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The South Korean Kwangju Uprising Of 1980: Through The Eyes Of The American Media

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THE SOUTH KOREAN KWANGJU UPRISING OF 1980:
THROUGH THE EYES OF THE AMERICAN MEDIA

AN HONORS THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

BY

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My interest in the 1980 Kwangju Uprising began with my reading of George Katsiaficas’s article, “Comparing the Paris Commune and the Kwangju People’s Uprising: A Preliminary Assessment.”¹ It was an interesting comparison which immediately attracted my attention. In history, my primary fascination has been with the human potential for the creation of spontaneous self-governing institutions. Kwangju seemed to be such an example.

Unfortunately, much of what has been written on Kwangju, at least that which has been translated into English, contextualizes the incident in tragedy. The initial brutality and later suppression has tended to be the primary focus, with little celebration of the human spirit during Kwangju’s brief period of liberation. Though I can not entirely escape this perspective given the available history, other facets of the uprising have been emphasized.

This thesis reviews the history of the American-Korean relationship from the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War through the rise of Chun Doo-hwan. Special emphasis is placed on the Kwangju Uprising as a watershed moment in American-Korean relations. While a great deal has already been written on the American government’s response to Kwangju, little is available on the general American public’s response. Though this thesis does not claim to answer this very general question, it does examine public news coverage of major media sources in the United States, including newspapers such as The Washington Post, The New York Times, and The Los Angeles Times, as well as weekly news magazines such as Time and Newsweek. The major television news broadcasts of NBC, CBS, and ABC are also examined.
Some literature is already available that examines the American media’s coverage of the uprising, primarily by contrasting it to the American media’s coverage of China’s Tiananmen Square democracy movement. Though these articles are an excellent beginning, this thesis hopes to approach the Kwangju coverage with a more thorough examination of primary sources that emphasizes the historical Cold War context of the American-Korean relationship.

It is my belief that it was America’s Cold War perspective that hindered the press from viewing the Kwangju Uprising in terms of Korea’s movement toward democratization and instead caused an emphasis to be placed on security concerns. Of course, there are always potential alternative explanations. The fact that American journalists were heavily reliant on both American and Korean government statements in writing their articles provides the possibility that journalism acted as the accidental mouthpiece for official government stances. Journalism was also not explicitly one-dimensional. Several journalists deviated from the general trend of viewing Kwangju primarily in terms of stability. Furthermore, prior to the uprising, articles on Seoul demonstrations were rich in democratic context. Was this context sufficient enough so as to extend into the following week when the uprising began?

This thesis presents the historical relationship between the United States and the Republic of Korea and has heavily quoted the journalism from this time. Given the history of American-Korean relations, I believe that an underlying bias becomes apparent within the American journalism if one reads between the lines.

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CHAPTER 1

THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN-KOREAN RELATIONS

South Korea is often characterized as America's success story in East Asia. American politicos and ideologues, when discussing their relationship with the Republic of Korea (ROK), are often quick to praise America's promotion of democratic ideals. Along with the operation of stable political institutions, the Korean economy has seen growth by leaps and bounds that few would have expected following its liberation from Japan. During the 1960s, Burma's exports dwarfed that of the ROK's. By 1990, South Korea's exports totaled 85 times greater than those of Burma. Thanks to early economic assistance from the United States, followed later by American investment, the ROK's economy continues to grow. Though not at the double-digit rate seen in the 1980s, eight percent and nine percent growth of the GNP was not at all uncommon in the 1990s.1 Except for a brief hiccup in the late 1990s, the Korean economy is an overwhelming success story, with Korea's real per capita GDP increasing five-fold between 1970 and 2001.2

The United States is never slow to praise the proliferation of capital and democracy on the southern half of the peninsula, and to affirm its dedication to the security of these ideals. On May 22, 1982, both the United States and Korea saw the centennial anniversary of diplomatic relations with one another. A resolution, passed by the Congress of the United States for the anniversary, specifically asserted American
dedication "to the principles of freedom and democracy," holding these values to be the "basis of the continued strength and friendship of the United States and Korea."\textsuperscript{3}

At the opening of the Korean War Memorial in Washington, D.C., on July 27, 1995, President Bill Clinton emphasized the importance of American involvement in the Korean conflict by highlighting American attempt to deflect an oppressive communist doctrine from undermining the ideals of capitalist democracy: "By sending a clear message that America had not defeated fascism to see communism prevail, [Americans] put the Free World on the road to victory in the Cold War."\textsuperscript{4}

Altruistic assertions of America's commitment to democracy in East Asia are all the more absolved by America's official history of our involvement. According to the Department of State in 1960:

> At the moment of liberation the United States, as one of the occupying powers, looked forward to cooperation with its Allies and the Korean people in the creation of a new Korea—united, democratic, and free of all foreign domination. Twelve years ago, the people of the north, to whom the Communist occupying power denied the free expression of their own will, were instead forced to establish a rival regime which subsequently launched an unprovoked surprise attack on the south. At great cost of life and property, this aggression was repelled through U.N. action; and unceasing efforts have been made by the United Nations and its members since that time to realize the continuing aspirations of the Korean people for unity in a single, free, and independent nation.\textsuperscript{5}

These types of historical distortions on American intentions within the peninsula are quite dubious when we examine the actual history of American-Korean relations since World War II. American dedication "to the principles of freedom and democracy" always hinged on the preservation of social stability and maintenance of its security interests. The American defined "Free World" demanded participants to acquiesce to the possibility of autocratic rule for the benefit of these security interests. Freedom from
foreign domination was grounded more on America’s immersion in Cold War policy than seeing South Korea as an autonomous country, based on the principles of self-determination. As such, democracy within the Korean peninsula was to remain subjugated to foreign security interests that rested upon stability within the ROK.

Actions which undermined the creation of a democratic government free of “foreign domination” are frequent in Korean history since the Second World War. America’s war with Japan forced the allied powers to consider post-war policies with Japan’s colonial possessions. While Japan’s seizure of territories such as Manchuria, Taiwan, and the Pescadores had the simple solution of being returned to China, the Allied solution to Japanese colonialism on the Korean peninsula came to have serious consequences for the Korean people so long as foreign powers insisted on dominating Korea’s political development. This can be seen as early as 1943 at the Cairo Conference in which President Franklin Roosevelt, Generalissimo Chian Kai-shek, and Prime Minister Winston Churchill stated that “[t]he aforesaid three great powers, mindful of the enslavement of the people of Korea, are determined that in due course Korea shall become free and independent.”

The clause “in due course” had particular significance as it was indicative of Roosevelt’s hope for the creation of a Korean trusteeship under United States jurisdiction. By 1945 Roosevelt coaxed Stalin into participating in America’s war against Japan. At Yalta the discussion turned to a three-power trusteeship for Korea overseen by the Soviet Union, China, and the United States. The purpose of Roosevelt’s trusteeship policy is made clear by British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden: “[Roosevelt] hoped that former colonial territories, once free of their masters, would become
politically and economically dependent upon the United States, and had no fear that other powers might fill that role.\textsuperscript{8} The death of Roosevelt in April of 1945 and the inauguration of Harry Truman led to some revisions in America’s policy in Korea. In particular, with the escalation of the Cold War, America’s chance of economically and politically influencing the country without interference from other powers was significantly reduced. Soviet interference in the region became more of a threat to American interests as was shown by the increase in hostilities between the two powers.

Thus, when the Soviet Union declared war on Japan in 1945 and closed in on Manchuria and the Korean peninsula, the War Department of the United States scrambled to put together a policy to ensure an American presence in the region and created General Order no. 1, dividing the country along the thirty-eighth parallel. Arthur Grey, Jr., described the reasoning behind America’s decision to bisect the Korean peninsula and its evolution: “the [United States] War Department took note of the latest operations reports that Russian forces were already on the ground and realized that this precluded our accepting the surrender of all Japanese forces in Korea.”

Grey went on to explain America’s understanding of the Thirty-eighth Parallel:

For some time after the Japanese surrender it was officially maintained in Washington that American troops entered Korea only to facilitate the surrender of Japanese troops, and indeed this was the nominal reason. During the year preceding the Communist invasion, however, military spokesmen showed a willingness to explain the occupation as the “best” that could be done under the circumstances to prevent Russia from taking all of Korea.\textsuperscript{9}

In this light, the division of Korea made by the United States can be seen as one of many subsequent American policies meant to deter Soviet influence on the peninsula, and often made potentially at the expense of Korean interests.\textsuperscript{10}
The Korean reaction to liberation from Japanese imperialism was quite distinct from its American counter-part and had no interest in seeing the artificial division of the country. Prior to American occupation of southern Korea, steps were already underway within Korea to establish a unified national government. When Japan’s surrender to the allied powers seemed imminent, Japan’s Governor General of Political Affairs approached Song Ch’iin-wu and Lyuh Woon-hyung (Yo Un-hyung) regarding the transitioning of political power to Koreans, while ensuring the safety of Japanese citizens in Korea, as well as their property. Though Song declined to participate with Japan, Lyuh agreed and immediately called together a broad spectrum of Korean political leaders. While many nationalists declined to participate with Lyuh, including Song Ch’iin-wu, believing it would be wiser to wait for the return of the Korean Provisional Government, considered to be the legitimate exiled government following the March 1st Movement of 1919, Lyuh persisted despite the lack of consensus within the Korean leadership. Lyuh, with the help of the moderate nationalist Ahn Chae-hong, and Communists Yi Kang-g’uk and Yi Yo-song, formed the Committee for the Preparation of Korean Independence (CPKI).\textsuperscript{11} This body then reached out to local Korean communities to set up a base structure for future Korean government.

The initial reaction to the CPKI was more substantial than some would give credit. By the end of August 1945, nearly 150 committees had formed throughout the Korean peninsula, thanks in part to the freeing of numerous left-leaning political prisoners. These committees began to operate as basic units for Korean self-government.\textsuperscript{12}
On September 6, 1945, immediately prior to the landing of American troops on the peninsula, the CPKI held a National Congress in Seoul and announced the formation of the Korean People’s Republic (KPR), dedicated to coalition governance of rightist, moderate, and leftist politicians, and passed a multi-point program for the political direction Korea should take since liberation had been achieved (see Appendix 1). Despite this, the left tended to dominate the initial central governing body of the KPR.\textsuperscript{13} It is noteworthy, however, that Syngman Rhee, though still living in the United States at the time of the Congress and unaware of it, was elected President despite his conservatism, while Kim Ku was appointed as a cabinet member.\textsuperscript{14}

While the KPR became a body for Korean leftists to rally around, conservative forces focused their attention on the exiled Korean Provisional Government (KPG).\textsuperscript{15} On September 7, a day after the meeting of the KPR congress in Seoul, right-wing political leaders formed a committee for the creation of the Korean Democratic Party (KDP), which would officially form on September 16. The party threw its support behind the KPG initially and opposed the KPR, while those in the KPR denounced the KDP as being composed primarily of “landlords, capitalists and collaborators.”\textsuperscript{16}

The following day, September 8, Lieutenant General John Hodge arrived in Korea and established himself as Commanding General of the U.S. Armed Forces in Korea. His assigned mission was:

1. Take the Japanese surrender, disarm the Japanese armed forces, enforce the terms of the surrender, and remove Japanese imperialism from Korea; 2. Maintain order, establish an effective government along democratic lines and rebuild a sound economy as a basis for Korean independence; 3. Train Koreans in handling their own affairs and prepare Korea to govern itself as a free and independent nation.\textsuperscript{17}
Yet for Hodge, the maintenance of order initially superseded the first directive, which included the removal of Japanese imperialism, since he was not allowed to give recognition to either the KPR or the KPG as being legitimate ruling bodies, and was thus unable to use either governing frameworks for the sustention of peace. Instead, the American Military Command announced as early as September 9 that the Japanese colonial forces would continue to operate within Korea, keeping all personnel remaining in place, including the governor general, provincial governors, as well as the Japanese police force.18 While U.S. Occupational forces’ initial insistence on the use of Japanese authorities and police for the governing of southern Korea was short-lived, as historian Bruce Cumings notes, this brief flirtation “served as a prologue to the more prolonged attachment to the conservative elements in the Korean political spectrum. Here was a romance that lasted, eventually allowing these elements to prevail in south Korea.”19

Behind the scenes, America never denied the popularity of the Left in south Korea, yet continued to campaign against these forces because of the sympathy much of the Korean left held for initial Soviet policy in the north:

Almost all Koreans are leftists by current US standards, and not even the conservative parties can be considered defenders of traditional capitalism. The socialization of basic industries and the redistribution of land figure in the political platforms of every party in South Korea.20

Not to be out done by Korea’s left, Hodge and the American military government took steps in late 1945 through 1946 to squash groups antithetical to the occupying force’s political ideals. In November of 1945, Korean labor advocates made moves to create a unified labor council throughout the peninsula. The National Council of Korean Labor Unions met in Seoul and asserted its official approval of the KPR and its program. In response to this, and similar activities in other areas of the society, the United States’
military government passed restrictive labor laws, including the prohibition of striking, and ordered the closure of numerous newspapers.²¹

It was this attitude of anti-communism at the expense of democratic participation that characterized America’s relation with Korea following its liberation from Japan. In conjunction with Truman and Roosevelt’s desire to economically influence the peninsula via a period of trusteeship, American involvement in Korea in the years following the end of the Second World War are better surmised not in the promotion of democratic ideals, but ultimately in the deterrence of communist elements for the assurance of American interests in the region, both political and economic, and often times at the expense of real democratic participation by the Korean people. According to American officials: “There are an unknown number of political parties and groups in Korea, many of which have mushroomed since the Japanese surrender was announced. . . . All groups seem to have the common ideas of seizing Japanese property, ejecting the Japanese from Korea, and achieving immediate independence.”²² While the United States was able to mask its desires through anti-communist rhetoric, the reality that a large portion of Koreans following the peninsula’s liberation were in favor of the nationalization of industry owned by Japan and Japanese collaborators was undeniable.

