

Marines landing
at Wonsan on
October 26, 1950.

To the Yalu and Back

Naval Historical Center

By STANLIS D. MILKOWSKI

The Korean War is a case study in operational art, not only historically but as a paradigm for U.S. strategic thinking. General Douglas MacArthur was the last operational level commander until the Persian Gulf War in 1990–1991.¹ Paradoxically, operational planning conducted in a strategic backwater some fifty years ago may have greater applicability to the new security environment than lessons

from Desert Storm. The United States must be able to deploy limited forces around the world for ambiguous missions in ad hoc coalitions. It is likely that operational planners may find themselves on unfamiliar terrain, in a theater lacking logistic and intelligence support, and without command and control tailored to the mission, similar to the situation that confronted MacArthur after Inchon.

Was the command and control system that MacArthur employed responsible for the plight of the United Nations Command (UNC) deep inside North Korea in November 1950? In

Colonel Stanlis D. Milkowski, USA (Ret.), served in South Korea for six years as an intelligence officer and has taught Asian history at the U.S. Military Academy.

doctrinal terms, the command was defeated when it passed the operational culminating point without gaining its objectives.² Accounts variously assign blame for this near catastrophe on MacArthur's hubris, schizophrenia at general headquarters, intelligence failure, or misplaced trust in airpower to isolate the battlefield. Elements of these problems arguably existed, but they offer little understanding of how UNC operations fell into disarray on the eve of the Chinese counterstroke and why miscalculation turned to calamity. The reversal shows that it was a failure of operational command and control more than single-mindedness on the part of MacArthur that made defeat inevitable.

Riding High, Falling Fast

By crossing the 38th Parallel in October 1950, U.N. and South Korean forces launched an aggressive pursuit across a broad front, encountering no serious checks until the surprise Chinese counterattacks. After a period of consolidation and unit boundary adjustment dictated by tactical withdrawals of forward elements, the final offensive began on November 24. Within 72 hours, the Chinese had

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struck hard at several points on an extended front and threatened to cut off major forces inside North Korea. Though U.N. forces kept lines of communications open and extricated most forces in danger of encirclement, the cost was heavy in terms of casualties, matériel, and loss of hard-won gains in the offensive. By Christmas, UNC found itself almost exactly where it had set out three months earlier. It was an entirely new war.

Although MacArthur received his authority as Commander in Chief, Far East (CINCFE), from the Joint Chiefs, and his command included both major Navy and Air Force headquarters, Far East Command (FECOM) headquarters was staffed almost entirely by the Army. In deference to jointness, planning was carried out by

ROK minesweeper hitting mine.



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a joint strategic plans and operations group (JSPOG), but the lack of balanced representation from all services prevented it from being truly joint.

MacArthur was also Commander, U.S. Army Forces Far East (AFFE), though he did not use that title. Thus Lieutenant General Walton Walker, Commander of Eighth Army, was only the senior subordinate commander within AFFE rather than a ground component commander in a joint headquarters.

When Walker became commander of ground forces in July 1950, the area of responsibility of Eighth Army was simply extended to Korea, and this sub-region was designated Eighth Army Korea to differentiate it from the base structure. Although Walker effectively exercised control of South Korean army units, he did not have command authority over them. As quickly as a skeleton corps headquarters could be organized in the continental United States, it was rushed to the theater. To achieve the movement, MacArthur needed a

corps headquarters separate from Eighth Army. Despite the fear of some that it would be a half-baked affair, he was determined to form a staff with FECOM personnel, even selecting his chief of staff, Major General Edward Almond, USA, to head it. This organization was designated X Corps and assigned one Army and one Marine Corps division that were placed in reserve until the Inchon operation began. Given the circumstances of its origin and the fact that nearly all key staff members were on loan from FECOM headquarters, JSPOG planners assumed that tactical elements of X Corps would be commanded by Walker after linking up with Eighth Army. That assumption proved erroneous.

