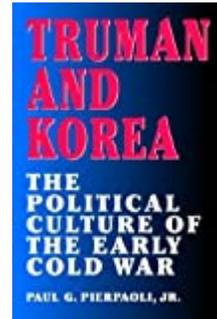




Paul G. Pierpaoli, Jr. *Truman and Korea: The Political Culture of the Early Cold War*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997. xi + 236 pp. \$32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8262-1206-1.



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A Corporatist View of the Korean War at Home

With the recent fiftieth anniversary of the start of the Korea War, numerous retrospective articles in newspapers such as the Boston Globe, USA Today, the Chicago Sun-Times and Atlanta Journal-Constitution referred to the “forgotten war,” the title of Clay Blair’s book on Korea. Even President Clinton used the term in his remarks that day. While Korea may be “forgotten” by the general public, it has hardly been neglected by scholars (even if it still suffers in comparison to World War II and Vietnam). Indeed, the trickle of information out of the archives of former communist states has sparked spirited continuing debate about the origins and meaning of the Korean War for the larger cold war policy of the United States.

Paul G. Pierpaoli, Jr.’s *Truman and Korea: The Political Culture of the Early Cold War* does not engage in that debate, however. In fact, questions of the war’s causation and significance for understanding the intentions of Stalin and the Soviets are scrupulously eschewed by Pierpaoli. Instead, his focus is on the ways in which the Korean War changed the political culture of the United States. Pierpaoli claims that his book is “the first in-depth, scholarly treatment of the Korean War mobiliza-

tion and the home front” (p. 2). Arguing that the war had both foreign *and* domestic implications, Pierpaoli focuses on the latter, in particular fears of the emergence of an American garrison state brought on by the dual mobilization for the Korean War (in the short run) and the Cold War (over the long haul). While those fears were never entirely realized, Pierpaoli concludes that United States, due to the Korean War, “mortgaged its economic and human resource potential in the name of national security” (p. 236). Pierpaoli’s tale is, in the end, a tragic one. A wealthy, powerful nation takes the path of militarization and forsakes the chance to become a modern day Athens, instead invoking “images of an American Sparta” (p. 236).

The unstated assumption that informs this conclusion is that it was all so unnecessary. While this position is certainly a defensible one, Pierpaoli does not engage the debate over whether the American response to the invasion of South Korea (and the general Soviet threat) was appropriate, though his views emerge from the text. When Pierpaoli refers to “internal civil wars – like the one in Korea,” it suggests that he sees the war

as having decidedly indigenous origins (p. 235). Korea was, without a doubt, a civil war. But it was a civil war with a difference. Kim Il Sung launched his invasion of the south only after receiving permission from Stalin. Thus from the start, this civil war had international implications. The American decision to intervene certainly added to those implications, but it did not create them. Pierpaoli concedes that to American policy makers the Soviet threat “seemed menacingly real” while also observing that it now seems “exaggerated” (p. 159). If Pierpaoli believes that the American war effort and subsequent militarization of the cold war were wasteful and unnecessary, he would be on somewhat stronger ground if he made an explicit argument explaining why he believes the American response was excessive.

Pierpaoli’s interest, however, is on the domestic impact of mobilization, and that is where our attention properly belongs. Pierpaoli’s approach follows the corporatist school of scholars such as Michael J. Hogan (with whom Pierpaoli studied at Ohio State University), and argues that the Korean War was a “multifaceted watershed” (p. 8) event: “despite the gospel of decentralization that framed the institutional and organizational dynamics of the rearmament program, one cannot escape the fact that government, in tandem with industry, the applied sciences, and academia, imposed a powerfully centralizing force on the American system ... [and] forever changed the trajectory of contemporary American history” (p. 14).

This strongly-stated thesis is somewhat qualified by Pierpaoli’s actual argument, however. To be fair, Pierpaoli does note the pressures for decentralization throughout his work, showing the author’s understanding that the story is not simply one of unrestrained centralization. He states that he sees both continuity (the traditional fear of government power) and change at work, but puts greater emphasis on the theme of change and centralization. He concludes: “By concentrating vast amounts of national resources and capital in the hands of national security managers, policy makers in fact vested the federal government with sweeping powers” (p. 14).

Pierpaoli’s detailed analysis of the policy disputes that emerged due to mobilization raises some doubts about that conclusion in this reader’s mind. For example, Pierpaoli rightly identifies the fear of the “garrison state” as a traditional concern of Americans, and notes its reemergence during mobilization for Korea. That fear acted as a check upon the ambitions of the Truman administration for greater government controls, as Pier-

paoli notes: “the Truman administration’s mobilization effort, rooted as it was in the traditions of the nation’s political economy, was a self-limiting effort.” (p. 158). Indeed, time after time, we see the Truman administration frustrated by Congressional (and sometimes internal administration) opposition to its mobilization and rearmament plans. Chapters Two and Three contain long (and sometimes necessarily tedious) discussions of administration infighting over price control policy and implementation, followed almost immediately by Congressional pressure for relaxation of those controls. Pierpaoli seems to be saying that the resulting “move toward greater decentralization” only produced a more effective corporatist means of control (p. 132). Can one create a “powerfully centralizing force” through decentralization? How “sweeping” are federal government powers that are also decentralized? Pierpaoli is certainly correct that the Korean War resulted in greater military spending and a closer business-government relationship. One could also claim, however, that his story demonstrates the effective resistance of the American political system to the kind of centralization of power that Pierpaoli seems to claim the Korean war in fact produced.