However, American policy by this point was already wrapped in Cold War politics and competition with the Soviet Union for domination in the region. It is in this polarized political climate that the United States met with the U.S.S.R. on a Joint Commission to discuss the independence of Korea, as decided by the Moscow Agreement in late 1945. All talks ended in failure, with both the United States and the Soviet Union obstinately arguing over the direction Korea should take, ultimately at the
expense of the Korean people. By 1947, the United States made the first move to bypass the Moscow Agreement and the commitment to bilateral talks regarding the Korean peninsula by submitting the Korean question to the General Assembly of the United Nations. While the Soviet Union made a last ditch effort to continue bilateral talks with the United States by suggesting the joint removal of both American and Soviet troops, the United States declined to reenter the dead-locked discussions of the Joint Commission.23

The United Nations quickly acknowledged the necessity of solving the problem of Korea’s division and created a Temporary Commission on Korea to supervise national elections. The Soviet Union in turn refused to participate with the U.N. commission out of fear that United States dominance within the U.N. could lead to a solution on Korea that would be unfavorable to Russia. They blocked the Commission from entry into the Soviet-occupied northern zone. Thus, the United Nations, on February 26, 1948, adopted a new resolution, stating that “the United Nations Commission on Korea proceed with the observance of elections in all Korea, and if that is impossible, in as much of Korea as it is accessible to it.”24

Concerns from K.P.S. Menon, India’s representative on the U.N. Commission, make clear a common sentiment held by Commission representatives:

I feel that, if the Koreans are left to themselves—not merely in name but in reality—they will work out their own salvation and establish their own democratic government.

... [T]he formation of a separate government in south Korea will not facilitate the twin objectives laid down in paragraph 5 of the resolution, namely the attainment of the national independence of Korea and the withdrawal of the occupying troops.25

Despite these objections, elections went forward, though the suppression of leftist dissidents did not go unnoticed by the U.N. team. When U.N. officials met in south
Korea to observe elections “in a free atmosphere,” protests arose from the Syrian U.N. representative who had “exhibited distrust of the America régime which he thought was holding large numbers of political prisoners.”

By May of 1948, a Constituent Assembly had been elected with Syngman Rhee’s party dominating. Truthfully, the United States had little interest in supporting the Rhee party, preferring moderates obtain political power, such as Kim Kiusic and Ahn Chae-hong, but these elements refused to participate in the Constituent Assembly, resulting in American support turning towards the Right over that of the Left. In the words of Kim Kiusic: “Any Korean who talks about a separate south Korean government will be condemned by history . . . Once such a thing occurs, it will be permanent; and then you are responsible for perpetuating the division of Korea.”

By August 15, south Korea committed itself to the U.N.’s policy of division and proclaimed the Republic of Korea south of the thirty eighth parallel. Rhee assumed the presidency due to his election in the largely boycotted May Assembly. The north responded shortly after with the creation of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). Both bodies asserted sole legitimacy over the entirety of the peninsula.

American and Korean politics consistently maintained anti-communist policies following the election. When residents of the southern island of Cheju protested the disuniting effects of exclusive southern elections, both American and Korean forces branded the demonstrators communistic and made moves to suppress the uprising unfolding on the island. According to a Newsweek interview with one island resident:

At Dongkwang, on Cheju’s southern highlands, soldiers came to kill and burn because locals had reportedly fed area rebels. Kim Yeo Soo, now 71, fled with his family to a secret cave in the mountain. He recently returned to the hideout for only the third time since the war, searching for 15
minutes before locating its tiny entrance amid scattered boulders and scrub. "We lived here for two months," he says, pointing into a hidden fissure. "When the police found us we had to move." As they fled, his father was shot; he died two weeks later. Soldiers killed his brother in mid-1949. "If I had been caught, I would have been killed, too," Kim says.

Below the cave, a small marble tablet under a banyan tree honors massacre victims as "pure and honest people" and blames government forces for reducing the hamlet to "a place of killing, tragedy and sad ghosts."28

Despite these reports of scorched earth tactics and genocidal murders, retired U.S. Army Colonel Jimmie Leach recalled a different interpretation of events on Cheju-do. Acting as military liaison between the American Army and Korean military forces on the island, Leach defended the military actions on the southern island as being a "legitimate military action against a rebellion that threatened a legitimate government."29 American complicity in the massacre can perhaps best be understood in light of the fact that by 1948, 20 percent of the island’s residents were members of the leftist South Korean Labor Party (SLKP), while an estimated 80 percent were sympathizers or active supporters.30 It was easy to label the uprising as communist inspired, and thus in conflict with America’s interest in the region.

In many ways, the initiation of aggression by North Korea on the South in late June of 1950 can be seen as a continuation of civil strife between polarized political bodies present in both zones on the peninsula. In the words of Bruce Cumings, the conflict in Korea was "civil and revolutionary in character, beginning just after 1945 and proceeding through a dialectic of revolution and reaction. This opening of conventional battles in June 1950 only continued this war by other means."31

At the start of conventional warfare, the military advancement by the North looked promising. By September much of the country was in the hands of the North
Korean army, with the ROK authority maintaining only a small land mass around the southern city of Pusan. Prior to the outbreak of war, the DPRK had other reasons to be optimistic. American troops on the peninsula had all but left, leaving many politicians to reassess the United States’ role in East Asia. This led American Secretary of State Dean Acheson to make the famous statement in January of 1950 on America’s defense perimeter which notably left Korea, as well as Taiwan, out of the umbrella of military security. From America’s perspective, Korea had become a minor actor in the Cold War’s Pacific Theatre, and this fact would be reiterated again by Tom Connally of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee as late as May of 1950, saying specifically that Korea was not a part of the American defense perimeter.  

By June 27, this was to change. President Truman announced that he had “ordered United States air and sea forces to give the Korean government troops cover and support.” This military action was ordered the previous day following an evening meeting at the Blair House, though discussion for the order began as early as the evening of June 25. Later, the United States sent ground forces through official U.N. channels under the command of General Douglas MacArthur, as did numerous other countries, though the United States always dominated the military arena. By late September, General MacArthur had retaken the entire southern peninsula, and insisted on moving north to squash communism in the DPRK, thus ensuring the admittance of Cold War politics onto the battlefield of the U.N. police action. China, fearing that American hegemony in Korea could lead to an invasion of Chinese soil, reacted by sending thousands of troops to thwart the U.N.’s retaliatory anti-communist aggression.
By 1951, Korean and Chinese communists had retaken North Korea and marched south, retaking Seoul. On March 20, MacArthur was told not to allow further U.N. forces to cross the thirty-eighth parallel following the recapture of Seoul earlier in the month. Despite this, four days later MacArthur sent a notice to the commander of enemy forces requesting a meeting for the discussion of the peaceful implementation of the original U.N. objectives in Korea, such as national elections. When the north declined the meeting, MacArthur sent patrols across the thirty-eighth parallel. U.N. forces continued to cross into north zones under MacArthur’s command without approval from President Truman.36

Movements of this kind by U.N. forces under the command of MacArthur would later give some credence to North Korean claims that the United Nations acted as an aggressor in the Korean War. In a 1959 statement before the U.N. General Assembly reviewing the history of the Korean unification process made by Walter Robertson, United States delegate to the U.N., this point was made especially clear, that the United States’ insistence on using the U.N. as a neutral body to oversee elections was consistently rejected by North Korea. In the words of North Korea, “the United Nations [had] been reduced to a belligerent in the Korean War and lost all competence and moral authority to deal fairly with the Korean question.”37

The fact that there was some truth to American domination of the U.N. also left many North Koreans questioning how such an American-biased body could act neutrally in dealing with national elections. At the time, the United States maintained a position of non-admittance to the newly created Chinese Communist government in the U.N.
By July of 1953, a cease-fire had successfully been reached, ending the U.N. police action in Korea practically, though not in theory. Communist aggression forced America to reassess its East Asian policy, and the role that Korea was to take in the Cold War world. Acheson’s comments on America’s defense perimeter were seriously shifted. In the words of General Omar Bradley of the Joint Chiefs of Staff following the 1950 invasion, “we must draw the line somewhere.” By 1953, the United States and South Korea drafted the Mutual Defense Treaty, stating in Article 3 that “[e]ach Party recognizes that an armed attack in the Pacific area on either of the Parties . . . would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes.” By 1954, the treaty went into effect and officially tied American security interests to those of South Korea.

The United States and the Republic of Korea successfully thwarted communist attempts to militarily unify the peninsula (though the same could be said of the North as well). The government created with American assistance remained in power, but by 1954, further deterrence of northern aggression dominated American policy in the south. This deterrence would come to dwarf American advocacy of political liberalization.

In 1947, original Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reports of Syngman Rhee stated that he was a demagogue “bent on autocratic rule.” By 1951, the United States government was willing to give Rhee’s government over US$100 million. This amount increased to US$236 million by 1955, a year following Rhee’s constitutional amendment exempting him from term limits.

In 1956, Cho Pong-am, leader of the Progressive party, advocating a planned economy and peaceful unification, received 2 million votes, establishing Cho as an
important minority candidate. By 1959, American aid to the ROK continued to surpass US$200 million per year, while Rhee broke up the Progressive party and had Cho executed for plotting with North Korean agents, most likely a false accusation.\textsuperscript{42}

Throughout the repressive Rhee regime the United States continued to supply the ROK with billions of dollars in economic aid, all for the sake of “strengthening [US] political influence and securing a military foothold in Korea.”\textsuperscript{43} From America’s Cold War perspective, security and stability were values that superseded all else.

This equation was slightly altered out of necessity when social stability relied on political liberalization. As the reality of the Korean War distanced itself from the collective conscious of Korean citizens, especially from the younger student generation, it became more difficult for the Rhee regime to continue justifying heavy-handed governance and anti-democratic policy for the sake of national security. This culminated in the elections of 1960, specifically for the vice presidency. When Rhee’s anti-democratic policies became overly flagrant, specifically in the vice presidency election, demonstrations exploded throughout South Korea, forcing Syngman Rhee to resign in April of 1960.\textsuperscript{44}

Thus began a short interlude of democratic reform on the peninsula, due largely to continued pressure by student groups demonstrating for political reform. However, by May 1961, military officials under the leadership of Park Chung-hee staged a coup d’état, ending hopes for civilian rule, at least in the near future, as the Korean military took control of the government.

Although originally there was hesitation to accept a military regime over that of a civilian government, Park’s commitment to stability in South Korea and his promise to
President Kennedy that government would be handed back to civilian rule by the summer of 1963 left Washington with enough breathing room to acquiesce. When, in 1963, Park suggested to the Kennedy administration that military rule might need to be extended by four years, protests erupted in Washington which resulted in America’s refusal to provide further economic aid requested by the military junta.  

However, the United States’ dedication to the procurement of a civilian government was generally guided by stability concerns. Following Park’s attempt to extend military rule, the State Department stated that “prolongation of military rule could constitute a threat to a stable and effective government.” American policy makers feared the effects of extended authoritarian rule on a population used to operating at least under the pretense of a democracy. This held true in 1963 as well as in 1961 following the coup when the CIA stated, “the junta has made full use of its powers under martial law to close newspapers, jail politicians, educators, and businessmen, and impose curfews and censorship. . . . Another student-led uprising is possible.” It was largely this fear that guided America’s demand for a return to civilian rule in South Korea which Park eventually acquiesced to, himself becoming president in 1963 following his retirement from the army.