Change of Mission

While U.N. forces were consolidating their gains at Inchon and breaking out from Pusan, operations north of the 38th Parallel were explicitly authorized, but the directive had one constraint and two caveats. Above all, no forces commanded by MacArthur were allowed to enter Manchuria or the Soviet Union, and no naval or air action could be undertaken against

Racing to the Yalu (September–November 1950)



Source: U.S. Army Center of Military History, *The Korean War: The Chinese Intervention*, Publication 19-8 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2000), p. 9.

those areas. Moreover, CINCFE was free to undertake operations anywhere in North Korea only so long as there was no sign of entry by major Chinese or Soviet forces. Finally, as a matter of

policy, he was prohibited from using non-Korean forces in northern provinces bordering Manchuria and the Soviet Union. As long as these conditions obtained, MacArthur was enjoined “to feel unhampered tactically

and strategically to proceed north of the 38th Parallel.”³

MacArthur had anticipated such restrictions and the operational latitude he could expect in selecting objectives. Likewise, the FECOM staff had earlier completed a preliminary estimate of the post-Inchon situation and already was drafting courses of action based on the assumption that the President would not settle for restoring the 38th Parallel. But CINCFE obviously had not communicated his concept of operations; nor had the staff validated assumptions of their plans. One day before receiving the directive from the Joint Chiefs, MacArthur surprised the staff by calling for developing plans for an offensive into North Korea which would feature another deep amphibious envelopment, in conjunction with a cross-country advance across the 38th Parallel. Although he did not specify the formation to be used for the amphibious landing, there was obviously only one candidate—X Corps.

MacArthur’s principal staff officers had assumed that he intended to give Walker command of X Corps. The staff of Eighth Army shared this mistaken assumption and planned accordingly: after Seoul was retaken, X Corps would continue the attack north toward Pyongyang, maintaining the offensive as Eighth Army came up behind. Depending on conditions, X Corps might continue the thrust in the west toward the Yalu or move laterally along the Pyongyang-Wonsan corridor to help the South Koreans advance along the east coast. In either event, operations by both forces would be coordinated under Walker.

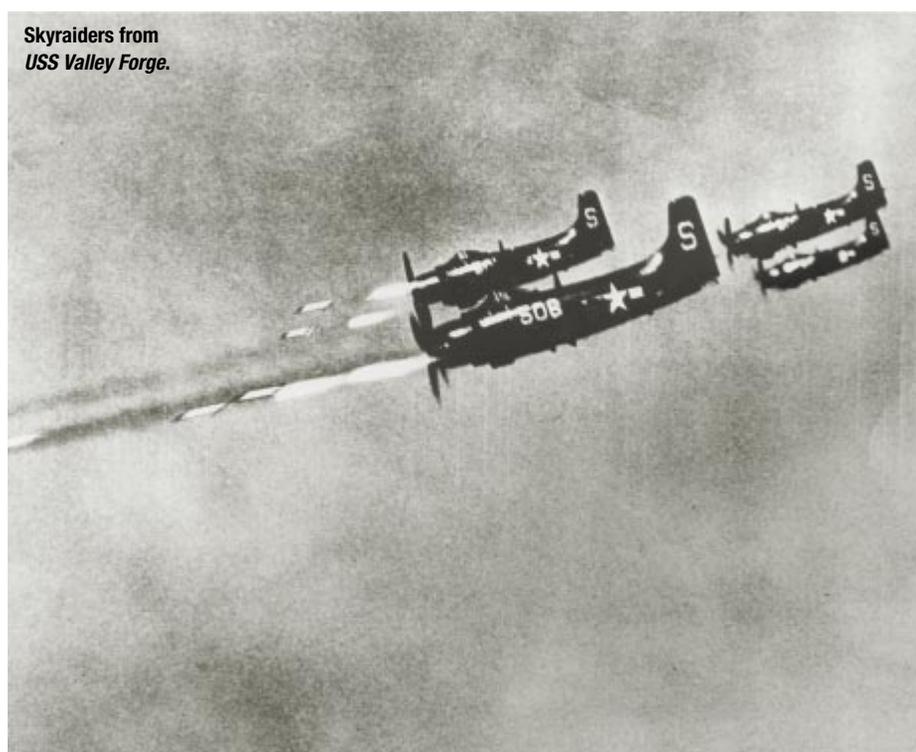
Because Inchon had originally been conceived as only one pincer of a double envelopment with a second amphibious operation on the east coast, JSPOG had gathered data on likely landing sites, and within hours of receiving guidance from MacArthur was able to give him an outline plan. The most likely candidate was Wonsan, an excellent deep-water port on the opposite side of the peninsula from Pyongyang which was connected by the only east-west line of communication of consequence north of the

