Seeing Red (1983, D)
The Spy Who Came in from the Cold (1965, F)
Strategic Air Command (1955, F)
Stripes (1981, F)
The Thing from Another World (1951, F)
The Third Man (1949, F)
Torn Curtain (1966, F)
Victory at Sea (1953–54, D)
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PHILIP J. LANDON

The Korean War

As Clay Blair explains in his appropriately entitled *The Forgotten War* (1987), the American public never regarded the Korean War (1950–53) as a heroic crusade. An advisor to President Harry S. Truman familiar with events in Korea referred to it as a "nasty little war" (Halberstam, 62). From the moment that the North Korean forces crossed the thirty-eighth parallel into the Republic of South Korea on June 25, 1950, the progress of the fighting gave rise to misgivings about the necessity of the war (see Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*), the strategic goals to be achieved (see Foot, *The Wrong War*), and the battlefield performance of American fighting men (see Leckie, *Conflict*). The war began with a series of defeats for the South Koreans and the American troops sent from Japan to aid them. Although the communist-dominated North and their supporters, the Soviet Union and Communist China, claimed to be defending itself against the aggressive policies of South Korea's President Syngman Rhee, President Truman interpreted the attack as another example of the dangerously expansionist policies of the Soviet Union. The desire to contain the spread of communism throughout the world, a policy articulated in what became known as the Truman Doctrine, prompted a massive buildup of American forces in the southern tip of the Korean Peninsula.

Within a week, the United Nations authorized an international force to halt the North's aggression, and the war became officially known as a "police action." Led by General Douglas MacArthur, the overwhelmingly American UN forces staged a series of successful counterattacks, and by the end of September the North Koreans had been badly defeated and pushed back across the thirty-eighth parallel. MacArthur continued driving north and by November had nearly reached the Manchurian border at the Yalu River when the Chinese joined in the fighting. By the spring of 1951, the Americans and their allies had retreated to the thirty-eighth parallel; Truman had dismissed MacArthur from his command; and the war had reached a stalemate that continued until the truce arrived at in July 1953.

Feature Films

Americans, who had little enthusiasm for the Korean War when it began, were increasingly disillusioned with its progress. A country that had emerged triumphant from World War II had little taste for a limited war that would not end in victory. It became even more unpopular as disagreements over its conduct led to the sacking of a popular general, as information about American POWs' collaborating with the Communists surfaced, and as Americans continued dying on the battlefield because truce talks stalled. The mood of disillusioned resignation is captured in Sam Fuller's *The Steel Helmet* (1951), released just six months after the war began. The central character, Sgt. Zack (Gene Evans), is a tough, cynical veteran of World War II who trusts no one and regards war not as a noble enterprise but as condition of existence. He sees little difference between his Korean enemies and his Korean allies. Events appear to confirm his suspicion when

a group of enemy soldiers arrives disguised as Buddhist monks fleeing the communists. Unlike in the films of World War II, the furious combat achieves no noticeable goal, and the film ends with the ominous epitaph: "There is no end to this story." Fuller's next film, *Fixed Bayonets* (1951), uses the Korean conflict to explore the responsibilities of leadership in a brutal war without clearly defined goals. Cpl. Denno (Richard Basehart), embittered by what he sees as the futile sacrifice of fellow soldiers, refuses to lead them until the death of his platoon sergeant (the same Sgt. Zack from *The Steel Helmet*) makes him realize that "no one looks for responsibility" and leads the survivors of his platoon back to their regiment.

Fuller not only made two of the best-crafted Korean War films, but he also revealed the ways in which the generic conventions established during World War II could be adapted to the circumstances of the fighting in Korea. The war films of the 1940s focused on small groups of military men representing a cross-section of American society. Their ability to transcend internal conflicts and fight as a team proved the key to success in a climactic battle, and winning that battle was portrayed as crucial to America's ultimate victory (see "World War II: Feature Films" and "The American Fighting Man"). But in Fuller's films there are no climactic battles, and there is no assurance of a final victory, only the hope for survival. Those best suited to fight such a war are cold-blooded professionals like Zack or the hero (Robert Mitchum) of Dick Powell's *The Hunters* (1958). Nicknamed "the Iceman," he declares, "I'm regular Air Force. I don't have to be told [why we are fighting]."

More frequently, however, the protagonist's doubts about his mission become central to Korean War films and are exemplified in Mark Robson's *The Bridges at Toko-Ri* (1954) and Lewis Milestone's *Pork Chop Hill* (1959). Based on James Michener's well-received novella published a year earlier, *The Bridges at Toko-Ri* focuses on Lieutenant Harry Brubaker (William Holden), a naval aviator stationed on an aircraft carrier off the coast of Korea. The World War II veteran is understandably bitter at having been recalled to duty at the expense of his successful law practice. Nevertheless, he refuses to use his father-in-law's political influence to secure a noncombat assignment and takes part in the attack on the bridges at Toko-Ri. The operation is a success, but Brubaker's plane is forced down behind enemy lines. He dies wondering how he wound up "in a smelly ditch in Korea" fighting "the wrong war in the wrong place." American Admiral Tarrant (Frederick March) praises the dead lieutenant (who reminds him of a son killed in World War II) for selflessly helping to stop the spread of Communism. But the desolate image of Brubaker's body lying in the Korean streambed encourages an ironic reading of this concluding eulogy.