While a semblance of a democracy began to appear, by the mid-1960s Cold War politics again shook the Korean peninsula. As American troops became more bogged down with fighting in Vietnam, North Korea began testing the waters of American commitment to ROK security as “Pyongyang . . . stepped up its infiltration of agents southward, and more important . . . initiated a campaign of sporadic violence against U.N. forces in the DMZ area.” This culminated in the Pueblo incident on January 23,
1968, when North Korea boarded an American ship in international waters off the coast of the peninsula and took the crew captive.

While the Pueblo incident does show that North Korean aggression remained a palpable threat for the ROK and United States, it also demonstrates the continued inability of the United States to address the Korean question separate from broader anti-communist Cold War policies. From the American side, the common position was simply to blame Soviet involvement. National Security Advisor Walt Rostow stated in one White House meeting: “the most symmetrical suggestion I have seen is to have South Korea pick up a Soviet ship.”49 Numerous United States senators made comments such as that “the Soviet Union and North Korea are certainly working together,” or that there was a “master hand” behind the seizure of the Pueblo.50 This diversion and misinformation prolonged the return of American troops from the North.51

Despite this incident, and others like it in 1968, such as the North’s attempted assassination of Park Chung-hee, the election of Richard Nixon to the presidency saw a surprising shift in policy by quickly putting forth the Nixon Doctrine, stating that American allies should be expected to provide the bulk of their own defense. During Nixon’s term, the United States would remove roughly 20,000 troops from the peninsula, without discussing the move with the Park government.52

The reaction in Korea was severe. First Park amended the 1963 constitution to allow himself to run for a third term as president. Following his victory in 1971 among rumors of voter fraud, Park passed the Yushin constitution, in essence making Park dictator over the Republic of Korea. With America’s new policy of requiring allies to be
more responsible for their own defense came a stance of noninterference with their domestic affairs as well. A United States House of Representative report stated:

When the Yushin declaration was made, the United States had to put its policy together quickly. At that time Seoul was in considerable favor in Washington because of the economic achievements and the negotiations with the North. Therefore, the policy adopted was one of noninterference. President Nixon reiterated the policy when he told Prime Minister Kim Jong Pil in January 1973 that “unlike other Presidents, I do not intend to interfere in the internal affairs of your country.”

When, in 1974, American ambassador to Korea Philip Habib suggested that America press for moderation in response to Park’s decree of 15-year sentences for political critics, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger’s was to tell Habib to “get off the Korean government’s back.” Colonel James Young, former military attaché in Korea explained the problem quite concisely:

The U.S. government had several overriding interests in Korea, but the primary concern was security. The major threat to security was North Korea, but the State Department was also concerned that human rights conditions in the ROK under President Park would eventually result in internal problems and instability. . . . U.S. policymakers . . . believed that Park had done a good job with the economy, and a continuing strong economic picture would blunt criticism internally for his lack of democracy. Human rights was [sic] not important enough to “rock the boat” and risk instability.

The election of Jimmy Carter as president in 1976 was perhaps the first attempt to reassess American policy towards Korea and balance military security interests with American commitment to human rights. Carter had campaigned for complete troop withdrawal, but upon being sworn in, received severe criticism for such a policy from military advisors due to troop build-up along the North Korean border. Despite Carter’s aspirations to balance human rights with security concerns, America’s Korean policy was never capable of escaping the shroud of Cold War security concerns. By 1979, Carter
was able to save some face and assure the release of 180 political prisoners, but by late 
summer of 1979, Carter’s plan for troop withdrawal was dead. Ultimately, Carter’s push 
for human rights remained an empty demand, as he attempted to remove the primary 
bargaining chip for such a policy.

However, Carter had been correct for emphasizing human rights and political 
liberalization on the peninsula. Economic conditions could not quell internal dissent. On 
October 26, 1979, Kim Jae-kyu assassinated President Park amid an increase in union 
activity and demonstrations. Prime Minister Choi Kyu-hah assumed the presidency, 
while Major General Chun Doo-hwan initiated a probe into the assassination. For a short time, the procurement of a civilian-run democracy seemed possible for South Korea once again.
In 1852, Karl Marx wrote in his work on Louis Napoleon: “Hegel says somewhere that great historic facts and personages recur twice. He forgot to add: ‘once as tragedy, and again as farce.’ Caussidière for Danton, Louis Blanc for Robespierre, the ‘Mountain’ of 1848-51 for the ‘Mountain’ of 1793-95, the Nephew for the Uncle.” If Korea was to have her own farcical recurrence of the tragic Park regime, it would come in the form of Chun Doo-hwan.

Born in South Kyŏngsang province in southeastern Korea, Chun Doo-hwan enrolled in the Korean Military Academy, graduating in 1955 as part of the academy’s 11th class. By the late 1970s, generational divisions within the ROK Army were becoming apparent, with much of the younger generation of officers questioning the capabilities of their senior officers. It was at this time that the American embassy noted the likely role Major General Chun Doo-hwan would take as a leader of the Class 11 to further antagonize the gulf developing within the ranks of the Korean Army.

Following the assassination of Park Chung-hee on October 26, 1979, martial law was declared, excluding Cheju-do, giving Army chief of staff General Chung Sung-hwa authority over the martial law command. Unfortunately for Chung Sung-hwa, as an older graduate of Korea’s military academy, he was held as an anachronism in the eyes of younger Class 11 graduates. His coincidental attendance of a dinner function on the
same grounds where Park Chung-hee was assassinated was all the reason General Chun
needed to begin his seizure of power.3

On December 12, 1979, Chun and his supporters acted, arresting General Chung
Sung-hwa, along with numerous other senior officers, on charges of conspiring with
Park’s assassin.4 Following Chung’s arrest, Chun took steps to make his coup a fait
accompli by contacting President Choi to receive legal approval for the arrest.

Initially the arrests by Chun were seen by the United States as a clear power play
by the Korean military. Ambassador Gleysteen in a telegram to the State Department
described it as being “a coup in all but name”.5 However, this sentiment would
eventually fade going into the spring of 1980. In a situation similar to the events
following the ousting of Syngman Rhee, political liberalization seemed a distinct
possibility despite the changes in the military. Amnesty was given to 676 political
prisoners, including opposition leader Kim Dae-jung and the socialist leader Kim Chol.6
Despite the fact that martial law persisted during these early spring months, the promise
of a return to a civilian government and a new constitution was made by both political
and military leaders. By March of 1980, Ambassador Gleysteen was able to safely say:
“the prospects for stability and democratic mindedness through 1980 are not bad. The
odds of a dangerous disruption, such as a military coup or massive/student/worker
uprising, do not seem high.”7

These prospects took a significant turn for the worse in April 1980 when Chun
took command of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA), resulting in his
control of both Korea’s military and civilian intelligence organizations. In the view of
Gleysteen, this appointment “allowed Chun to lunge into the civilian sphere through
leadership of the most powerful and ubiquitous mechanism of control in Korean society. To me, this sudden, ill-advised move was by far the most important reason that tensions escalated, erupting four weeks later in mid-May."

This tension between civilian and military domination of Korean politics existed not only in the continued dialogue within Choi’s interim government on how to transition to a fully working democracy, but also manifested itself physically through the persistence of Korea’s citizens during the spring months of 1980, articulating their desire for political reform directly through public demonstration. Throughout Korean cities, tens of thousands of students held peaceful democracy rallies. Following Chun’s infringement on the civilian sphere, protests quickly turned more militant. Strikes erupted in Seoul, Inchon, and Pusan. On May 10, representatives from 23 universities met and drew up a resolution for the end of martial law and the removal of Chun Doo-hwan from office. On May 14, student delegates had decided to organize massive street campaigns to attain their goals. Upwards of 70,000 students in Seoul left their campuses and marched for the ending of martial law and the removal of Chun. By May 15, participants would increase to nearly 100,000. These rallies continued until May 16 when Premier Sin Hyon-hawk promised a more rapid rate for constitutional change.

In many respects, Korea’s dialogue between civilian and military forces mirrored the problem of American allies: the inability to balance peninsular security concerns with the need for political liberalization, or, more accurately, to cease viewing democratization in terms of Korean stability. Korean students and laborers felt that the necessity of democratic participation in a civilian government superseded security concerns. General Chun Doo-hwan, as a protégé of Park Chung-hee and the commander of the military, was
seen as a continuation of the oppressive *yushin* system, and as such, an obstacle to the possibility of political liberalization. Yet for Chun and his followers in the Korean military, security concerns and the possibility of a North Korean attack were reason enough to stifle public dissent and thwart civilian rule.\(^\text{13}\) This included working to “change the public’s desire for a democratization movement into a desire for safety.”\(^\text{14}\) It also included the military order for certain military units to undergo “*chungjung* training” (riot control training), emphasizing quelling riots with wooden clubs through an offensive, rather than defensive, posture.\(^\text{15}\)

America’s inability to come to terms with the balancing act between democratization and security can specifically be seen in light of these Korean military policies. While Gleysteen spoke of the necessity of human rights and civilian government, he actually was more than willing to concede to the Korean military the necessity of maintaining order. According to a cable sent from Gleysteen to the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Richard Holbrooke:

> In none of our discussions [with Chun and Blue House officials] will we in any way suggest that the U.S. government opposes Korean government contingency plans to maintain law and order, if absolutely necessary by reinforcing the police with the army. If I were to suggest any complaint on this score, I believe we would lose all our friends within the civilian and military leadership.\(^\text{16}\)

American support of contingency plans came in spite of the fact that the United States was aware of *chungjung* training and that troops were being stationed near Kwangju to suppress student dissent. On May 8, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) sent a cable to the Pentagon that “the 7th Brigade remained away from the Seoul area . . . [and] was probably targeted against unrest at Chonju and Kwangju universities.”\(^\text{17}\)
While it is certainly clear that the Carter administration opposed continued military rule, America's inability to divorce its advocacy for democratization from Cold War security concerns would continue to persist through the Chun regime, just as it had for Rhee and Park—ultimately limiting any real pressure the United States could utilize. For example, following Chun's seizure of military power, it was suggested amongst some American officials that the United States cancel the annual security consultation meeting with South Korea, a meeting used more as a symbol of America's military commitment to the R.O.K. This suggestion was increasingly attacked by the joint chiefs of staff, who felt that it would be "a mistake to link security policy with [US] political objectives to expand democracy in Korea."\(^{18}\)

While the United States remained indecisive on how to handle the growing Chun problem, on the evening of May 17 the Korean government cabinet convened and agreed to extend martial law throughout the entirety of the ROK. In an attempt to deter civilian agitation, the government took steps to arrest prominent democracy advocates, including opposition leader Kim Dae-jung of the South Chŏlla region. Universities were shut down and soldiers were quickly dispatched throughout Korea, including Kwangju's Chŏnnam National University.

Between 9 a.m. and 10 a.m. on May 18, 300-500 students of Chŏnnam University slowly began to gather in front of the gates at their shut down school. Despite the threat of force by nearby police if they did not disperse, 50 of these students began a sit-in on the bridge leading to the university, chanting for the end of martial law and the removal of Chun Doo-hwan from power.\(^{19}\) It was at this point that troops attacked the demonstrators, forcing their retreat. Many of the fleeing students began marching to
Province Hall, announcing to Kwangju while *en route* the arrest of Kim Dae-jung and Chun's suppression of Korean democracy.

Once at Province Hall, students numbering 700 began a highly visible sit-in at the Catholic Center. By 4 p.m., the troops again acted, moving into the crowd of demonstrators and indiscriminately attacking fleeing students. Numerous accounts tell of extreme excesses taken by the military in suppressing the demonstrations:

Trapped in a Blind alley, one student dropped to his knees and begged for his life. An elderly man intervened; throwing himself on top of the student and demanding the soldiers let him go. A soldier stepped forward and struck the old man, shouting “Get out of my way, you old bastard!” The old man fell, bleeding. The student tried to pick up a stone, but the soldier swung his baton and stabbed the student in the back.

Another student ran into an old woman’s house and hid in a cabinet. A group of soldiers entered and demanded that the woman turn the youth over. When she spoke hesitantly, a soldier caved in her skull with his truncheon and shouted, “Bitch, I’ll take care of you!” She lost consciousness. They found the student, beat him and dragged him back outside.

Human rights atrocities were noted by numerous groups and witnesses to the suppression of the Kwangju uprising. According to the World Council of Churches, “at least 40 people were killed the first day by the bayonets of paratroopers and girl students were raped and tortured.” Arnold Peterson, another witness to the events of May 18, recalled his first encounter with the violent suppression of students:

... [A] young man in his twenties walked past us. He was neatly dressed in casual clothes... He was walking in the same direction that we were headed. We following about ten yards behind him.

We had walked about one block when this young man came to a group of three paratroopers who were standing in front of a police box. The paratroopers surrounded him and began to question him. Since this took place in the street immediately in front of us, we stopped and watched rather than try to walk through the group.
The paratroopers were each armed with a rifle mounted with a bayonet and were dressed in combat fatigues. They immediately began to hit the young man about the ribs, back, and shoulders with their batons and forced him to his knees. They questioned him, implying that he was involved in the demonstrations. The young man protested that he was merely on his way home, but his words fell on deaf ears. . . . They continued to beat him, kick him in the groin, and lunged at him with the bayonet. The bayonet stopped only inches from his throat.