38th Parallel. MacArthur accepted the hybrid plan, calling for X Corps to land at Wonsan and be prepared either to effect a juncture with Eighth Army, advancing in the west to take Pyongyang, or advance north to the coastal industrial complex of Hamhung-Hungnam. X Corps would constitute an operational maneuver force under MacArthur. He apparently based his concept of operations on four assumptions, which seem not to have been explicitly stated but tacitly accepted as conditions for operations in North Korea. First, the extremely difficult, nearly trackless mountain terrain running north-south divided maneuver into eastern and western sectors. Second, given the primitive transport system and efficiency of Far East Air Forces in interdiction, logistic support throughout North Korea could not be sustained from Inchon and Pusan alone. Third, a turning movement on the east coast might cut off large numbers of North Koreans who had escaped across the 38th Parallel. Fourth, there would be no interference by the Soviet Union or China with UNC operations. MacArthur had identified remnants of the North Korean army as the enemy center of gravity, which was true as long as his fourth assumption remained valid.

Walker was soon disabused of the notion that he would get X Corps under his command. Informed of this plan, the Eighth Army staff objected vigorously. They believed their forces

the lack of a joint campaign plan was most conspicuous in the realm of air-ground coordination

could reach Wonsan faster by road from Seoul, which was substantiated by a report on October 1 that South Koreans under Walker had crossed the 38th Parallel on the east coast highway against negligible enemy resistance. Furthermore, Eighth Army would be forced to delay its offensive for lack of supplies because of requirements to embark X Corps elements through Inchon and Pusan. Adding their voices, Commander, Naval Forces Far East, and his staff objected to the amphibious operation as unnecessary, holding with



the Army that X Corps could march there faster than they could be lifted. Perhaps Navy planners, realizing they no longer enjoyed the element of surprise, foresaw the slow and dangerous job of clearing Wonsan harbor of mines. But MacArthur held to his plan for a Wonsan amphibious landing.

FECOM could not support an operational commander. First, it had been raided for officers to serve in the nascent X Corps headquarters. Second, there was a lack of joint service expertise; naval and air planners had served component commanders and were seen as outsiders. The lack of a joint campaign plan was most conspicuous in the realm of air-ground coordination until CINCFE named Lieutenant General George Stratemeyer, Commander, Far East Air Forces, as operational controller of all land-based air operations and coordination controller of all carrier-based Navy and Marine air operations. This resulted from Air Force efforts to centralize theater air allocation and targeting that had been going on

since July—resisted by the Navy and FECOM staff. At no time, however, was the air campaign fully integrated into operational level planning.

Finally, there seems not to have been a means of disseminating guidance to staff principals. Perhaps this is because of the failure to name a permanent replacement for Almond, who was chief of staff when selected to command X Corps and expected to resume that post after the campaign. Given MacArthur's Olympian style of command, in which access to his office in the Tokyo Dai Ichi Building was limited to advisors, there was no conduit for the routine exchange of critical information.

On the Offensive

CINCFE issued orders on October 2 assigning the main attack in the west to Eighth Army, which was to take Pyongyang. X Corps would land at Wonsan to encircle enemy forces escaping north across the 38th Parallel and remain under the direct command of MacArthur. Adding insult to injury, Walker was also ordered to provide logistic support to X Corps without control over operations, imposing an added



Advancing through
Hyesanjin near
Manchurian border.

U.S. Army

burden on Eighth Army. In October the advance of Eighth Army would be limited by the logistic situation; its troops had nearly reached Pyongyang before it got supplies through Inchon. Yet it was not relieved of logistic support responsibility for X Corps until well after the landing at Wonsan and beginning of operations in North Korea.

This burden was so onerous, according to General Matthew Ridgway, USA, that to have given Walker tactical control of X Corps "would have added little to the load already awarded him."⁴ Distance, terrain, lack of regular communications between the fronts, guerrilla activity, and a fragile transport system frustrated the best efforts of Eighth Army. Inevitably,

mutual resentment arose between the two commands.