The same ambivalence concerning the lives sacrificed in Korea appears in *Pork Chop Hill*. The film recounts a fierce struggle to recapture a hill of no strategic value, a struggle that had come to symbolize the American dilemma in Korea, as military historian S. L. A. Marshall points out in his 1956 book of the same title. The peace negotiators at Panmunjon hope the effort will symbolize American resolve, convincing the Communists that the UN forces will not accede to improper Communist demands in order gain an early cease-fire. Despite his own doubts and his awareness that his men see their mission as futile, Lieutenant Joe Clemons (Gregory Peck) orders his company to attack and defend Pork Chop Hill. The assault succeeds, but his company is decimated by the Chinese defenders and then—in a command that bewilders and angers the combatants—ordered to abandon their prize.

Rapid advances followed by equally rapid retreats marked the sudden reversal of fortunes in the Korean fighting, and one of the consequences of these swift movements was that both sides took many prisoners. Widespread public discussions of Americans being brainwashed and of collaborating with their captors became the dominant themes of a subgenre of the war film: narratives of life as a POW. Although early evidence suggests that, despite the harsh life they were forced to endure, the vast majority (perhaps 95 percent) of American prisoners resisted their captors (Harrison), the few who did collaborate were used as examples of a decline in military discipline and the general decline of American cultural values (Kinkead). The first of the Korean prison camp films, Andrew Morton's *Prisoner of War* (1954), focuses on both collaboration with the enemy and Communist brainwashing techniques. An American intelligence agent (Ronald Reagan) allows himself to be captured in order to see firsthand conditions in the North Korean prison camps. He sees the brutalities suffered by American prisoners, but it turns out that an apparent collaborator is also an American agent on the same mission, and the Americans establish their immunity to Communist manipulation. Not much better than this facile and improbable piece of propaganda is Lewis Seiler's *Bamboo Prison* (1955), a Korean War version of Billy Wilder's World War II POW drama *Stalag 17* (1953), in which a falsely accused collaborator proves to be a loyal American.

Films that dealt more thoughtfully with the issues of brainwashing and collaboration were equally anxious to vindicate the accused. In Arnold Lavin's *The Rack* (1956), an ex-prisoner (Paul Newman) is guilty of collaboration, but the blame is attributed to his traumatic childhood. Similarly, an American officer (Richard Basehart) accused of signing a false confession in Karl Malden's *Time Limit* (1957), is defended at his trial by an attorney who reveals that the ex-POW has acted to save the lives of sixteen prisoners.

The most famous film to dramatize the themes of collaboration and brainwashing (and arguably one of the two best American films dealing with the Korean War) is John Frankenheimer's *The Manchurian Candidate*

FIGURE 10. *Pork Chop Hill* (1959). Lt. Joe Clemons (Gregory Peck, left foreground) stands in stoic ambivalence at the thought of leading his men on a pointless strategic mission in Korea that will surely kill many in the company. Courtesy Melville Production.

(1962). Part psychological thriller and part political satire, it is the story of Raymond Shaw (Lawrence Harvey), a decorated Korean War veteran who, after being kidnapped and subjected to brainwashing by his Chinese Communist captors, returns to the United States with no memory of the experience. He has been programmed to obey commands given to him by his American handler, and his mission is to assassinate an American presidential candidate. His handler turns out to be his own dominating mother (Angela Lansbury), a deep cover agent married to a right-wing, communist-hunting senator (James Gregory) selected to run on the ticket with the targeted candidate. With the help of a counterintelligence officer (Frank Sinatra), the plot is foiled, and Raymond manages to shoot his nefarious mother and McCarthy-like stepfather instead of the presidential candidate. The cartoonish characters and the improbable sequence of events diminish the film as a thriller, but it offers an insight into the political paranoia of Cold War America while foreshadowing the acts of Lee Harvey Oswald a year later.

The other film classic set in Korea, Robert Altman's *MASH* (1970), is probably more concerned with the political issues of the 1960s than with the Korean War itself. The film's

many anachronisms (smoking marijuana, for example) suggest that the war in Vietnam rather than in Korea inspired the filmmakers. The focus of the film is a mobile surgical hospital, an innovation in treating battle casualties that saved many lives during the war and was the subject of an earlier film, Richard Brooks's *Battle Circus* (1953), a serious if pedestrian treatment. *MASH*, on the other hand, is a black comedy that satirizes the hollow ideals and windy pieties that justify both the war and the military system conducting it. A pair of surgeons, Hawkeye Pierce (Donald Sutherland) and Trapper John McIntyre (Elliott Gould), battles the bureaucratic hypocrisies and medical incompetence embodied in a superior officer (Robert Duvall). The film established Altman as a major director and served as the model for one of television's most popular and longest-running series (*M*A*S*H*, 1972–83). By the early 1970s, the cycle of Korean War films had run its course. Except for Terence Young's *Inchon* (1981), a U.S.-Korean production that has found its way onto all-time-worst-movies lists, Korea was no longer the subject of American feature films. Hollywood had lost interest in a war that the American public had largely forgotten.