While we stood there, a large crowd gathered and watched this confrontation. Some persons in the crowd threw stones at the paratroopers. Two of the paratroopers chased the crowd away while the other continued to beat their victim.22

Kim Ch’ung-gun, a reporter for the Dong-A Ilbo newspaper, upon seeing the violence, felt unable as a journalist to convey the reality of the situation. “Expressions such as the following flashed in my mind: rape in broad daylight, outrageous violation, sadistic attack, armed suppression. But none of these could adequately portray the situation in Kwangju.”23 According to Lee Jai-eui’s book Kwangju Diary:

One old man cried, “How did this happen? I saw many brutal Japanese cops during the colonial time. I saw communists during the Korean War. I have never seen cruelty like the killings today! Students are not criminals! These paratroopers are not our soldiers! They are devils in disguise!” One middle aged man could not believe what he saw either, declaring, “I’m a veteran of Vietnam! I killed Vietcong but we were never this brutal. These kids were beaten to death; it would’ve been kinder to shoot them! We should kill all these bastards!” The streets became rivers of blood feeding an ocean of tears.24

Even if the eyewitness accounts told in Lee Jai-eui’s book dabbled in hyperbole, the sentiment conveyed was certainly representative of popular opinion in Kwangju: that the military brutally beat and killed innocent students demonstrating for democracy. This realization was a critical moment for Kwangju, as it marked the point when student demonstrations were transformed into a popular uprising.
The following day, May 19, residents of Kwangju began to again fill Kumnam Avenue, the road leading to Province Hall. By 10 a.m., between 2,000 and 4,000 citizens gathered on the street, denouncing the martial law command. However, unlike the previous day, the crowd was dominated by regular citizens, with students constituting a minority. By 10:40 a.m., the police attacked, shooting tear gas into the crowd, but following the brutality of May 18, Kwangju’s citizens resolved to fight back, throwing stones at the police and troops. When Lee Jai-eui saw his university teacher in the crowd, he was overwhelmed to hear him say, “even if I cannot strike fully, I share this struggle with you.”

To confront Kwangju’s citizens, soldiers quickly divided themselves into small groups of two or three and began moving through the tear-gas filled streets, entering houses and searching alleys for potential democracy advocates. Lee Jai-eui again attested to the continued violence he witnessed:

... I saw that in an alley at the back of Suchang Elementary School two soldiers had caught a young woman.

The paratroopers stripped her, then they kicked her in the stomach, and they kicked her breasts. Finally, they slammed her up against the wall, beating her head against the wall, time and again. Their hands grew slick with blood. They wiped them on their uniforms and grinned. This done, they hauled the unconscious woman over to a truck and threw her into the back, like an old piece of sacking.

Despite paratrooper violence, Kwangju’s fear and trepidation had dissolved, and both students and citizens became resolved to expel government forces. On Kumnam Avenue, one demonstrator drenched four cars with gasoline and rolled them towards police barricades. Others did the same with barrels of petroleum from a construction site.
Demonstrators erected their own barricades along the street and armed themselves with steel pipes and other tools from nearby construction sites.29

At 5 p.m., demonstrations spread to Kwangju High School. One armored car that had been patrolling the street was bombarded by protestors. A soldier lifted his rifle out of the roof of the car and fired at a student, shooting him through the neck. The student died instantly, the first gunshot fatality of the Kwangju Uprising, though certainly not the last.

By the evening of May 19, paratroopers fell back from Kümnam Avenue while protestors continued to chant and denounce Chun Doo-hwan.30

According to most accounts the morning of May 20 passed without serious incident. Arnold Peterson attended a Baptist service at a hospital chapel:

After the opening hymn, the worship leader called on one of the doctors to lead in prayer. The doctor prayed for the city of Kwangju and for its people. He asked God to guard and protect their young people and students. He said, “Dear God, what kind of an event is this when our own soldiers kill our brothers and sisters and our children?” He broke into tears and most of the congregation also wept. For several minutes he was silent. The chapel was filled with the sound of crying. His prayer continued by expressing his deep anguish and distress over the behavior of the military on the previous two days and over the innocent suffering of the students and young people. His prayer expressed the concerns of the hearts of everyone in attendance. I have never seen such a spontaneous expression of deep emotion as was shown by these doctors, nurses, and hospital employees as they shared their grief with one another and with God.31

By lunch, citizens began to mobilize. Nearly 100,000 people again filled Kümnam Avenue, no doubt filled with a similar grief witnessed by Arnold Peterson. As the crowd continued to grow, police finally acted, lobbing tear-gas canisters into the streets at roughly 3 p.m.32 Elsewhere, flamethrowers were reportedly used by paratroopers on the protestors.33
Still, demonstrators remained persistent. At 7 p.m., taxi drivers made their own foray onto the scene. Having agreed previously in the day, hundreds of taxi drivers paraded their cars down Kŭnnam Avenue towards troopers surrounding Province Hall from Mudŭng Stadium. Soon the army counterattacked, smashing windows and dragging drivers from their cars and beating them. Briefly the demonstrators retreated, but were eventually joined by another group traveling to Kŭnnam Avenue by bus from the Joint Suburban Bus Terminal. With reinforcements, demonstrators pushed the military back to Province Hall. A censored article from the Dong-A Ilbo summarized the events:

Soon, there was a hard fought battle between soldiers and the demonstrators, backed by buses. Kŭnnam Avenue shook with screams. After a twenty-minute battle, many people with broken heads and dislocated shoulders were hiding between dozens of buses, trucks, and taxis. Two girls in their twenties, wearing ticket-taker uniforms, lifted up a man in his thirties. He wore a bus driver uniform. He was unconscious. They were both crying. The demonstrators’ shouts while evacuating the injured summed up the atrocious bloodbath, “they are critically wounded, call an ambulance!”

Demonstrations continued into the night. Fed up with the MBC and KBS Broadcasting Stations’ falsified newscasts, demonstrators set fire to both buildings. Press coverage came to a halt in Kwangju except for the activist publication, The Militants’ Bulletin. Protestors stormed City Hall and burnt the Kwangju Taxation Office as well as the Labor Supervision Office. Live ammunition was shot into the crowd as night fell on Kwangju and demonstrators pressed forward. Heated battles had spread throughout Kwangju. Shots were fired at the railway station, the Kwangju Taxation Office, as well as Chosun University.
On the evening of May 20 Jean Underwood, an American missionary, listened to the battles in the streets of Kwangju: "Lying in bed that night I heard the roar, like the roar of a stormy ocean, hundreds of thousands of voices raised in fury. Whenever I awoke during the night I heard it."\(^{40}\)

Prior to May 21, rumors had abounded at the United States embassy in Seoul regarding the first few days of the Kwangju Uprising, due primarily to fragmentary information received as well as the censored press.\(^{41}\) From May 18 through May 20, the American embassy remained relatively oblivious to unrest in the south. Colonel James Young observed, "there was a widespread American mindset that believed that the ROK military, despite its disciplined training and reputation as a tough and effective fighting force, would never fire its weapons on its own people."\(^{42}\) Ambassador Gleysteen acknowledged, "News of this uprising was slow to reach Seoul. . . [W]e did not get a real sense of the seriousness until May 20 and 21. By then, we had the government’s story about ‘rioting and hooliganism’ in Kwangju [and] disturbing reports of brutality by the special forces."\(^{43}\)

By May 21 General John Wickham was informed of the Korean army’s plan to withdraw troops by nightfall, as well as the plan to upgrade the alert status of the army in case of a North Korean invasion. Wickham in turn requested aircraft deployment to deter a North Korean attack and increased intelligence gathering on North Korean troop movement at the border.\(^{44}\) Colonel Young made the suggestion that he personally travel to Kwangju to receive a proper assessment of the city, but this was ultimately disapproved by Ambassador Gleysteen.\(^{45}\)
Despite piecemeal reports, the United States largely remained unaware of the severity of the situation, especially during the crucial first few days of the uprising. As a result, in his cable to the Department of State on May 22, Gleysteen would twice refer to the Kwangju uprising as a riot situation.\textsuperscript{46} The result was an updated Korean policy. America would emphasize the restoration of order in Kwangju, if possible through peaceful channels, but if peaceful channels fail, then through a minimal use of force. Upon the restoration of order, America would continue to pressure for political liberalization.\textsuperscript{47} Despite having witnessed the context of democratization in Seoul the week prior to Kwangju, the United States was incapable of moving away from a Korean security standpoint, opting instead to wax indignant at the destabilizing effects of Kwangju’s uprising and the renewed possibility of North Korean exploitation of the situation.

In Kwangju, May 21 began with negotiations held with the city’s governor, four elected citizen representatives, and the martial law command.\textsuperscript{48} While these negotiations were underway, citizens continued to fill the streets. By 10 a.m. upwards of 100,000 people gathered in Kûmnam Avenue, many arming themselves with rudimentary weapons.\textsuperscript{49} Despite this determined demeanor, a feeling of elation tended to dominate the crowds. According to one participant in Kwangju’s uprising:

Our hearts burst whenever citizens clapped their hands and cheered us. It gave us great strength. Wherever we went, women lifted seaweed-rolled rice and rice balls to our car, telling us to fight with courage. Sometimes they wiped our faces, smeared with tear-gas smoke, with wet towels. Women, in neighborhood units, prepared food and distributed it to us. From stores, people tossed us soft drinks and pastries. . . . The citizen’s encouragement and care, overwhelming wherever we went, brought tears to my eyes. No matter how I tried to hold them back, my heart warmed, my eyes grew wet, and tears began to flow down my cheeks. There was no need in trying to find meaning. Naturally, I was getting ready to die.
In such a situation, what is politics and what is the need of activist consciousness? It was enough to see the picture of true human beings. This was none other than the recovery of humanity, and this was the rage derived from the love for human beings. This was the citizens’ fury after witnessing students being stabbed to death with paratroopers’ bayonets and citizens being clubbed with sticks. This was a firm resolve and protective instinct that we could no longer allow them to be killed. Maybe it was a community of common destiny. Rather than stopping at being furious at the paratroopers, citizens were developing consciousness that they should recover the blood shed by young people through the realization of democracy, overcoming the region’s isolation from society, politics, and culture.  

Experiences of solidarity abounded on the streets in Kwangju. Blood donors filled Kwangju’s hospital, creating a surplus despite the enormous casualties. Citizens united to oppose military rule and save their city. This phenomenon has been characterized by some as an “absolute community,” while others, in a romantic appeal to Parisian Communards, alluded to a Kwangju Commune.  

By late morning, any hope of negotiating with the governor dissipated. Tensions again slowly began to mount on Kûnmam Avenue. This would come to a head when paratroopers made the decision to fire on demonstrators, killing numerous protestors. Following the breakdown of peaceful negotiations and the armies renewed assault onto the crowd, Kwangju made the conscious decision to actively arm itself. Citizens raided police stations and reserve army armories for carbine rifles. Dynamite was taken from a nearby coal mining area. Hundreds of firearms were taken back to demonstrators and distributed. Armed citizens organized themselves into small militia units. These units would begin to refer to themselves as the Citizens’ Army. By 3:20 p.m., Kwangju began returning fire.
It is important to note that the class character of the Citizens' Army was particularly blue-collar. Of the 30 members of the Citizens' Army arrested during the period of the Kwangju Uprising, the vast majority were factory workers, with artisans and students significantly under represented. Hwangj Seong-yeong describes the Citizens' Army during the initial distribution of arms: "Although their occupations were impossible to confirm, most seemed engaged in physical labor: they looked like laborers, carpenters, and construction workers. . . . There were also many high school students . . . and sometimes middle aged-men in reservist uniforms." And so, at 5:30 p.m., facing an armed, class-driven fighting force, along with negotiation failures, the government forces retreated from Province Hall toward the edge of the city, initiating the brief period of Kwangju’s liberation.