The X Corps staff wrestled with problems beyond its organizational abilities, performing army-type functions with a corps-size staff. The decision by CINCFE to coordinate the operations of both the eastern and western maneuver forces from Tokyo was based on an appreciation of the nearly impassable terrain separating them. Yet the assignment of theater logistic responsibility to Eighth Army indicates a lack of such understanding. One must conclude that MacArthur was out of touch with the situation as the campaign shifted to the offensive.

In the final event, those who had expressed doubts concerning the efficacy of the Wonsan operation were proven right: South Korean troops advancing up the east coast took the town on October 11, several days before the last X Corps units had even boarded transports. Undeterred, MacArthur announced his intention to detach South Korean troops (I Corps) in the northeast from Eighth Army and place them under the operational control of X Corps. If the merits of the Wonsan landing appeared dubious, the operation was soon to become a debacle. The Navy found Wonsan Harbor heavily mined. Arriving off the objective area on October 19, X Corps steamed back and forth until they were

USS Helena bombarding
Chong-Ji.



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finally able to begin landing on October 25. But probably the most pernicious effect of the operation befell Eighth Army in the west: not until October 9 did its spearhead division strike across the 38th Parallel for Pyongyang, delayed primarily by supply shortages.

When it became clear that the capital of North Korea could fall to U.N. forces long before X Corps debarked, MacArthur issued a new operations order on October 17 that drew a proposed boundary between Eighth Army and X Corps, to become effective on his further order. The line ran north-south, generally along the watershed of the Taebaek Mountains, to an objective line deep inside North Korea corresponding to the limit of advance directed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff for non-Korean elements. Eighth Army was to advance to the western extension of the line, X Corps to the eastern. On the eve of the X Corps landing, MacArthur modified his instructions,

ordering both commanders to drive rapidly to the Yalu River.

Red Dawn

With Wonsan and Pyongyang both in friendly hands, the concept of two operational forces maneuvering independently on either side of the Taebaek range appeared eminently sound. It minimized the difficulties imposed by formidable terrain and promised rapid destruction of the North Korean army as an organized force, assuming the continued forbearance of the Soviet Union and China. But events almost immediately cast doubt on that assumption. Eighth Army units encountered Chinese troops for the first time on October 25, north of the Chongchon River. The following night, the Chinese struck at South Korean forces on the right of Eighth Army and over the next three days caused the South Koreans to pivot northeast to face the main enemy attack. That created a huge gap in the Eighth Army front, leaving open the right flank of I Corps. Elements of

1st Cavalry Division shored up the South Korean position, with one regiment badly mauled in the process. The Chinese attacks ceased on November 6 as suddenly as they had begun, leaving Eighth Army holding a shallow bridgehead across the Chongchon, but with a South Korean corps crippled. To the east, X Corps encountered Chinese in divisional strength but repulsed them with limited losses. There, too, the enemy forces broke contact.

Eighth Army was shaken, X Corps sobered, and FECOM left unsure as to the actual scope of Chinese intervention. On November 14 another ominous sign was recorded as the temperature plummeted some 40 degrees to well below zero. Nevertheless, Walker made clear that he had no intention of going on the defensive, bringing up IX Corps in the center to renew the advance in greater strength. Similarly, there was confidence in Almond's headquarters. Diminishing contacts led its assistant chief of staff for intelligence to conclude that the enemy was again withdrawing.

This optimism was striking given the circumstances. FECOM had sufficient intelligence by mid-November to raise serious doubts over the wisdom of plunging into the unknown. MacArthur was privy to key national intelligence reports, which suggested hardening resolve by the Chinese leadership to intervene, and he had information on the movement of additional enemy forces into Manchuria. That the intelligence community regarded such indicators as ambiguous does not let theater intelligence analysts off the hook, for they were receiving concrete tactical information that, together with national reporting, suggested exercising greater caution in renewing the offensive. Yet the FECOM intelligence staff appeared unable to provide an unqualified forecast or clear warning. Indecisiveness over enemy capabilities and intentions was found in vacillating, even contradictory daily intelligence estimates. In the absence of solid intelligence, the fact that MacArthur relied on his own intuition that the Chinese were bluffing is more understandable.

