos. |
| Chicago Tribune | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 1 |
| Los Angeles Times | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| New York Times | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 2 |
| Washington Post | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 4 |
| Newspaper | 1948 | | 1949 | | 1950† | |
| | Neg. | Pos. | Neg. | Pos. | Neg. | Pos. |
| Chicago Tribune | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Los Angeles Times | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| New York Times | 1 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 7 | 0 |
| Washington Post | 2 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 0 |

*Refer to Table 2 for the total number of articles mentioning Rhee in each year. †Prior to the Korean War.

frowned upon by most in the U.S. and therefore would be considered negative. All other articles which were not clearly positive or negative are considered neutral. For example, an article that reports that Rhee will visit McArthur will be considered neutral because it is primarily informative and neither contains a clearly positive or negative connotation, nor attempts to take a position. The importance of neutral portrayals of Rhee lies in their ability to reveal the extent to which Rhee was not portrayed negatively, despite the great deal of evidence which suggest he should have been, given his reputation and actions.

As discussed in the previous section, there was much negativity regarding Syngman Rhee in U.S. government documents. Therefore, it is conceivable that U.S. newspapers would seek to publish a commensurate number of negative articles about him. However, on the contrary, newspapers usually held a neutral stance when mentioning Rhee. From 1945 to 1950, the Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times, New York Times, and the Washington Post published approximately 680 articles about Syngman Rhee. However, out of these 680 articles, less than 8 percent (52 articles) clearly portrayed Rhee positively or negatively. Fifteen articles portrayed Syngman Rhee positively. The Chicago Tribune and the Los Angeles Times had only one article each that were positive towards Rhee. An April 1947 article from the Chicago Tribune reported that Koreans cheered when the leader returned to Korea after five months of travelling for international conferences.³³ In a December 1948 article, the Los

³³ "Syngman Rhee Cheered on His Return to Korea." *Chicago Tribune*, (April 22, 1947).

Angeles Times reported that the Administrator or the Economic Cooperation Administration, Paul G. Hoffman, held Rhee in high regards:

Rhee, leads his population of Korea in a determined effort to make the country a singing beacon of democracy – an example to all of Asia that democratic is the true way of economic progress and liberty.³⁴

The New York Times and the Washington Post had four and nine articles, respectively, that depicted a positive image of Rhee. The four New York Times articles reported that Rhee was creating a respected and transparent government, being honored by a U.S. veterans group, and receiving support from the Korean populace.³⁵ The Washington Post published nine articles portraying a positive image of Rhee, in large part due to his supporters from the Korean Commission and friend Robert T. Oliver writing op-eds which countered articles that criticized Rhee to any degree. One example is B.C. Limb's op-ed, in which he defended Dr. Rhee's refusal to cooperate with the joint commission with the U.S. and Soviet Union., claiming his actions were due to his concern for Korean independence – he did not want to sign his country over to foreign control.³⁶ Apart from the zealous allies of Rhee writing op-eds for the Washington Post, all four newspapers did not go out of their way to promote Syngman Rhee. However, while newspapers rarely published an article that was completely positive towards Rhee, articles did at times promote Rhee by subtly offering him signs of respect. From 1945 to 1948, articles typically referred to Rhee as Dr. Rhee and frequently mentioned his decades of work in advocating for the Korean state. In addition, he was regularly referred to as a scholar and patriot. It is possible that neutral articles indirectly created a positive image for Syngman Rhee through this honorific language.

From 1945 up until the Korean War, 37 articles portrayed Rhee negatively. The Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times, New York Times, and Washington Post published 7, 3, 14, and 13 articles, respectively, which portrayed Rhee negatively. In 1945 and 1946, there was only one article by the Chicago Tribune that was negative towards Rhee. In the March 1946 article, the article quotes a Pravda article in that Syngman Rhee only seeks power in Korea.³⁷ In 1947, the year that U.S. government documents criticizing Rhee increased, there were 11 articles that portrayed Rhee negatively in the Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times, New York Times, and the Washington Post. The New York Times published 2

³⁴ "Hoffman Praises Koreans' Strides Toward Democracy: ECA Administrator Pauses Here on Headlong Trip Around World." *Los Angeles Times*, (1948).