The following day, while demonstrations continued within the city, Kwangju began to exercise its newly obtained autonomy with the creation of the Citizen Settlement Committee to handle negotiations between the demonstrators and the martial law command, as well as to collect firearms from citizens. Alternatively, students from Chŏnnam University formed the Student Settlement Committee to assist with medical care, distribute vehicles, and ensure public order. This mild infighting within the Kwangju Uprising for dominance can be seen in the fact that the Citizen Settlement Committee was composed primarily of lawyers, clergymen, professors, and politicians. However, the Citizens’ Army, as a class-driven entity, maintained an attitude of suspicion toward the Citizen Settlement Committee, and to a lesser degree the Student Settlement Committee, while ultimately being distrustful of the rounding up of firearms.
From May 22 until May 26, the period of liberation, Kwangju continued its experiment in self-government, as citizens cared for the injured, cleaned the streets, and continued discussions with the military for a peaceful resolution, while the Korean government maintained a position that Kwangju was a riot situation, provoked by impure elements. On the contrary, events in Kwangju remained particularly peaceful. By most accounts, crime nearly vanished during this period. According to Choi Jungwoon:

In [Kwangju], the concept of private property completely disappeared. The community was created because all shared their possession, rather than taking away someone’s assets, as was the case in communist revolutions. The citizens, however, respected commercial activities and protected each other’s property. The sharing of possessions was taken for granted when individuals were dignified beings who fought enemies, braving death; this sharing was a natural thing to do when individual lives coincide with the community’s life.58

Despite accounts of disciplined solidarity in Kwangju, both the Korean government and the American embassy would continue to characterize Kwangju as disorderly and a riotous situation. By characterizing Kwangju as being both an anarchic crisis and in stark discongruity with Korean security concerns, the riotous categorization of the city was used as justification for the subsequent military assault.59

Shim Jae-hoon of the New York Times witnessed a significantly different Kwangju when he entered the city on May 21 than what was being promulgated by Korean and American politicians. According to Shim, “Kwangju was not in disorder, nor was there violence. Citizens, no matter who they were, provided food and water to the militants. The first conclusion I reached, then and there, was that this was no riot situation—as the military maintained, insisting on that expression ‘riot’—it was an ‘insurrection,’ an ‘uprising.’”60
On May 23, negotiations between the settlement committees and the martial law command continued. In the early afternoon, Kim Ch’ang-gil, committee chair of the Student Settlement Committee, turned in 200 rifles to the regional martial law command and returned to Kwangju with thirty-four prisoners. Kim argued: “the martial law command released some prisoners. If we abandon the weapons, they will give in to our demands.” Others vehemently argued against giving in to the martial law command. Kim Chong-bae in particular would counter, “if we surrender our weapons to the military now, we would be selling out the people of Kwangju and all the blood they shed! Moreover, the militia will not give up its weapons. The government must at least first admit that we are not just a rioting mob.”

In the days that followed, Kim Ch’ang-gil would resign from the Student Settlement Committee and a new leadership coalesced around Kim Chong-bae, taking a significantly more hard-line stance against the interim government and the Chun cadre. While the Korean government had paid lip service to the American suggestion to deal with the Kwangju situation as amicably as possible, this breakdown in negotiations would be the last straw for Chun. On May 26, the local commander in Kwangju was given approval by the Korean government to invade the city by force. And so, at 3:30 a.m. on May 27, the Korean army entered Kwangju and retook the city. Compared to the loss of life a week earlier, the operation was relatively bloodless save for a heated battle at Province Hall.

From the Korean perspective, much of the consequential animosity toward the United States stems from the fact that the 20th Division of the American-controlled Combined Forces Command (CFC) had been released from the American CFC, under the
command of General John Wickham, without protest. These Korean troops then entered Kwangju’s periphery on May 21.\textsuperscript{64} As a result, when negotiations between demonstrators and the government broke down, four regiments from the 20\textsuperscript{th} Division were involved in the retaking of Kwangju on the morning of May 27.\textsuperscript{65}

Following the rise in anti-Americanism as a result of the suppression of the Kwangju Uprising, the United States government became more duplicitous in explaining its involvement. Though initially government officials would speak of having approved the operation in Kwangju, later the United States fell back upon the CFC’s legal obligation to respect the autonomy of the Korean military in handling domestic disturbances. The official American State Department statement on Kwangju, released in 1989, again tried to avoid responsibility by using legal terminology:

The 1978 Agreement establishing the Combined Forces Command preserved the sovereign right of both the United States and the Republic of Korea to assert OPCON [Operation Control] over their respective forces at any time, without the consent of the other party. The United States could neither approve nor disapprove the movements of elements of the 20\textsuperscript{th} Division which had been removed from OPCON.\textsuperscript{66}

Colonel James Young agreed that this is “technically and legally true, but in this case my recollection is that we participated very much in the decision process.”\textsuperscript{67} The 1989 State Department’s statement would allude to this fact:

In subsequent publications and interviews Ambassador Gleysteen has stated that the U.S. “approved” the movement of the 20\textsuperscript{th} Division, and the U.S. Department of Defense spokesman on May 23, 1980, stated that the U.S. had “agreed” to release from OPCON of the troops sent to Kwangju. Irrespective of the terminology, under the rights of national sovereignty the ROKG had the authority to deploy the 20\textsuperscript{th} Division as it saw fit, once it had OPCON, regardless of the views of the U.S. Government.\textsuperscript{68}
These official statements misconstrue the collaborative nature of the talks between the Korean and American military. According to Young’s remembrance of the discussion:

I believe that it was the preplanned intention of Chun and his followers to involve the United States as much as possible in the events in Kwangju. As a result, the same Korean military authorities who a day or two before were concealing information from us now were eager to share every detail concerning the 20th Division’s movements and operational plans. They went so far as to directly ask the U.S. leaders if they objected to use of the 20th. After consultations with Washington, both General Wickham and Ambassador Gleysteen agreed to its deployment.

I do not mean to imply in any way that the American side “ordered” or “approved” this decision, but it has always seemed to me that, in later attempts to explain this issue, we tried to hide behind technical and legal provisions of the CFC charter, when ethically and morally we were obligated to explain this situation more frankly to the Korean people. The fact was that we were consulted in great detail on this issue and reached the same decision, although perhaps more reluctantly, than the ROK authorities.69

Unfortunately for any dialogue concerning America’s involvement in the Kwangju Uprising, Korea’s use of the 20th Division in Kwangju primarily serves as a misconception of America’s passivity toward political liberalization within Korea, leading some to assert that the action implied American approval. In the end, the emphasis on the involvement of the 20th Division, together with being misleading in revealing American desires for Korea, serves to overshadow the opposing perspectives that emerged between the American government and the new generation of Korean democracy advocates. In the weeks following the suppression of the Kwangju uprising, Michael Armacost of the American State Department stated that “our judgments about what would contribute best to political stability reflected a belief that, in the aftermath of President Park’s death, it was inevitable that a new balance would be struck between the
requirements of order and the desires for freedom.” It is clear that the State Department supported the idea of political liberalization on the Korean peninsula, provided that democracy remained subjugated to stability. Democracy, though preferential to the existence of stability, remained a secondary concern.

Thus it is no surprise that the White House meeting involving the joint chiefs of staff, the secretary of state, the defense secretary, the national security advisor, and others concluded, during the midst of the Kwangju Uprising, that “the first priority is the restoration of order in Kwangju by the Korean authorities with the minimum use of force necessary without laying the seeds for wide disorders later. Once order is restored, it was agreed that we must press the Korean government, and the military in particular, to allow a greater degree of political freedom to evolve.” In the rather poignant words of National Security Advisory Zbigniew Brzezinski, “in the short term support [for the Chun regime], in the longer term pressure for political evolution.”
CHAPTER 3

THE AMERICAN MEDIA'S PORTRAYAL OF THE KWANGJU UPRISING

It has been suggested in earlier chapters that the American government's priority within Korea was the sustentation of stability due to broader Cold War concerns that had been developing since the end of World War II. While political liberalization which followed an American model was often held to be the optimal means for the preservation of stability, as the Kwangju Uprising shows, the value of democracy remained secondary to security concerns. This in turn allowed democratization to become neglected when the peninsula was in crisis. But this speaks only of the American government and is not necessarily indicative of broader American values. To assess general American perceptions, it is necessary to look at civilian institutions, such as the American press.

At the time of the Kwangju Uprising, the American press, unlike the Korean press, enjoyed uninhibited freedoms. The autonomy of the American press, though perhaps abashedly obvious, must be kept in mind when examining the portrayal of the event. Newspapers, weekly news magazines, and television news programs were all independent entities capable of thought distinct from governmental policy. Yet for all of its freedom, the American press remained constrained by the same viewpoint exhibited by the American government: stability remained the gravest concern regarding Korea,
making democratization nearly irrelevant when the Korean peninsula faced a security crisis.

In the week leading up to the Kwangju uprising, student democracy demonstrations surged in Seoul and through South Korea. During these episodes of student dissent, the American press did emphasize political liberalization and democratization so long as Korean society remained stable. While reporting on this on May 17, James Sterba of the New York Times described the rule of Park Chung-hee as “autocratic,” while continuously emphasizing the Korean demand for “restoring democracy.”[1] The previous day, the same paper noted that “most South Koreans are believed to sympathize with the goals of the demonstrators.” This article would also be one of the first to specifically mention Kwangju’s student movement, twice referring to student activities in the southern provincial capital as demonstrations, despite skirmishes with police.[2] The Washington Post acknowledged that political liberalization in Korea had been “snuffed out” due to the military’s power expansion.[3] On May 18, the Los Angeles Times reported that demonstrators had clashed with police while “demanding democratic reform, early elections and an end to martial law.”[4] The following day, the New York Times emphasized the democratic nature of Korean demonstrations: “students, fearful that the Choi Government and the military were moving to perpetuate the Park regime’s authoritarian rule, began nationwide street demonstrations last week to demand constitutional revisions, free elections, and a quick end to martial law.”[5] By May 20, prior to the presence of reports on the Kwangju Uprising, James Sterba wrote of Chun Doo-hwan’s martial law decree, saying that “Korean students whose cherished if untested ideals of democracy” had been attacked by a “police state” created by the Korean
government and that “promises of a steady transition toward democratic rule will remain unfulfilled.” It is during this period, prior to the presence of reports on the Kwangju Uprising, that student demands remained consistently contextualized in terms of Korean democracy.

It should be noted that despite the democratic emphasis in news reports prior to the Kwangju Uprising, the concern for stability still occasionally surfaced. In describing these demonstrations that gripped Korea in the week prior to the Kwangju Uprising, one New York Times article quoted opposition candidates Kim Dae-jung and Kim Young-sam, saying that “rising political tension” demanded democratic reform. Both candidates acknowledged that growing tensions could result in further instability, but held that the solution to the problem was democratization. For the American press, democratization was often portrayed in terms of Korean stability, a view that mirrored that of the American government.

In the following days, the severity of the Kwangju incident became stressed by the American press. By the time Kwangju started to make front-page news, the diction of the journalism had significantly shifted. The New York Times on May 20 was quick to assert that Chun Doo-hwan’s extension of martial law would result in the death of Korea’s democratic aspirations. The following day, once reports of Kwangju’s contempt for martial law became apparent, the same paper began to depict student democracy protests in Seoul as being radical, due to the students’ desire for a “more rapid rate of progress” toward political reform. Though on May 20 there existed concern that Korean democracy would remain unfulfilled, once Korea was perceived to be in crisis situation a day later, democracy was not moving forward rapidly enough according to
student demonstrators. The concern over whether democracy could be attained, given the actions taken by the Korean military, had become ignored, at least temporarily, while South Korea was in a state of unrest. Instead the focus was shifted towards instability and away from the barriers to the democratization process, a trend that continued in much of the news coverage throughout the uprising.

Perhaps more importantly, however, and in stark contrast with reports from Seoul demonstrations the week before the uprising, was that the uprising remained largely divorced from the broader context of the Korean democracy struggle. On May 22, the demonstrators’ list of demands ceased to begin with democratic reform or constitutional revisions, as reported by the Los Angeles Times and the New York Times on the previous days, but instead were now topped with calls for the removal of Chun and the freedom of Kim Dae-jung.11 Although both demands were intrinsic to the Korean democracy movement, they remained political ambiguities when removed from the context of democratization. On the same day William Chapman of the Washington Post followed this pattern, explaining that the primary demand of students was the lifting of martial law, after which he explained that the arrest of Kim Dae-jung could also have complicated the situation.12 Following this report, on May 23, William Chapman overtly stated that “among those arrested was opposition leader Kim Dae-jung, who comes from the province in which Kwangju is located, and much of the anger of citizens is traced to the government’s treatment of a favorite son.”13 On May 20, the Los Angeles Times followed suit, stating that the demonstrations in Kwangju solely called for the ousting of Chun Doo-hwan and the lifting of martial law.14 On May 18 students in Seoul were “rioting for political reform.”15 By May 20, Kwangju’s students had become “violent anti-
government" demonstrators. During the Kwangju Uprising, the focus quickly shifted away from Korean democratization.

Norman Thorpe, an American journalist in Kwangju during the time of the May uprising, noted that this distinction was purposeful due to the extension of martial law and the student response to this. He argued:

By spring, a number of events made it clear that progress toward direct elections was being derailed. Hence, that issue—democratic reforms—was the key issue raised in the demonstrations during the week preceding May 18. Accordingly, democratic reforms were the focus of foreign press reports...[W]hen demonstrations occurred in Kwangju on Sunday, the context was entirely different. The demands of the previous week were no longer relevant. To simply continue calling for democracy wouldn’t have made sense when the government had ratcheted everything in the other direction. Now, the students were responding to what they saw as making the situation much worse.