Royal Marines landing
at Sorye Dong.



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JSPOG recommended that X Corps attack northwest towards the Chosin Reservoir. There were serious problems with that idea. Most obvious was that it

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assigned a mission that was basically incompatible with the scheme of operational maneuver: the main reason for control of X Corps as a separate force by the operational commander was the impracticality of coordinating its operations with Eighth Army. Much worse from a maneuver commander's point of view, the ground over which JSPOG wanted X Corps to attack in support of Eighth Army was the worst on the peninsula. Avenues of approach from the line of contact were extremely restricted because of rugged, compartmented terrain, a paucity of usable roads, and the virtual impossibility of cross-country motorized movement.

The difficulty of mounting mutually supporting operations across the Taebaek Mountains had been illustrated by the fact that, despite several efforts fol-

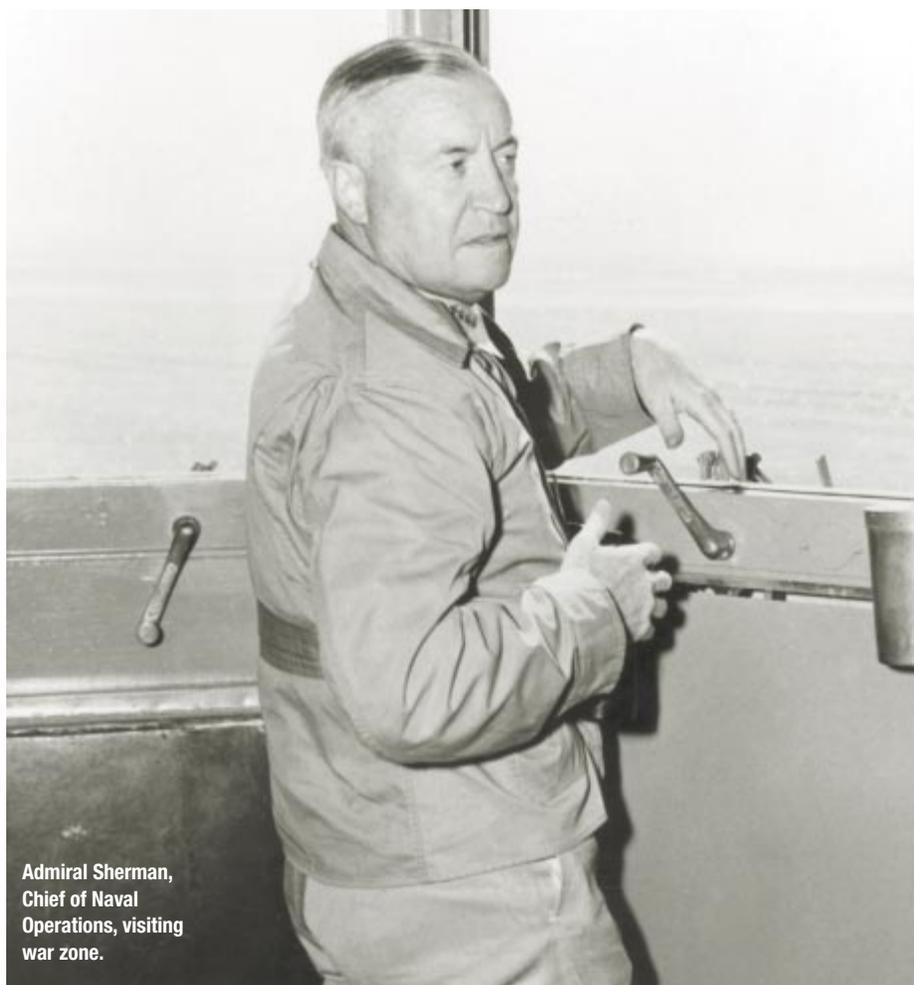
lowing the Chinese attacks in October, it had been impossible to establish patrol contact between Eighth Army and X Corps. There was almost no liaison between the fronts in November. JSPOG was clearly ignorant of such subtleties, probably because it was isolated in Tokyo. After Seoul was retaken, its personnel rarely visited the theater.

