



When Intelligence Made a Difference

<<< COLD WAR >>>

Intelligence and the Battle of the Chosin Reservoir

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A military is most effective not by the amount of manpower it has, the amount of military vehicles nor the financial backing, but rather the amount of information one has. Accurately collected, analyzed, and disseminated information is imperative in the success or downfall of an operation, be it military or in the advancement of foreign policy. In better defending against intelligence failures, some have advocated for the use of a value chain system in assessing military intelligence.

As noted by the RAND Corporation research report *Blinders, Blunders, and Wars: What America and China Can Learn*, "Problems encountered in the top portion of the information value chain—the use of knowledge and judgment to choose a final course of action—may significantly hinder decision-making for several reasons."¹ Effectively the information value chain is a way of properly analyzing decisions which encompasses "full range of activities needed to create a product or service" often used in the financial sector to "increase production efficiency so that a company can deliver maximum value for the least possible cost."²

Some of the problems in the Information Use area include information not reaching policymakers or upper level commanders due to bureaucratic models, general biases, technology being unable to stop human error, and purely poor decision-making based upon the limits of governments.³

The way militaries have conducted themselves and both listened to and disregarded intelligence throughout history is substantial. One of the best examples is the disastrous Battle of the Chosin Reservoir during the early months of the Korean War.

PAROCHIALISM AND THE BATTLE OF THE CHOSIN RESERVOIR

While the Korean War is not often studied, the problems highlighted with Information Use can all be found by using Chosin as a case study.

The Korean War began when North Korea crossed the 38th Parallel into the South in June of 1950, seeking to reunify the Koreas under the banner of Communism.⁴ Largely because the U.S. desired to halt the encroachment of Soviet Communism throughout the world (in addition to desiring to protect the sovereignty of their South Korean allies),⁵ they appealed to the UN who allowed the U.S. to begin making preparations for an invasion force, under the command of General Douglas MacArthur. Thanks to a masterful, risky, and inventive amphibious landing, at Inchon MacArthur was able to rescue Seoul before pushing the North Koreans back across the 38th Parallel.

From a containment standpoint, the war at that point was successful, but MacArthur decided⁶ to press on into North Korea and boldly try to unify Korea under democratic rule, directly ignoring President Harry S. Truman's orders.⁷ Eventually, U.S. Marines and a few U.S. Army units were stopped at the Chosin Reservoir, during one of the worst winters in Korean history, engulfed in fighting against the North Korean and intervening Chinese army units. With supply lines overextended and aerial support scarce, the Americans were forced back across the 38th incurring heavy casualties.

Examining the intelligence on Chinese troop movements into Korea that the U.S. had collected, it is apparent that the senior military commanders should have been aware of these developments. While the Central Intelligence Agency's Director, General Walter

1. David C. Gompert, Hans Binnendijk, Bonny Lin, *Blinders, Blunders, and Wars: What America and China Can Learn*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2014, p. 28. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR768.html.

2. Carla Tardi, "What Is a Value Chain?," Investopedia, *Investopedia*, 19 April 2022. <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/v/valuechain.asp>.

3. Gompert, et. al. p. 36.

4. David Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War*, New York, NY: Hachette Books, 2008.

5. "Korean War," *Ohio History Central*, Ohio History Connection, http://ohiohistorycentral.org/w/Korean_War.

6. "Marshall, MacArthur and the 38th Parallel," The George C. Marshall Foundation, 13 October 2017. <https://www.marshallfoundation.org/articles-and-features/marshall-macarthur-38th-parallel/>.

7. "The Firing of MacArthur," Harry S. Truman Presidential Library. <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/education/presidential-inquiries/firing-macarthur>.

Bedell Smith, analyzing Chinese operations, wrote that the Chinese, “probably genuinely fear an invasion of Manchuria ... [and would develop a protective barrier along their border] regardless of the increased risk of general war”⁸ and sent a memo to President Truman asserting that “Chinese Communist troops had crossed the Yalu en masse and were flooding into North Korea.”⁹ MacArthur and his G-2 (intelligence chief, Gen. Willoughby) had their own intelligence fiefdom,¹⁰ resented CIA involvement, denied its estimates, and accepted no independent intelligence¹¹ from the Agency. Due to the bureaucratic military processes (in addition to fears of power being taken away), intelligence was denied to mid and lower level military commanders. In terms of how MacArthur’s intelligence service operated, it was built on biases—“an intuitive approach that mingled the hard facts of enemy capability with hunches about the enemy’s presumed ethnic and racial qualities.”¹²

This, combined with MacArthur’s own perceived insights into Asian policy, based on his 1905-6 trip throughout Japan and China and the post-war rebuilding of Japan, his racism and own arrogance resulted in intelligence being built upon biases, forcing his subordinates to “[give] him intelligence that reinforced his already held views.”¹³ Hampton Sides, a historian of the Battle of Chosin, spoke of MacArthur’s opinion on China in this way: “[he] was very disdainful of the Chinese as a fighting force. They were a peasant army, they weren’t very well armed, they didn’t have an air force to speak of, so he was quite scornful of this notion that the Chinese posed a threat.”¹⁴

All of these factors made for an extreme disaster that cost lives and resulted in significant geopolitical setbacks.