It is true that the political environment had changed following Chun’s extension of martial law, resulting in students shifting their demands from constitutional reform to the removal of Chun Doo-hwan and the lifting of martial law. However, by removing the broader context of Korean democratization from the latter demands, the importance of the demands became lost within the media reports. Significantly, the previous demands for constitutional reform had always been painted within the context of Korean democratization prior to the outbreak of the Kwangju uprising.

In fact, during times of relative peace and stability, it was not at all uncommon for newspapers to utilize critical language in reference to the Korean government, either directly or through quotation. Months after the assassination of Park Chung-hee in 1979, Henry Scott Stokes of the New York Times reported on the American government’s approval of President Choi’s decision to cautiously step forward towards democracy. Stokes would quote one Korean politician who said, “It’s the old story... You
Americans prefer the antidemocrats, you like the autocrats—is there no hope for you?"18

A month later, Stokes would report on the martial law command’s “determination . . . to stifle public protest.”19

American newspapers also seemed comfortable reporting on Seoul demonstrations within the context of democratization following Chun’s extension of martial law, but prior to Kwangju. These newspapers shifted away from political reform to the ousting of Chun and the end of martial law once reports of the Kwangju Uprising had surfaced. To Norman Thorpe’s credit, this reporting could be referring more to the prior week of protest than that following the extension of martial law. However, this shift in reporting did not remain consistent. On May 24, Henry Scott Stokes deviated from the path and made it clear that Kwangju demonstrators “called for ending martial law and movement toward democracy.” after which the demand for Kim Dae-jung’s release was explained.20

In television news, the *ABC World News Tonight* broadcast that aired following the suppression of the Kwangju Uprising was the only time that democracy and political liberalization were seriously examined during the week of the uprising by any of the major television networks. According to reporter Jim Laurie on May 27, “The [Kwangju] students with the support of local residents had been dramatizing their demand that the military government resign and make way for one democratically elected.”21 The same program would then speak to the State Department’s hope “that progress be resumed toward the establishment of a broadly based civilian government.”22

If the context was different following the extension of martial law, as Thorpe said, making earlier student demands irrelevant, one has to wonder then if Stokes and Laurie
were incorrect in associating Kwangju’s call for democracy with the student’s supposedly changed demands. It is telling that ABC remained remarkably mute on the issue of democratization prior to the suppression of the Kwangju Uprising—neither the May 22 nor the May 25 news programs addressed it. As in the print news publications, martial law remained the reason behind Kwangju’s unrest.23

Stokes’ article notwithstanding, this general journalistic shift can possibly be explained by what South Korea represented to the United States: an island of stability to house American interests in what was otherwise an unstable area dominated by Cold War rivalries. An editorial column running in the New York Times on May 22 made this clear. Although it was preceded by the assertion that security concerns could not justify the preservation of a non-civilian government, the editorial then said that “the civil insurrection in Kwangju demonstrates [that] the prolongation of undemocratic rule can only undermine security.”24 The paper suggests that the uprising in Kwangju was not a proactive representation of Korea’s desire for democratization, but rather an ailment of instability caused by a miscalculating government. John Nielson of Newsweek put it bluntly by quoting a Korean official regarding the suppression of Kwangju: “we had the choice between democracy and stability. We chose stability.”25

Instability in South Korea remained a principle concern of the American media throughout the uprising. This was largely due to the fear that North Korea would exploit the situation for its own advantage. Fears of North Korean military advances were mentioned in the media almost as much as the Kwangju uprising itself, despite the lack of empirical evidence suggesting an intrusion loomed in the near future. On May 21, the Wall Street Journal reported that “U.S. fears that political instability in South Korea
could encourage an attack by Communist North Korea. This, in turn, could lead to a war involving the 42,000 U.S. troops protecting the Seoul government." 26 The following day, the Los Angeles Times ran an article entitled, "N. Korea Seen Tempted by Strife in South," which stated that "the violent clashes in the southwestern city of Kwangju present North Korea with 'a tempting situation' compared with a year ago." The article would go on to quote an American official in Seoul, declaring that Korean students had become "very radical, very communist and inflammatory." 27 In doing so, the Los Angeles Times suggested that student demands for democratization were unnecessarily radical and could lead to an attack from the communist North. Although the United States remained persistent in its hopes for a "transition to a democratic government," it is apparent that this aspiration was predicated on stability on the Korean peninsula. 28 On May 20, the New York Times' James Sterba began reporting on the State Department's warnings to North Korea by stating, "the United States . . . would 'react strongly in accordance with its treaty obligations' to any attempt to exploit the present situation." 29 On May 23 the same paper would again reassert the State Department's warning to North Korea that the United States would "react strongly" to any military advances from the north. 30 By May 26, the New York Times also reported, "President Choi said that North Korea was bent on exploiting the confrontation and that its continuation would directly affect national security." 31

Weekly news magazines were also quick to play up Cold War fears and report on the possibility of a North Korean invasion. On May 26, Time magazine printed an interview with Chun Doo-hwan. According to Chun, "since February there have been large-scale military maneuvers by [the North Korean] army, navy and air force and
preparations for mobilizing the whole nation. This continues. At the same time, North Korea regards recent developments in South Korea as a ‘decisive moment for [touching off] revolution.’ They are mounting a deceitful ‘peace offensive’ [with repeated calls for unification] in order to divide our nation against itself.”

On June 2, nearly a week after the uprising had been suppressed, *U.S. News and World Report* made the dramatic claim that “the insurrection, centered in Kwangju city in southwestern Korea, raised the specter of 39,000 U.S. troops standing alone against North Korean invaders while South Korean forces battled dissidents on the home front.” Why the entirety of the Korean army would leave the demilitarized zone to suppress the southern movement was never made clear. The article then reported that “South Korean officials blamed North Korean spies for the uprising.”

Not surprisingly, the British news magazine, *The Economist*, offered a tellingly different explanation than its American counterparts. The author explains, “Koreans are a literate, highly politicized people who have lived too close to the threat from the communist north to take it lightly but who have heard the cry of wolf too often to be taken in again. They know, even if their censored press will not acknowledge it, that the Kwangju riots and the non-violent student protests that preceded them had little if anything to do with Marxist politics. They were expressions of frustration and a desire for constitutional change.”

American television news programs were also quick to report on North Korean intervention in the south. On May 22, *ABC Evening News* reported that the “State Department formally warned North Korea not to exploit the troubles in the south.” Similar reports were given by *CBS Evening News.*
Significantly, *NBC* was the only television program during the midst of the Kwangju Uprising to contextualize the events within democratic terms. However, the mention of democracy was fitted inside a broader report dealing with American troops located in South Korea, and the fears of a North Korean invasion. While *NBC* gave democracy concerns airtime, it remained within the confines of the United States's security concerns.\(^{36}\)

Prior to the Kwangju Uprising, reports on the DPRK often remained buried within stories ostensibly about democracy demonstrations.\(^{37}\) At the beginning of student democracy demonstrations in Seoul, the week prior to the start of the Kwangju Uprising, the *New York Times* reported:

> Interior Minister Kim Chong Hwan, a retired army general, took another tack against the students, saying, "For the sake of social stability, tough measures may become inevitable."

Such warnings reflect concern in the military that further unrest would mislead North Korea into raising tension against the South.\(^{38}\) However, this statement was simply a brief epilogue, overshadowed by earlier reports of democracy advocacy in the article. In the preceding paragraphs the article quoted students who demanded that Chun Doo-hwan “serve the cause of democracy” and step down from power. They would go on to assert the student demands: “the lifting of martial law, freedom of the press” and a “quick movement toward full democracy.”\(^{39}\) North Korea’s military aspirations took a back seat to democracy, provided the south remained stable.

A pattern emerges when one examines the press coverage surrounding the assassination of Park Chung-hee in 1979 and the political confusion left in its wake. The *New York Times* ran numerous front-page articles on the assassination,
with one titled, “Washington Warns North Koreans It Will ‘React Strongly’ to Intrusion,” while the other article touches on the North Korean threat by the fourth paragraph: “The 38,000 United States troops in South Korea were ordered by Washington into an increased state of alert as a signal to North Korea not to attempt military action against South Korea.”

This stands in stark contrast with events in the weeks leading up to the Kwangju Uprising. Nearly a week before the brutal suppression of student demonstrators in Kwangju, the New York Times reported that North Korean soldiers did intrude into the southern half of the demilitarized zone and fired at American soldiers standing guard. However, this report remained lost within a story revolving around democracy demonstrations in Seoul. During times of uncertainty and insecurity, such as the assassination of Park Chung-hee and the Kwangju Uprising, the American media would report often on the potential of North Korean invasion, even when troop movement in the north had not been observed. When a small military intrusion did occur, reports were limited or non-existent because social and political stability remained relatively intact.

So as to ensure that this Korean crisis took place within the context of Cold War perceptions, political ideologies were incorporated by some reports. However, like the reports of North Korean military threats, their representation in the press would change depending on the status quo in South Korea. For example, during the Seoul Spring, when amnesty was granted to hundreds of political prisoners and civil rights were restored to once jailed politicians, the issue of Kim Dae-jung’s political allegiance was called into question by the South
Korean government. Henry Scott-Stokes, in reporting this controversy, would first refer to him as an “aspiring democrat,” and then mention that the martial law command was “accusing” him of “supposed” Marxist beliefs, thus undermining the martial law’s attempt to slander a democratic political candidate.  

During the midst of the Kwangju Uprising, Kim Dae-jung’s political views would again be called into question when the Korean government accused him of being responsible for inciting the violence. On May 23, the New York Times reported that, according to one Seoul official, Kim Dae-jung was a Marxist and a supporter of the Pyongyang government. “He is in league with the students, many of whom spout pure Pyongyang propaganda.”  

To its credit, the Washington Post was one of the few daily news publications that was not quick to report on the possibility of an impending North Korean attack. The first significant reference to the Pyongyang government came on May 21, in an editorial that read: “Naturally, the coup-makers say an ‘emergency situation’ had been produced by North Korean ‘troop movements’ and by civil disturbances. But of course there is no supporting evidence. The more likely explanation lies in the situation being created by South Korea’s tentative movements toward a new constitution.” On May 28, the paper would go on to run an article that reported on Chinese Premier Hua Guofeng’s comments to Japan that “North Korea was not about to intervene in politically unsettled South Korea.”  

Throughout the ten days of the Kwangju uprising there was a continual tendency on the part of the media to depict Kwangju citizens as violent usurpers and anti-government rioters, thus not only reinforcing the portrayal of instability in the South
Chôlla region, but also undermining the rationality of Kwangju’s struggle toward democracy. Contradicting many media reports, the May 24 edition of the *Washington Post* reported, “students were cleaning up the debris of four days of fighting and maintaining order. . . . Food and medicine were in short supply in Kwangju and a system of food sharing and rationing was informally begun.” Though the civic-mindedness of Kwangju’s citizens was mentioned by the *Washington Post*, few other papers would do so. Numerous reports continued to characterize Kwangju’s citizens as rioters. On May 23, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a story entitled “Rioting Spreads In South Korea” in reference to the popular uprising of the South Chôlla region. According to the June 9 edition of *Newsweek*, Kwangju had been seized by “hundreds of thousands of rioting citizens.” When uprisings occurred in other cities of South Chôlla, *Time* reported that “rioting spread to 16 other towns of the province.”

This language in the press can be traced back to the Korean military command’s riot theory behind the uprising. The military sought to utilize antagonistic language in order to justify its own heavy-handed practices. Thus, the American media’s adoption of this terminology can be seen as a byproduct of reports filtered through the Korean military’s bias. Occasionally, reports would specifically speak to this process. For example, the May 22 edition of the *Los Angeles Times* related that events in Kwangju, according to the military, were “what it called a ‘riot’.” Likewise, a May 25 article in the *New York Times* reported that a government statement spoke of Kwangju as “a state of lawlessness.” Therefore, it is of little surprise that some initial reports regarding Kwangju, prior to foreign media’s access to the city and knowledge of the situation’s severity, were quick to characterize the situation as a riot, given the information that the
Korean government was providing. For example, the May 20 edition of the *New York Times*, which first mentioned unrest in Kwangju, stated that “reports from Kwangju . . . said that people there rioted mainly because of the arrest Saturday of Kim Dae-jung.”

Norman Thorpe addresses this issue specifically:

... If the [reporters] didn’t visit Kwangju and [were] relying on U.S. government sources, they really didn’t know what was going on there. If the writer was relying on Korean sources, they didn’t know much either, because of the blackout of news in Korea. Only official disinformation was being published in Korea. Even government officials were in the dark. When I got back to Seoul [from Kwangju], two senior Korean officials wanted to have lunch with me to learn what had really happened.