Pierpaoli performs an important service by giving us a detailed examination of the process of mobilization during the Korean War. His meticulous research in the relevant files illuminates the give-and-take process which produced both the limited mobilization for the immediate crisis and the longer-term commitment to a larger American military establishment as envisioned in NSC-68. As Pierpaoli concludes, “the massive rearmament effort and the resulting reorientation of the federal budget had begun to change the way in which American government and industry did business” (p. 186).

This conclusion is a reasonable one. However, Pierpaoli tends to want to claim somewhat greater significance for his case study than the evidence can bear. For example, he argues that the Korean War “turned American politics on its head, ushering in the first Republican era in twenty years while forging a new bipartisan consensus based upon internationalism, Soviet containment, and a moderate social welfare state” (p. 9). This is an overstatement, to say the least. Eisenhower’s election hardly represents the coming of a “Republican era.” (Strangely, Pierpaoli himself later writes that the 1952 election was “a repudiation of Truman himself” and “Eisenhower’s victory was a personal one” [p. 211].) While Ike’s coattails did bring him a GOP-controlled Congress, Democrats regained control of both houses only two years later and kept it throughout the rest of

his presidency. Also, the bipartisan internationalist consensus Pierpaoli describes largely predates the Korean War; its products were the Marshall Plan, the Truman Doctrine and NATO. If anything, the course of the Korean War threatened to _destroy that consensus by further politicizing domestic debates over foreign policy and giving McCarthyites and the Taft wing of the Republican Party new openings to attack internationalism. Lastly, it was Truman's reelection in 1948 that confirmed public support for the maintenance of the basic New Deal reforms and the welfare state they created, while the failure of Truman's Fair Deal proposals for expansion of the welfare state showed the limits of reform. The Fair Deal was a dead letter before Korea; the war merely forced the president to finally concede the point.

Pierpaoli does make an important argument: the Korean War overcame Truman's resistance to NSC-68 and thus helped institutionalize, militarize and globalize the cold war abroad, and create the national security state at home. This, however, is not an entirely new argument. (One might even say that it represents a consensus opinion. For example, James T. Patterson, in his volume of the Oxford History of the United States, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974*, includes these points in his summary of the significance of the war [pp. 235-236].) Pierpaoli admirably fills in the details of how this came to be, but also tries to take it even further, concluding that "the social ills and fiscal crisis that faced America at the end of the Cold War were in part the result of the last forty-five years of Cold War decision making" (p. 235). Can the budget deficits of the 1980s really be traced in any meaningful way to the Korean War, or were they due primarily to the supply-side economic policies of the Reagan administration?

By extending the significance of the phenomena he discusses to the present day, Pierpaoli is unfortunately victimized by how quickly things can change. Among of the "deeply troubling" consequences of decisions made in the early 1950s that he bemoans are "today's budget

deficits" (p. 10). Due to the changes wrought by Korea, a "balanced budget," he laments, "was thus no longer sacrosanct" (p. 236). In the short time since he wrote those words, those deficits have disappeared and have become huge budget surpluses. In 2000, the idea of the balanced budget has not enjoyed such bipartisan support since before the Great Depression.

To give Pierpaoli his due, the present difficulty in creating a political consensus behind using these new surpluses to address America's "many social and economic ills" testifies in part to the continuing power of the national security state, now searching for new enemies to fight. There is a much greater willingness to spend tens of billions of dollars on a dubious missile defense than to spend even a fraction of that amount to improve the lives of the people under that fanciful shield.

However, that reluctance is also due to the persistent American skepticism about the limited welfare state. As Pierpaoli rightly observes, the welfare state and national security state are connected; both sparked "[f]ears of a regimented state" (p. 3). Perhaps Pierpaoli would argue that the national security state eclipsed the welfare state because of the Korean War. Still, the latter expanded under Lyndon Johnson in the 1960s and experienced continued growth under Nixon and Ford in the 1970s. Accurately or not, many Americans concluded by the 1980s that Ronald Reagan was right and that government was the problem. Today the national security state persists with bipartisan support, while the welfare state flounders and Truman's proposal for national health insurance still remains a liberal dream. The reasons for this dichotomy are many and varied, and it will not suffice to attribute them all to decisions made in 1950 by Dean Acheson, Paul Nitze, *et al.*

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