The essential misunderstanding by JSPOG of enemy strengths and weaknesses reflected its lack of firsthand familiarity with the ground on which U.N. forces were maneuvering and a nearly complete breakdown in operations-intelligence interface. There seems to have been little awareness in Tokyo that, once in motion, X Corps forward elements might find themselves on the end of a long and precarious limb if anything went wrong. As Almond later put it, "the principal problem facing me as X Corps commander, with a fighting force extended

over a 400-mile front, was how to concentrate these forces to meet a rapidly deteriorating tactical situation."⁵

But even as 1st Marine Division launched its attack west on the morning of November 27, the Eighth Army offensive was halted by strong counterattacks on its right and center. Within one day, South Korean forces collapsed on the right of Eighth Army and many penetrations elsewhere led to withdrawals by I and IX Corps. Heavy counterattacks halted an attack by 1st Marine Division, while major elements of 7th Infantry Division were isolated and under heavy pressure.

"Having done everything humanly possible," MacArthur announced that his plan for the immediate future was to pass from the offensive to the defensive with such adjustments as were dictated by a "constantly fluid situation." He concluded that the ultimate objective of the Chinese was "undoubtedly" the complete destruction of U.N. forces and that it was "quite evident" that his



Admiral Sherman,
Chief of Naval
Operations, visiting
war zone.

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present strength was insufficient to meet this “undeclared war by the Chinese with the inherent advantages which accrue thereby to them.”⁶

Flawed Command

MacArthur had an overriding belief in his mission and a willingness to call what he surely regarded as a Chinese bluff. But that flaw need not have been fatal if the command and control system had provided CINCFE some margin for rashness, accidents, or chance. The system was simply unequal to the demands. In essence, it lacked the structure and flexibility to succeed. FECOM had not been a joint headquarters when the war began, nor did it become joint until long afterwards. Its staff tended to see the conflict almost exclusively in terms of the

ground component, thus naval and air coordination was usually an afterthought. Certainly contributions by the four services were never synchronized in a single operational campaign plan, although the Inchon landing was clear evidence of the tactical merits of synchronization. This points to perhaps the most difficult task in a contingency like Korea: tailoring a joint operational staff that is functionally organized to deal with the specific problem at hand.

The lack of a joint campaign plan was also evident in the failure to prepare for the exploitation of the success of Inchon. That resulted in loss of momentum at the critical point. Because a seam was introduced in operations, the effects of friction were greatly increased. Moreover, the greatest cause of friction was the decision to continue the independence of X Corps. Failing

to ensure unity of effort by the ground component at this juncture is perplexing. Perhaps it can be attributed in part to the fact that MacArthur had not seen the ground on which the campaign would be fought. Prior to Inchon he had visited Korea only three times, and there is no indication that he conducted a personal reconnaissance north of Seoul.

If allocation of resources is the key logistic problem on the operational level, control of the logistic spigot also gives an operational commander the means to either weight the main effort or change its direction by reinforcing success. Making the commander of Eighth Army responsible for resupply of X Corps, a force not under his control, reduced MacArthur’s flexibility to exploit tactical advantages developed on either front, quite apart from seriously encumbering Eighth Army at the critical point in the campaign. The Eighth Army-X Corps predicament demonstrates a major difficulty with multiple lines of operation in a single campaign: it tends to produce competition for resources which might better be concentrated in support of one commander or the other.

The greatest operational failure for the offensive was intelligence. Operational intelligence represents the point of convergence of national and tactical intelligence collection. It collates data from both above and below, correlates it with weather and terrain, and disseminates to subordinate commanders what they need to know. Above all, operational intelligence provides estimates on enemy intentions and capabilities. By this standard, it is hard not to conclude that CINCFE was badly served by his intelligence staff. In general, the more prior strategic intelligence preparation of the battlefield is afforded to theater commanders, the more operational intelligence will have a better feel for enemy intentions than national intelligence agencies.