Television news programs were also quick to accept the Korean government’s riot theory behind Kwangju. The May 22 episodes of *ABC* and *CBS Evening News* both spoke of “rioting” in Kwangju, or that citizens were “rioters.” Interestingly, the *CBS Evening News*’ portrayal of Kwangju, despite the rioting characterization, was significantly more positive than many of the printed news publications. It referred to the fact that those rebelling in Kwangju considered themselves “patriots.” It also indirectly attacked the credibility of the Korean military by reporting that citizens had been shot in the face at close range and others bayoneted, while rebels were also cheered by neighboring villages. Despite this, neither *ABC* nor *CBS* spoke of Kwangju in terms of democratization, but rather as byproducts of regional animosity, or the arrest of Kim Dae-jung. *NBC Evening News*, like CBS, also addressed the fact that citizens had been bayoneted by the military, but then alleged that some of those hospitalized were also injured by other citizens, again alluding to a violent, riotous situation.

To the credit of American journalists, there was an apparent attempt to be critical of official government statements regarding the uprising. For example,
American journalists remained constantly critical of the Korean government’s claims that only a handful of casualties existed. Thanks to eyewitness reports, more accurate statistics were often used in place of official death tolls. Also, by no means was “riot” the sole descriptive noun utilized by the American press. More accurate terms were used just as often. Many reports spoke of Kwangju’s citizens “protesting,” or that events in Kwangju constituted an “uprising” or “insurrection.” Students were occasionally referred to as “dissidents” instead of “rioters.”

Despite these efforts by American journalists, some exceptions can be noted. For example, prior to the eruption of protests in Kwangju, the New York Times ran a front-page photo of the Seoul democracy rallies on May 16. The caption to it read, “demonstrators opposed to South Korean Government policies [were] confronting police.” Once the Kwangju Uprising was underway, the Los Angeles Times would report that citizens of the southern capital were “violent anti-government” demonstrators, a description not at all uncommon to many newspapers. This distinction, though seemingly minor, portrayed a different tone and represented Korean democracy advocates in a tellingly different light.

A study by Sung Tae Kim analyzed the use of condensational symbolism, such as “pro-democracy” or “freedom of the press,” and referential symbolism, such as “protests against the government” or the “repeal of martial law,” within the American media coverage of Kwangju. According to the study, referential symbolism was most heavily used with the reporting on Kwangju, at 86.9%. Of the symbolic terms used to refer to the Kwangju uprising, 51.2% depicted the Kwangju incident unfavorably with terms such as
“turmoil” and “riot,” 41.7% of the reporting was symbolically neutral, while only 7.1% of the Kwangju coverage was positive in associating the movement as being pro-democratic. When compared to the American press coverage of China’s Tiananmen Square democracy movement, the study found that “U.S. newspapers associated the Tiananmen movement with far more positive symbolic terms, especially with reference to condensational symbols, than the Kwangju movement. In other words, the Tiananmen movement was portrayed in a much richer context of emotional symbols than the Kwangju movement.”

The reason the American government’s reaction to Kwangju was less positive than similar events in other countries is clear. America’s primary concern was security in Korea. Because the uprising in Kwangju in May of 1980 led to instability on the Korean peninsula and raised the possibility of a North Korean attack, American concern centered on the restoration of order through the suppression of Kwangju and then a later return to political liberalization once American security interests were met. The American media’s portrayal of Kwangju—as being divorced from the broader democracy movement, perpetrated by violent dissidents, and an unnecessary temptation for a North Korean invasion—mirrored the American government’s stance on Korea.

This broader American perspective is rooted in the history of American-Korean relations dating back to the end of the Second World War and is a direct byproduct of Cold War mentalities. Despite the intentions of the American government to support democratization and human rights on the Korean peninsula, these policies were often undermined due to excessive emphasis placed upon Korean stability. An article which appeared in Time made this clear:
After the unrest spread to Kwangju last week, U.S. Secretary of State Edmund Muskie declared at a press conference that he was "deeply concerned" that the South Korean government was moving away from "liberalizing policies." The problem, as his aides explained later, is that the U.S. has precious few bargaining chips with which to influence developments in South Korea. Obviously Washington cannot threaten to withdraw its 39,000 troops or threaten economic sanctions against Seoul, since such actions would only undermine a pro-Western country that the U.S. once fought dearly to protect.61

The idea of needing to maintain alliances with "pro-Western" states was no doubt specifically a result of then current international relations. The late 1970s and early 1980s saw the deterioration of détente between the two Cold War super powers: The United States and the Soviet Union. Furthermore, America was in the midst of witnessing the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the resulting Iranian Hostage Crisis. Fears of America loosing clout internationally came to the forefront of politics.62 These factors would lead to a political swing to the right in the presidential elections of 1980 with the election of Ronald Reagan.63

In an interview with the press spokesman of Kwangju’s Student Settlement Committee at the time of the uprising, Bradley Martin of the Baltimore Sun quoted the young activist: "We think the United States as an ally can exercise its influence on the Korean government. Since it hasn’t done so, we suspect the U.S. might be supporting General Chun [Doo-hwan]."64 The tragic irony of this statement is how much it would come to ring true in subsequent years. Immediately following the inauguration of Ronald Reagan, Chun Doo-hwan, who by this time had assumed the presidency of South Korea, became the first official foreign guest of the White House.65 Even prior to this meeting, the incoming president had already developed strong opinions about Korea. In Reagan’s first meeting with President Carter at the White House, Reagan informed Carter that he
held a great deal of “envy [for] the authority that Korean President Park Chung Hee had exercised during [the] time of campus unrest, when he had closed the universities and drafted the demonstrators.”

However, to say that Reagan’s Korean policy was completely distinct from that of Carter is to ignore a primary value behind American-Korean relations which had stretched back to the end of World War II. It should be kept in mind that it was during the Carter Administration, immediately following the suppression of the Kwangju Uprising, that the United States State Department spokesman David Passage stated: “We believe [the Kwangju] rebellion was a major breakdown of law and order. Our situation, for better or worse, is that Korea is a treaty ally, and the U.S. has a very strong security interest in that part of the world.” Though the American-Korean alliance had allowed for degrees of policy variance, the relationship at its heart remained derived from Cold War perceptions, and as such, gave the political value of stability primacy over all else. Though this perception remained intrinsic to American policy since the 1940s, the experience in Kwangju solidified a Korean perspective which was critical of its American military ally.
CHAPTER 4
CONCLUSION

Within domestic Korean politics, the legacy of the Kwangju Uprising had become a significant talking point for the past quarter century. In 1993, Kim Young-sam of the South Gyeongsang province was inaugurated president of the Republic of Korea. He immediately began to use the Kwangju legacy to his own administration’s advantage. Kim’s new democratic government worked to “insert itself into the uprising narrative, principally by aligning itself to the spirit and objectives of the movement.”¹ Kim spoke in great length of a “new Korea” in which democracy played a central role. Kim revitalized the Kwangju discussion by emphasizing that the uprising was a democratization movement, but at what cost? Kim’s government had, in effect “pulled out the event’s claws and teeth by binding it together with the bourgeois notion called the ‘democratization movement.’”²

This is of little surprise considering Kim’s earlier remarks. In 1984, during the rule of Chun Doo-hwan, Kim made the comment, “I am willing to set aside the [K]wangju incident on the condition that the recovery of democracy is pledged.” The reply from Kwangju was furious. In an open letter to Kim, Kwangju citizens said:

How can one individual, in what capacity, argue for or against the pain of history, in which numerous human lives were lost and injured, and blood, tears, sorrow and oppressions were strewn everywhere? How can a person who did not personally experience the pain in such an immense tragedy act and talk as if he were a central figure in the event? . . . Mr. Kim
Young-sam! . . . What intention do you have in spouting a gaffe that dares place the [K]wangju righteous rebellion on the altar of sacrifice for political negotiations? If there is no measure whatsoever to heal the wounds of deaths, injuries, imprisonments and slave-like oppressions, we make it clear on behalf of the dead that we cannot forgive political words and actions to gloss over the solemn fact—the [K]wangju righteous rebellion.3

Though much of the previous chapters have emphasized the event’s course, the democratic nature of the uprising, and its presentation in the media, it should be made clear that Kwangju held greater implications. To say that Kwangju’s goals had been realized because of Korea’s movement toward a liberal democracy would be erroneous, if not offensive. The uprising was more than simply a democratization movement, but rather an emotional reclamation of human dignity in the face of democratic suppression by a brutal military opportunist. For any discussion on Kwangju or Kwangju’s legacy, this fact must be remembered.

Unfortunately for the United States, the American handling of the uprising was anything but an empathetic response to this reality. Throughout the uprising itself, America continued to talk with Chun and emphasize the necessity of maintaining order. Stability guided American policy and undermined any possibility of viewing Kwangju for what it was: a demand for reform, democracy, and Korean dignity.

The United States government viewed political liberalization as the ideal method of maintaining security on the Korean peninsula. Following the suppression of Kwangju, after democracy and dignity had been lost (but stability maintained), the American media mirrored the government’s voice. As such, the American stance on Korea was not limited to political elites in the White House, but was part of a broader vision that saw Korean democratization primarily in terms of stability, given the underlying narrative
present within civilian journalism. Like the American government, this narrative would again turn toward human rights and democratization following Kwangju when Korean stability had been restored. Throughout the remainder of 1980, much of the coverage on South Korea would focus on the unfair treatment of Kim Dae-jung.\(^4\)

After the inauguration of Ronald Reagan and his meetings with Chun, the American press continued to print critical remarks about the relationship. In a letter to the editor of the *New York Times*, one man would say:

> On the day that President Reagan accused the Soviets of lacking morality in achieving their ends, he welcomed Chun [Doo-hwan] of South Korea. As part of the attendant hoopla, the clear message is sent: henceforth we will attach more importance to our national security than to concern about human rights.

> Is Mr. Reagan aware of the hypocrisy of damning conduct in others that he endorses for ourselves, to say nothing of the insult to the good sense of the American people when a President talks out of both sides of his mouth on the same day?\(^5\)

Secretary of State Alexander Haig, in response to criticism of this kind, publicly stated: “We’re going to return to the more traditional diplomacy of the past. We are for human rights, but we must forgo the Carter people’s penchant for gratuitous advice to others. And on Korea in particular our concern for human rights will be tempered by a preeminent concern for the security realities.”\(^6\) For the Reagan administration, “diplomacy of the past,” meant a return to basics regarding American-Korean relations. Security would come to the forefront while human rights and democratization would cease to be emphasized.

Whether this was a significantly different policy for Korea from Carter is certainly debatable. While there is little doubt that Carter was critical of Park and Chun’s human rights records, and was not shy to say so, the fact remains that the Carter
administration remained confined to the “traditional diplomacy of the past”—that is, trapped by America’s Korean policy. Carter’s government was willing to sacrifice Kwangju for security concerns, just as it was willing to take a soft stance on Chun prior to his coming of power.

Despite the American media’s noble criticisms of Chun following his ascension to the presidency, the damage for Koreans had already been done. A realization for many Koreans occurred, in which democracy on America’s terms was not in Korea’s best interest because it seemed to ignore the autonomy and dignity that Koreans felt they deserved. In reality, the legacy left by America’s terms had been one of military dictators and political despots, with short interludes of true civilian government.

Moon Ik-kwan, a human rights activist jailed at the same time as Kim Dae-jung following the extension of martial law, looks to this fact when he recalled what Kwangju symbolized to him, as a Korean democracy advocate: “For the first time I was able to see the Korean problem in an international context. . . . Syngman Rhee, Park Chung-hee, Chun Doo-hwan—to me, they had been the enemies. But all of a sudden I realized that America and Japan are pulling all the strings behind them. . . . America knew what was happening [in Kwangju] and . . . condoned it. That was shattering.”

Although Moon perhaps overstated America’s historic role in shaping Korean governments, he was not alone in his sense of betrayal. His sentiment conveys a realization or awakening within Korea’s collective conscious shown by many Korean citizens. For example, according to one Korean activist in Kwangju, “people in Korea believed that Americans [were] angels. We thought that you saved Korea from colonial rule under the Japanese. We believed in Americans as models [for] democracy. But
suddenly your image changed overnight. We could see a demonic aspect. You were Satan all of a sudden. Now there is hatred and fear among people in Kwangju.”