³⁵ Richard Johnston, "Rightest refuse pledges in Korea," *New York Times*, (1947).

³⁶ B.C. Limb, "Disservice to Korea," *Washington Post*, (1947).

³⁷ "Yanks Seeking Trade in Korea, Reds Complain." *Chicago Tribune*, (1946).

noteworthy articles. In May 1947, the *New York Times* used government sources to report that Rhee and his followers' disruptive activities in Korea were sabotaging the joint commission through mass demonstrations.³⁸ In June 1947, the *New York Times*, as well as other publications, revealed that rightists (while not fully blaming Rhee) attempted to overtake the government.³⁹ The *Washington Post* reports negatively on similar subjects as the *New York Times*, but the *Washington Post's* expert, Yongjeung Kim, wrote four op-eds that were critical of the authoritarian-style conduct of Rhee and his party.⁴⁰ Most of the negativity towards Rhee came when he became president from August 1948. In 1950, Rhee had 12 articles that were critical of his presidency. For example, *New York Times* articles reported that Rhee was losing support from his cabinet, his government was already bankrupting the country, his people opposed his strong-arm methods, and that Koreans had become concerned about his authoritarian-like rule. The *Los Angeles Times*, the newspaper that covered the Korean situation the least, began to release more negative articles concerning Rhee. In 1948, the *Los Angeles Times*, like other articles, reported that the Korean National Assembly demanded reform from Rhee.⁴¹ By 1950, many of the articles were reporting criticism towards Rhee's presidency. For example, the *Chicago Tribune* published an article which reported that the United States was threatening to cut off aid due to misuse.⁴²

Out of the four newspapers, the *Chicago Tribune* was the only newspaper that published an article that completely and accurately described U.S. official's concerns towards Rhee. In a March 1947 article, the *Chicago Tribune* listed all of Rhee's shortcomings. Using anonymous sources, the article stated that his distinguished record caused American commanders to expect much when he returned triumphantly to Korea in November of 1945. Yet, the following months produced only disillusionment and bitterness. The article then continues to report that Rhee refused to compromise, increased pressure on the U.S. military government, lied or exaggerated to the Korean populace, hindered progression of the trusteeship due to his misuse of the press, was unable to establish a democracy, and would likely become a dictator.⁴³

The most important information to derive from this data is that government documents and newspaper articles did not equally discuss the negativity surrounding Syngman Rhee. Table 7 shows that 39 percent of the 125 government documents detailed negative information concerning

³⁸ Richard Johnston, "Rhee Asks Inquiry on Acts in Korea," *New York Times*, (1946); "Trouble in Korea," *New York Times*, (1947).

³⁹ "M'Arthur Describes Korean Rightist Plot," *New York Times*, (1947).

⁴⁰ Yongjeung Kim, "Korean Elections," *Washington Post*, (December 26, 1947); "Koreans Cheer Rhee on Return," *New York Times*, (1947); Yongjeung Kim, "Sham in Korea," *Washington Post*, (October 19, 1947).

⁴¹ "Korea Demands Reform Program," *Los Angeles Times*, (November 10, 1948); "Reds Hit U.S. Stay in Korea," *Los Angeles Times*, (December 7, 1948).

⁴² "U.S. Threatens to Cut Off Aid to South Korea," *Chicago Tribune*, (April 9, 1950).

⁴³ Walter Simmons, "See Freedom in Korea Injured by Rhee's Acts," *Chicago Tribune*, (March 22, 1947).