Documentaries

As the fortieth anniversary of the Korean War approached, historians began to reappraise the conflict, and television networks, sensing a renewed interest in Korea, turned out a number of documentaries that reflected the widespread influence of historical revisionism. The earliest of the Korean War documentaries, which began to appear shortly after the hostilities began, were staunchly pro-American. John Ford's *This Is Korea* (1951) explains why it is necessary to resist Communist aggression in Korea, as does Joseph Browne's *Korea and Communism in the Pacific* (1953). The latter, which was produced by the Army Signal Corps and broadcast on NBC's *Youth Wants to Know* television series, features James Michener, the author of *The Bridges at Toko-Ri*, answering young people's questions about the necessity of an unpopular war.

Irving Lerner's *Suicide Attack* (1951) deplores the Chinese Communists' disregard for the value of human life, while Owen Crump's *Cease Fire* (1954), reenacts a battle fought just hours before the 1953 armistice is to begin. Like the fictional *Pork Chop Hill*, which dramatizes a similar battle, *Cease Fire* praises the resolution of UN forces and blames the Chinese and North Korean aggressiveness and treachery for the continuing bloodshed. The same Cold War ideology informed the documentary treatments of the Korean War, whether found in portraits of policy makers (Robert Foster's survey of Harry Truman's presidency, *H.S.T., Days of Decision* [1963]; and Louis Tetunic's eulogy to General Douglas MacArthur, *Old Soldier* [1964]) or reports on the continuing tensions in the divided Korea (for example, the CBS account of the tenth anniversary of the armistice, *Korea: The War That Didn't End*, 1963).

By the 1990s, however, the end of the Cold War and the increasing popularity of historical revisionism brought a very different political mood to documentary treatments of the Korean War. The CBS production *Korea—Forgotten War* (1987) and the History Channel's five-episode miniseries *The Korean War: Fire and Ice* (1999) focus more on the sacrifices made by the participants than on ideological issues in much the same way that films dealing with Vietnam managed to honor the frontline soldiers without staking out an ideological position on the war itself. *Korea: The Unknown War* (1990), a six-part effort produced by Thames Television in association with WGBH, Boston, lays much of the blame for the Korean War (and the Cold War in general) on the aggressively anticommunist policies of a United States determined to preserve its post–World War II hegemony in world affairs. *An Arrogant Display of Strength*, the title of the episode describing the United Nations

counterattacks that drove the North Korean forces back to the Yalu River, exemplifies *The Unknown War's* ideological perspective. CNN's massive twenty-four-hour documentary, *Cold War* (1998–99), tries to achieve greater objectivity (or at least avoid contentious issues) by granting equal weight to the opposing interpretations.

These Korean War documentaries tend to use the same familiar film footage to exemplify radically different interpretations of the conflict. For example, the images of exhausted, nearly frozen American infantrymen retreating from North Korea has been used to illustrate the sacrifices necessary to contain communism *(This Is Korea)*, the stoic resolve of the common soldier *(The Korean War: Fire and Ice)*, and the bitter consequences of Douglas MacArthur's hubris *(The Unknown War)*. As a result, although none of the films can match the scope and ideological balance of Clay Blair's book *The Forgotten War*, they provide examples of the ideological battles waged by journalists and historians over the past half century. In addition, the best of the feature films (*The Steel Helmet, The Bridges at Toko-Ri, Time Limit,* and *Pork Chop Hill*) offer rich and complex insights into the ambivalent and conflicted responses of the Americans who reluctantly supported a war in which the objectives were not clear and in which victory was impossible.

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Bamboo Prison (1955, F)
Battle Circus (1953, F)
The Bridges at Toko-Ri (1954, F)
Cease Fire (1954, D)
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Fixed Bayonets (1951, F)
H.S.T., Days of Decision (1963, TV)
The Hunters (1958, F)
Inchon (1981, F)
Korea—Forgotten War (1987, TV)
Korea: The War That Didn't End (1963, TV)
The Korean War: Fire and Ice (1999, TV)
The Manchurian Candidate (1962, F)
MASH (1970, F; 1972–83, TV)
The Men of the Fighting Lady (1952, F)
Mission over Korea (1953, F)
Old Soldier (1964, F)
Pork Chop Hill (1959, F)
Prisoner of War (1954, F)
The Rack (1956, F)
The Reluctant Heroes (1971, F)
Sabre Jet (1953, F)
The Steel Helmet (1951, F)
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