The Korean Decision: A Cognitive Process Model Analysis*

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Abstract

When North Korea invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950, the United States in an apparent reversal of its policy decided in a single week to commit its combat forces to Korea. This quick decision, tersely known as the “Korea Decision,” begs a question. How did it happen?

To answer the question this paper employs the cognitive process model of decision-making. Unlike some earlier analyses that deduce the decision directly from the belief systems of the key decision makers, the model focuses on how the pre-decision variables, including the “operational code,” interact with the decision-making process variables to lead the key decision-maker(s) to a particular decision. To look into the black box of President Truman’s mind, the paper relies primarily on the so far largely untapped private letters of Truman. For day-to-day developments, I relied on the Glenn Paige’s classic, The Korean Decision.

In the final analysis, the most important factor was the decision-makers’ perception of the situation which, in turn, was conditioned by their “operational code” and the decision-making situation as represented by the “reinforcements/feedbacks.” Throughout the whole stages of decisions, the perceptual framework changed little, but was reinforced. Their simplistic perceptual framework limited the range of alternatives, which were always put in two extreme forms, forcing upon the decision-makers an “either-or” choice. With their perceptual framework also producing a single value at each stage, the selectable alternative was almost always predetermined.

Besides, the political setting consistently reinforced the decision in one direction. The support provided by the public and the Congress whenever a firm action was chosen prodded the decision-makers toward an even firmer posture at the next stage of decision. The closedness of decision-making process as indexed by the number of

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decision-makers also increased the propensity to biased perception.

**Key words: Korean War, Korean Decision, Cognitive Process, Operational Code, US Containment Policy, Cold War**

I. Introduction: The “Korean Decision” in Perspective

At four o’clock on Sunday morning, June 25, 1950, (Korean Standard Time), North Korean armed forces launched major attacks at seven points along the 38th parallel and amphibious landings in two areas on the eastern coast of South Korea. Although there had been numerous warnings against the possible North Korean attack, the offensive took both South Korea and the United States by surprise.

However, the United States responded to the attack rapidly and resolutely, eventually committing its combat forces to the peninsula. The U.S. involvement, tersely named as the “Korean Decision” by Glenn D. Paige, occurred in three stages. In the first stage of involvement, the United States took the case to the Security Council of the United Nations, coming out with a resolution demanding North Korea’s immediate cessation of hostilities and withdrawal of its forces to the 38th parallel. The second stage of involvement concerned the commitment of air and naval forces to action in South Korea and the Taiwan Strait, and the increased assistance to Indochina. When it became obvious that North Korea had no intention of honoring the Security Council resolution and that South Korea certainly needed the assistance of American ground forces to repulse the attack, the decisions of the final stage were made: extension of American air and naval operations into North Korea and introduction of the US combat troops in the battle areas.

All these decisions were made in a single week. While arguing that President Truman was the foremost important decision-maker in the case, one researcher even says that “it seems plain that the President made his basic choice during the first twenty-four hours.” In the following days, says he, Truman simply “waited on events.”

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2) Ernest R. May, “Lessons” of the Past: The Uses and Misuses of History in American Foreign Policy