Table 7. A Comparison of Negative Content on Rhee in U.S. Newspapers and Articles

| | Total Content | Negative Content | Percentage of Negative Content |
|---------------------------|---------------|------------------|--------------------------------|
| U.S. Government Documents | 125 | 49 | 39% |
| U.S. Newspapers | 680 | 37 | 5.45% |

Rhee. However, on the other hand, only 5.45 percent of the 680 newspaper articles reported negative information concerning Rhee. These numbers suggest that while the negativity concerning Rhee was an important issue for the government, it was not an important issue for newspapers and consequently, neither for American readers as well.

In summary, newspapers typically published content that was primarily neutral and informative on the circumstances surrounding Rhee. Less than 8 percent of newspaper articles were clearly negative or positive towards the leader, of which more than half were negative. The concern covered the most in U.S. newspapers was Rhee and the extreme rightists' acts of obstruction and sabotage against the U.S. military government. The New York Times, Washington Post, and the Chicago Times reported on this concern approximately three times each. However, even then some of these articles did not directly relate the demonstrations, riots, and acts of sabotage directly to Rhee. The Chicago Tribune was the only newspaper that published an article which sufficiently reported on government concerns towards Rhee: his hunger for power, plans to sabotage U.S. operations, at times illogical and irresponsible behavior which made the chances of unification less likely, and his antagonistic relationship with many U.S. officials. After Rhee became president, newspapers began to publish more articles that criticized Rhee's handling of the South Korean government. Ultimately, however, due to these events not being frequently or accurately reported on by the four major U.S. regional newspapers, they likely did not have a significant impact on changing American readers' perceptions of Rhee in the same way they did for U.S. officials.

How the Portrayal of the Syngman Rhee in U.S. Newspapers Advanced U.S. Policy in Korea – Evidence of a U.S. Government Motive to Withhold Information from the Public

The U.S. military government had a monopoly on information regarding the Korean situation. Consequently, U.S. officials could have used this control of information to destroy Rhee's image and support a new successor. By tarnishing Rhee's image, the U.S. military government may have been able to pressure policy makers in Washington to work against Rhee, including exiling him back to the United States so that a more agreeable leader might take his place. Yet, General Hodge and his military

government chose to discourage U.S. editors and correspondents in South Korea from reporting negatively on Rhee. The likely reason for this, as mentioned previously, was that Rhee was viewed as important for U.S. policy in Korea. This is explained explicitly in a conversation between Brown, Draper, Jacobs, and Hodge:

The reason they had not seen it [negativity surrounding Rhee] in the U.S. press was because I persuaded the American correspondents to keep it down. We have constantly been confronted with the circumstances that we are going to have to deal with old man Rhee at some stage because he is a powerful figure and I have tried to keep from an open declaration of war on him – I'd like to deal with him without somebody back in Washington telling his crowd one thing and us here telling him another.

Regardless of Syngman Rhee's inadequacies, Rhee was likely the best-suited Korean leader to achieve U.S. objectives in preventing communist expansion into Korea. For this reason, as suggested by correspondents that worked in Korea, the government used its authority to prevent this sensitive information from reaching the American public. One U.S. intelligence officer even told a correspondent that Americans were "too dumb" to understand what was occurring in Korea and that the Army will tell the American people all they need to know.⁴⁴ Thus, this paper provides evidence which substantiates the claim that the U.S. government, to safeguard its policy objectives in Korea, was intentionally preventing deprecatory news concerning Rhee. If articles actively reported on the undesirable characteristics and tendencies of Rhee, public opinion may have pressured policymakers to pursue measures that would have prevented him from becoming president of the Republic of Korea. However, regardless of whether U.S. officials played a substantial role in preventing negative press for Rhee in U.S. newspapers, the results of this research also suggest that the lack of reporting on these concerns helped maintain public support for, or at the very least avoid a backlash that could have jeopardized, the U.S. presence in Korea.