Unfortunately for American-Korea relations, the imagery of a demonic American government may also have provided some Koreans with the poetic vindication for the sour turn in domestic politics which was largely perpetrated by Koreans, not Americans. While issues such as the CFC’s legal obligations and American complicity toward the uprising certainly are valid talking points, the tragedy of the Kwangju Uprising remains primarily the result of Koreans acting against Koreans. The Korean inability to come to terms with this, while utilizing the American government as a scapegoat, remained a stumbling block for the relationship of the countries for years to come. The American government, as a military ally with 38,000 troops stationed on the peninsula, remained a powerful force within Korea’s domestic arena. For better or worse, and regardless of the Korean role and responsibility, the suppression of the Kwangju Uprising led to a reassessment of America’s historic involvement in Korean affairs.

The Kwangju Uprising solidified a perspective divergence between American and Korean visions of democratization. America’s historic advocacy of democracy in terms of stability lent itself to be reliant on Korean despots who were sympathetic to the United States’ Cold War fears. Kwangju acted as the impetus for this realization and caused Koreans to view Chun as just one of many such examples. Because of Kwangju, the entire history of American-Korean relations became tainted due to America’s incessant security concerns.

This is why in the years following the Kwangju Uprising, anti-Americanism flourished on the peninsula, especially in the younger student generation; American
cultural centers were burnt down as Koreans demonstrated their opposition to their government’s military ally. In a letter authored by one of the arsonists in 1982, the motivations behind the attack were explained:

The reason why we chose this extreme method of setting fire to yet another American Cultural Center in Korea was to chastise the U.S. for the historical crimes it has committed on Korean soil. . . . Just looking at the Kwangju uprising, we must ask how it is that the U.S. gave final power to Chun Doo-hwan, slaughterer of innocent lambs, for his barbarous campaign against the citizens of Kwangju. . . . In the tragedy at Kwangju, the U.S. played the role of mother-in-law to the murdering demon Chun Doo-hwan, thus allowing him to accomplish his aims. . . . We chose this method of setting fire to a building in broad daylight because we felt there was no other way left to chastise the U.S. for acting as the mother-in-law for this dictatorship.9

For many of these Koreans, at the heart of America’s Korean perspective was the value of viewing South Korea in terms of America’s Cold War needs at the expense of democracy. As has been suggested, the American media, like the government, was incapable of escaping the specter of its Cold War perspective, leaving journalists to view Korea from the vantage point of stability, security, and American foreign interests.
APPENDIX 1

DECLARATION OF THE CENTRAL PEOPLE'S COMMITTEE
OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA¹

September 14, 1945

We declare herewith that the date September 6, 1945, together with August 15, 1945, should be regarded as epochal in the annals of the Emancipation of the Korean people. On that date (September 6, 1945), a Korean people’s council was held, the members of which represented every circle and stratum of the nation and comprised more than one thousand advocated of Reform, who have been resolutely striving in and outside of our country for our Liberation from Japanese imperialism. At this meeting the name of “The People’s Republic of Korea” at last came into the world, and the people’s committee was organized to constitute its government and to enforce functions thereof. Under these circumstances, the Korean people have entered upon the colossal task of consummating what our Independence imposes on us.

For nearly half a century, the way to our free development and growth in every possible way has been obstructed by Japanese imperialism, and by its feudalistic exploitations and oppressions. Notwithstanding these disadvantages, we, the Koreans, have ever maintained our revolutionary resistance for the sake of our Liberation. To our unyielding resistance and the international adjustment of postwar problems through principles and ideals of democracy, our deliverance from the Japanese yoke is much indebted.

This means, however, only the termination of our laborious movements for our Liberation so far. Complete freedom and independence which is yet to be won can be gained only through strenuous efforts. Surmounting every obstacle, adversity, and hardship, in accordance with the basic demand of our revolutionary members and our fellow citizens who have elected us, we are determined to demolish Japanese imperialism, its residuary influences, antidemocratic factions, reactionary elements, and any undesirable foreign influencers in our state, and to establish our complete autonomy and independence, thereby anticipating the realization of an authentically democratic state.

Hereafter it should be our aim to secure swift improvement in the living standard of the Korean people as a whole and their political freedom, and to establish world peace through our cooperation with the U.S.A., U.S.S.R., England, China, and all the other peace-loving democratic countries.

We announce, with the intention manifested above, our platform and our administrative policies as follows:
PLATFORM

1. We are resolved to establish an autonomous and independent state, both politically and economically.
2. We are resolved to demolish imperialism and residuary feudalist influences in our state and to be faithful in the principles and ideals of democracy which must materialize the basic political, economical, and social needs of our nation.
3. We are resolved to secure a rapid elevation in the living standard of the laborers, the peasants, and the masses.
4. We are resolved to establish world peace through our cooperation as one of the democratic countries of the world.

ADMINISTRATIVE POLICIES

1. Immediate abolition of judicial ordinances, directives, systems, and institutions under Japanese imperialism.
2. Confiscation and state ownership thereafter of lands owned by the Japanese imperialists and the national traitors, and gratis allotment of the lands to the Korean peasants. (Proviso: Farm rent of the lands not confiscated in ratio of 3-7 in favor of the peasantry.)
3. Confiscation and state ownership thereafter of mines, factories, railways, shipping, harbors, communication utilities, banking organs, and other institutions owned by the Japanese imperialists and the national traitors.
4. Authorization of middle and small trade and industry by Koreans under state supervision.
5. Enforcement of policies for a swift development of industries.
6. Freedom in speech, publications, assemblies, fraternities, and faith.
7. Enfranchisement of all males and females above the age of 18, excluding the national traitors.
8. Abrogation of all privileges and prerogatives, and maintenance of absolute equality.
9. Complete emancipation of women, and their acquisition of the same rights as those possessed by men.
10. Establishment of an 8-hour working day and prohibition of labor by persons under the age of 14. Six-hour working day for youths under the age of 18.
11. Maintenance of minimum wages.
12. Maintenance of the living standards in accordance with the average standard of living.
13. Guaranty of a rapid restoration of peacetime industries and gradual abundance of the necessities of life.
14. Establishment of ration system, impartial and even, of the necessities of life.
15. A swift improvement in the living standard of the laborers, the peasants and the white-collar class of cities.
17. Abolition of compulsory submittance of grains and all other commodities to the state.
18. Abolition of requisition, compulsory labor, and compulsory saving.
19. Establishment of monetary adjustment and measures to stabilize the prices of commodities.
20. Abolition of all exorbitant taxes and establishment of a unit progressive taxation.
21. Abolition of usury system, and declaration of lend-and-loan system under usury so far, null and void.
22. Aggrandizement in agencies of asylums, sanitation, hygienics, amusements, and culture, and establishment of social insurance system.
23. A campaign against illiteracy.
24. Establishment of compulsory elementary educational system under state responsibilities.
25. Establishment of a new policy for free growth and development of the national culture.
Chapter One


6 Ibid., 42.

7 Ibid., 37.


10 This is not to imply that the Soviet Union wasn’t equally guilty of medaling with Korea’s domestic policies. The Soviet Union gained from Korea’s division just as the United States did.


12 Cumings, Without Parallel, 54.
The Korean Provisional Government had been formed in 1919 following the March 1st Movement and fought against Japanese imperialism on the Korean peninsula. It remained an exiled government in China throughout the entirety of its existence with little international recognition.

Cumings, *Without Parallel*, 57.


 Ibid., 52.


31 Cumings, The Origins of the Korean War, 2-3.

32 Ibid., 65.

33 Harry Truman, “Statement by the President,” http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/korea/large/week1/kw_27_1.htm


36 Choy, A History of the Korean Unification Movement, 73.


40 Bruce Cumings, “Anti-Americanism in the Republic of Korea,” in The United States and South Korea: Reinvigorating the Partnership, eds. Peter Beck and Florence Lowe-Lee (Washington, D.C.: Korea Economic Institute, 2004), 224. The full text is
available online at: http://www.keia.org/2-Publications/2-3-Monograph/Monograph2004/Monograph-Contents04.html


46 Ibid.


51 Ibid., 18.


57 Young Whan Kihl, *Politics and Policies in Divided Korea*, 74-77.

Chapter 2


7 Gleysteen, *Massive Entanglement, Marginal Influence*, 103.


12 The May 18th History Compilation Committee of Kwangju City, *The May 18th Kwangju Democratic Uprising*, 87.
It is difficult to establish whether Chun’s reason for infringing in Korea’s civilian sphere was guided by a genuine fear of North Korean invasion, or simply as a justification for a political putsch.

14 The May 18th History Compilation Committee of Kwangju City, The May 18th Kwangju Democratic Uprising, 80.

15 The May 18th History Compilation Committee of Kwangju City, The May 18th Kwangju Democratic Uprising, 80-81.


18 Young, Eye on Korea, 85.


20 Lee Jai-eui, Kwangju Diary, 47.


24 Lee Jai-eui, Kwangju Diary, 48.


26 Lee Jai-eui, The Kwangju Uprising: Eyewitness Press Accounts of Korea’s Tiananmen, 32.

27 The May 18th History Compilation Committee of Kwangju City, The May 18th Kwangju Democratic Uprising, 105.


32 The May 18th History Compilation Committee of Kwangju City, *The May 18th Kwangju Democratic Uprising*, 110.


35 The May 18th History Compilation Committee of Kwangju City, *The May 18th Kwangju Democratic Uprising*, 111.


37 The May 18th History Compilation Committee of Kwangju City, *The May 18th Kwangju Democratic Uprising*, 111.


39 The May 18th History Compilation Committee of Kwangju City, *The May 18th Kwangju Democratic Uprising*, 112.


41 Young, *Eye on Korea*, 102.


45 Young, *Eye on Korea*, 102.

47 Young, *Eye on Korea*, 103.


49 The May 18th History Compilation Committee of Kwangju City, *The May 18th Kwangju Democratic Uprising*, 113.


51 Choi Jung-woon, *Contentious Kwangju*, 3-10.


63 Gleysteen, *Massive Entanglement, Marginal Influence*, 131. Official death tolls of the Kwangju Uprising are disputed. It is generally accepted that roughly 500 citizens died while 3000 were injured during the 10 days of the Kwangju Uprising. However, the official death toll remains around 200, while some human rights groups believe it to be as


65 Wickham, Korea on the Brink, 145.

66 Wickham, Korea on the Brink, 195, 206.

67 Young, Eye on Korea, 104.

68 Wickham, Korea on the Brink, 195, 206.

69 Young, Eye on Korea, 105.

70 Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, United States-South Korean relations: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, 96th Cong., 2nd sess., 25 June 1980, 12.


Chapter 3


8 Of course, this can partially be explained by the use of the American government as a primary source for journalists. By May 22, after Kwangju began to make news, Ambassador William Gleystein requested the United States make a clear public statement regarding the unrest in South Korea. The response was the following press briefing by the State Department spokesman:

We are deeply concerned by the civil strife in the southern city of Kwangju. We urge all parties involved to exercise maximum restraint and undertake a dialogue in search of a peaceful settlement. Continued unrest and an escalation of violence would risk dangerous miscalculation by external forces. When calm has been restored, we will urge all parties to seek means to resume a program of political development as outlined by President Choi. We reiterate that the U.S. government “will react strongly in accordance with its treaty obligations to any external attempt to exploit the situation in the Republic of Korea.”


11 Shim Jae Hoon, “Protestors Control South Korean City; At Least 32 Killed,” New York Times, 22 May 1980, sec. A1. Kim Dae-jung was a former presidential candidate under the Park regime, and remained an important oppositional figure throughout the 1970s and 1980s. After facing numerous jail sentences, removal of civil rights, and an assassination attempt, he eventually went on to become President of the Republic of Korea in 1998.


17 Norman Thorpe, interview by author, email, Seoul, South Korea, 24 October 2005.


23 ABC News, *World News*, 25 May 1980, http://www.transcripts.tv. It should be remembered that partial martial law had existed since the assassination of President Park Chung-hee, but Chun Doo-hwan had extended martial law to include Cheju island at the time of the Kwangju Uprising.


39 Ibid.


42 It could be argued that the fear of a North Korean invasion was of something significantly more massive that could retrigger hostilities on the peninsula and lead to another Korean War. It should be noted however that after the Korean War, smaller military intrusions were a primary reason for the escalation of hostilities on the demilitarized zone. See for example, the 1976 Axe Murder Incident.


46 Reuter, “Hua Sees No Involvement In Turmoil by North Korea,” *Washington Post*, 28 May 1980, sec. A15; The *Los Angeles Times* ran a brief article similar to those by the *Washington Post* which reports that North Korea had no intentions of intervening. It should be noted that despite this, the language of the article still spoke of Kwangju as a “bloody anti-government riot”. AP, “North Korea Disclaims Any Intention to Intervene in South,” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 May 1980, sec. A3.


54 Norman Thorpe, interview by author, email, Seoul, South Korea, 24 October 2005.


56 Regional animosity refers to the belief held by some residents of the South Cholla region that they had been historically neglected due to prejudices within Korean society. This fact was reported numerous times within the American coverage and is another example of displacing the primary motivator behind events in Kwangju: democracy.


Appendix 1

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