THE CORRUPTION OF INTELLIGENCE

Noting the personalities of those in command, it is apparent that the intelligence related to the Chosin Reservoir was corrupted based upon MacArthur’s personal insights into Asian politics (partly built upon prejudices and biases), a desire for recognition of personal exceptionalism and to show the world the power of the United States.

The pathologies that emerge in the information value chain is that of human misjudgment—the need to please others, hatred, and exaggerating importance. The intelligence given to higher command was filtered based upon what senior commanders perceived that MacArthur and Willoughby desired to see, not what the facts on the ground truly showed. The information value chain is a good process and way of determining viable intelligence, but it overall must be handled by competent individuals and not be corrupted through institutions’ biases and policies.

Preventing this type of pathology is incredibly difficult as it requires those in command positions to change their overall attitude. MacArthur was intelligent and had the capability to recognize the importance of military intelligence, but he was also burdened by what he considered his own destiny and legacy (which stemmed from a desire to live up to his father’s esteemed legacy). He seemed to desire to end his career on a high note and accomplish something that would stand the test of time and reunifying Korea under democracy would be an extremely historical feat. The best way the corruption of intelligence can be avoided is to have intelligence chiefs and personnel who are willing to speak truth to the senior commander. They aren’t supposed to challenge the intelligence (as in what troops in the field have found, what mid and field commanders are reporting, and what other agencies are concluding), but if the senior command is saying one thing and it’s not based on any type of intelligence, then the intelligence chief is supposed to posit an alternative theory. In a way, they should be the antithesis of “yes men.” They are not meant nor supposed to confirm their commander’s assumptions or biases, but they should look at all available information and corroborate it with what is known about the adversaries’ militaries, the individuals in command, the governments and their processes, and the history of the region and past decisions made in similar situations. Taking all of these together, they should present the real and true analyses, even if their commanders don’t want to hear it. With MacArthur,

8. Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History*, New York, NY: Modern Library, 2011, p. 23.

9. Hampton Sides, *On Desperate Ground: The Marines at the Reservoir, the Korean War’s Greatest Battle*, New York, NY: Doubleday, 2018.

10. Franz-Stefan Grady, “Is This the Worst Intelligence Chief in the US Army’s History?” *The Diplomat*, MHT Corporation, 27 January 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/is-this-the-worst-intelligence-chief-in-the-us-armys-history/>.

11. Cumings, p. 26.

12. Ibid.

13. Bruce Riedel, “Catastrophe on the Yalu: America’s intelligence failure in Korea,” Brookings Institution, 13 September 2017. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/09/13/catastrophe-on-the-yalu-americas-intelligence-failure-in-korea/>.

14. *The Battle of Chosin*, directed by Randall MacLowry, Boston, MA: WGBH-TV, (2016), streaming at https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/chosin/#cast_and_crew.

telling him that the facts on the ground did not correlate with what he himself believed would have been (in his mind) insulting or insubordinate and would most likely have quickly resulted in removal.

CONCLUSION

Having intelligence chiefs who are not afraid to speak their minds and have access to all forms of intelligence is the best way to prevent the kind of sycophancy and groupthink that was exhibited by the military in Korea. Having strong intelligence chiefs who are not second guessing themselves (as Willoughby did during the lead up to the 1942 New Guinea Campaign)¹⁵ nor doubting the intelligence reported also is a way to avoid the disaster that came about in Korea.

James Olson, a Professor of the Practice at Texas A&M and former CIA Counterintelligence Chief, said, “Counterintelligence, to be effective, must be honest,

independent, and steadfast. It must be immune from command or political influence. A counterintelligence officer worthy of the name must be prepared to speak unpopular truth to power, even at the potential cost of poor performance appraisals or missed promotions.”¹⁶ While he was discussing counterintelligence, the advice given is fundamental to being a good intelligence chief and advice to the intelligence profession as a whole.

Being able to speak truth to power is an important and necessary requirement for any subordinate especially when such extremely important matters like the fate of a region, populace, or the lives of millions for the next three-quarters of a century are involved.

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15. Arthur Herman, *Douglas MacArthur: American Warrior* (New York, NY: Random House, 2017).

16. James C. Olson, *To Catch A Spy: The Art of Counterintelligence* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2019).