Had U.S. media reported on Rhee more consistently and accurately, his rise to power would have been less than assured. There were only two mainstream political groups in South Korea at the time, the rightists and leftists. If Rhee and his fellow rightists were prevented from gaining control of the government due to the withdrawal of American support precipitated by negative portrayals of Rhee, a possible alternative outcome could have been a more progressive government which eventually may have come under Soviet influence. It was therefore in the

⁴⁴ Hugh Deane, *The Korean War 1945-1953* (California: China Books, 1999).

interests of the U.S. government to prevent Rhee's fall out of favor by suppressing negative news regarding the future Korean President by the U.S. media, as evidenced by the conversation between Brown, Draper, Jacobs, and Hodge.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to analyze the discrepancies between the portrayal of Syngman Rhee in U.S. newspapers and U.S. government documents as well as suggest how it impacted U.S. policy in Korea from 1945 to 1950. By doing so, this research revealed that Rhee and the Korean situation were not as prevalent in U.S. newspapers as their strategic importance to U.S. officials indicated. Articles on Rhee were both low in number and did not occur near the front page. Additionally, out of the articles that did mention Rhee, only 5.45 percent reported negatively towards the South Korean leader. This is in contrast to the 39 percent of negative contents which government documents reported on Rhee.

Government documents and comments from correspondents in Korea strongly suggest that the U.S. military government used its control over information to prevent unfavorable sentiment towards the U.S. presence in Korea from developing at home. Public opinion has influence on policy making. Had the American public's concerns about the U.S. presence in Korea grown large enough, policymakers could have been pressured to withdraw from the peninsula. The U.S. could not allow this to happen. The research presented in this paper suggests that U.S. officials were protecting Rhee's image at home in order to advance the primary U.S. policy objective in Asia during the post-war period: to prevent communist expansion. Anti-communist Rhee was determined to be the likely future leader of South Korea, and in the interests of U.S. policy in the region, the U.S. government undermined negative media portrayals of Rhee. As a result of the media's inability to portray Rhee more accurately, the American public had little reason to develop concern towards the U.S. presence in Korea, as they did not fully understand the amount of trouble Rhee was causing the U.S. government. The impact of media on U.S. policy in Korea, therefore, is significant. Based on an analysis of U.S. newspapers, American media not only downplayed the negativity surrounding Rhee, it often portrayed him in a positive light thereby maintaining the American public's support of the U.S. presence in Korea. The U.S. government's role in facilitating this resulted in a public opinion of America's role on the peninsula that would not pose a threat to its policy objectives in the region. It can be inferred that the role of the media in advancing U.S. foreign policy in East Asia from 1945 to 1950, therefore, was significant – U.S. objectives in preventing communist expansion were advanced, but just as easily could have been ruined, by the media's portrayal of Syngman Rhee.

By the time the Korean War erupted in 1950, negativity surrounding Syngman Rhee could have discouraged Americans from

supporting U.S. military aid to South Korea. This in turn could have changed the course of the Korean War, the political makeup of East Asia, and the current U.S. military alliance system. U.S. officials saw Rhee as irresponsible, uncooperative, and dangerous. Some documents even suggested that the leader was failing to form an adequate government in Korea. Yet, 78 percent of Americans supported U.S. operations in Korea. The reason for this is that the U.S. media either voluntarily or involuntarily downplayed concerns surrounding Rhee. As a result, the American public's primary concern was confronting the expanding communist threat in Asia. The portrayal of Syngman Rhee thus proved to be key to U.S. policy and the war that would unfold on the peninsula – the future political and military makeup of the region was no less at stake.

Future Research Program

This article analyzed only one issue pertaining to the Korean situation from 1945 until the start of the Korean War in 1950. Two other issues of considerable importance were the United States' relationship with the Soviet Union in Korea and the U.S. military government's relations with South Korea. These two issues will be addressed in the following two articles in this series. The primary research goal of this series is to provide evidence that the withholding of negative information concerning the Korean situation significantly helped to prevent public opinion from undermining U.S. objectives in Korea. The fourth and final article in this series will analyze the U.S. government's input in U.S. media, the decisions made by congressmen concerning Korea, and the actions taken by U.S. officials due to public opinion.

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