The Korean War was unique because it was fought on the margin of U.S. strategy, beyond the line that demarcated vital national interests. It was also fought on the periphery in the sense that resources were limited

The United Nations Goes to War

On July 7, 1950 the U.N. Security Council appointed President Harry Truman as executive agent in its fight against aggression in Korea. The text of the resolution read as follows:

*Resolution 84 of July 7, 1950. The Security Council,
Having determined that the armed attack upon the Republic of Korea by forces from North Korea constitutes a breach of the peace;*

Having recommended that Members of the United Nations furnish such assistance to the Republic of Korea as may be necessary to repel the armed attack and to restore international peace and security in the area,

1. Welcomes the prompt and vigorous support which Governments and peoples of the United Nations have given to its resolutions 82 (1950) and 83 (1950) of 25 and 27 June 1950 to assist the Republic of Korea in defending itself against armed attack and thus to restore international peace and security in the area;

2. Notes that Members of the United Nations have transmitted to the United Nations offers of assistance for the Republic of Korea;

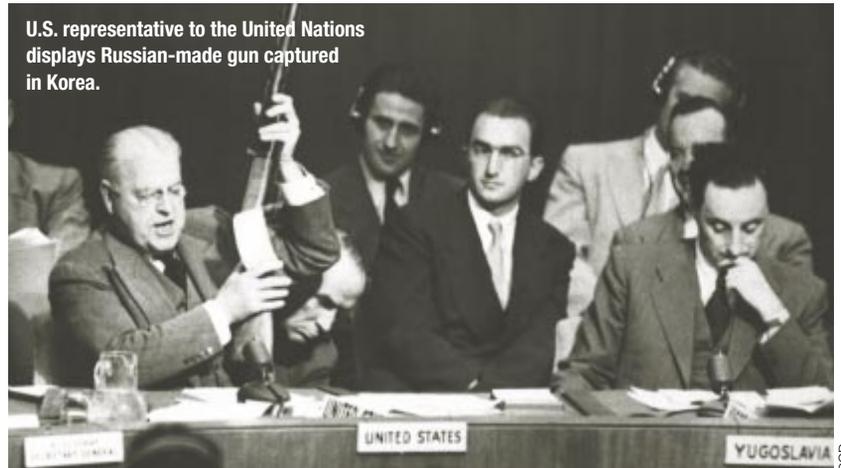
3. Recommends that all Members providing military assistance pursuant to the aforesaid Security Council resolutions make such forces and other assistance available to a unified command under the United States of America;

4. Requests the United States to designate the commander of such forces;

5. Authorizes the unified command at its discretion to use the United Nations flag in the course of operations against North Korean forces concurrently with the flags of the various nations participating;

6. Requests the United States to provide the Security Council with reports as appropriate on the course of action taken under the unified command.

On July 10, 1950, Truman appointed General Douglas MacArthur as Commander in Chief, United Nations Command, and directed him to submit biweekly reports through the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the U.N. Security Council. In December 1950 the General Assembly authorized the award of the United Nations Service Medal to honor allied troops serving in Korea.



U.S. representative to the United Nations displays Russian-made gun captured in Korea.

and borrowed from strategic assets elsewhere. Future crises may arise in the same way, where map sheets end and no sound contingency planning exists. Against that day, operational planners should consider the lessons of 1950.

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NOTES

¹ This is true in the classic meaning of operational level command. Although the definition is somewhat elastic, certain criteria can be added. Operational commanders are responsible for selecting military objectives to accomplish strategic goals assigned by the National Command Authorities. Their forces are joint and likely

combined as well. Distances involved in movement, fire, and maneuver are likely to be great. They allocate logistics within theater and serve as a focal point for integrating national and tactical intelligence. Given these criteria, no U.S. officer between MacArthur and Schwarzkopf fully qualified as an operational commander, though Generals William Westmoreland and Creighton Abrams in Vietnam came close in some respects.

² The culminating point indicates that an attacker's strength no longer significantly exceeds that of a defender's, and thus beyond it offensive operations risk over extension, counterattack, and defeat (see Department of the Army, Field Manual 100-5, *Operations*, p. 181).

³ James F. Schnabel, *U.S. Army in the Korean War, Policy and Direction: The First Year* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1972), pp. 182-84.

⁴ Matthew B. Ridgway, *The Korean War* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), p. 48.

⁵ "Recollections of Hungnam and Chosin," *Korean War Historical Commentary*, Edward M. Almond Papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute.

⁶ Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Joint Daily SITREP," no. 143, November 28, 1950.