

# 2010

## H-Diplo

### H-Diplo Roundtable Review

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### Response to H-Diplo Roundtable:

“Special Issue on the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Korean War,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 33:2 (April, 2010): 177-332.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XI-41response.pdf>

### Response by Colin Jackson, U.S. Naval War College

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I first want to thank H-Diplo for their thoughtful review of the *Journal of Strategic Studies* special issue and for the opportunity to respond. The contributors to the roundtable did the authors a great service in the review; with luck, their questions and insights will spur future research on the central questions of the conflict. In the interests of brevity, I will restrict my comments to the objections raised by Professors Millett and Matray.

*Sources: Archives and Cables*

Professor Millett raises two major issues: source materials and the operational feasibility of Van Fleet’s proposals.

I agree wholeheartedly that an accurate understanding of the debates surrounding the decisions of late May and early June 1951 depends on a careful review of primary sources. In order to capture the full breadth of the debates that raged in Washington, Tokyo, Korea, Moscow, and Beijing, I reviewed a number of sources: the FRUS records of senior civilian debates, the official records of the MacArthur hearings, Communist cable traffic, and primary documents from various archives. I have listed below a sample of the relevant documents drawn from the National Archives and the Ridgway papers that I reviewed in the preparation of the article. Taken together, these documents record the ebb and flow of the arguments over amphibious landings in the Tongchon/Wonsan area from May 1951 through March 1952.

1. Document 1: Summary, G-3 Journal (May 1951): These documents summarize the evolving 8<sup>th</sup> Army situation in the month leading up to the Ridgway/Van Fleet exchange on Tongchon.
2. Document 2: Radiogram (GK-5-5099) from Van Fleet to Ridgway (28 May 1951): This message records Van Fleet's request to mount the Tongchon operation. Ridgway's receipt of this message prompted him to fly to Korea to meet Van Fleet to debate the issue in person.
3. Document 3: Ridgway Memorandum for Record (31 May 1951): This memorandum is Ridgway's record of the 28 May 51 meeting with Van Fleet and his justification for rejecting the proposal.
4. Document 4: Ridgway Planning Directive (19 JUN 1951): This document provides evidence of the resuscitation and elaboration of the Tongchon concept of operations by Ridgway in June 1951.
5. Document 5: OPLAN Overwhelming (26 June 1951): OPLAN Overwhelming was the formal product of Ridgway's return to amphibious contingency plans modeled on the earlier Van Fleet proposal. The chief difference was the expansion in scale. Operation Overwhelming envisioned a ten division ground advance supported by a corps landing at Wonsan and Tongchon.
6. Document 6: Operational sketch Overwhelming (26 June 1951): The operational sketch reveals that the land and amphibious scheme of maneuver for Overwhelming was essentially identical to that proposed by Van Fleet on 28 May 1951. The only major changes were in the scale of forces and addition of a second landing at Wonsan.
7. Document 7: Operational sketch Operation Redskin (March 1952): The sketch demonstrates the enduring features of the Van Fleet proposal in later CINCFE contingency plans: the coordinated advance along identical routes, the use of amphibious landings at Tongchon and Wonsan, etc.

Apart from the light they cast on the contemporary debates, these documents demonstrate the gap between those records and the memoirs that followed. I argue that the mutual exhaustion narrative rests heavily on the postwar assertion by Ridgway and others that no reasonable alternative existed. If an alternative existed and Ridgway and others had turned it down, then they could be held to account for the tens of thousands of casualties suffered by U.S. forces between the end of offensive operations in 1951 and the end of the conflict in 1953.

As early as June 1951, the failure of American war termination had led Ridgway to reconsider Van Fleet's concept of operations. While Operation Overwhelming was the first of such contingency plans, a number of almost identical plans (Operation Dauntless, Wrangler (Sep 51), Operation Bear Trap (Jan 52), Operation Redskin (Mar 52)) dominated CINCFE planning in the year following the end of the war of movement. All these contingency plans bore a striking resemblance to Van Fleet's May 28, 1951 proposal. Ridgway's memoirs, by contrast, present the impression that the end of the war of movement was the product of mutual exhaustion and prudence. If Van Fleet's ideas on amphibious pursuit were so reckless in May 1951, then why did they form the backbone of subsequent CINCFE/8<sup>th</sup> Army contingency planning thereafter? My contention is that after

the war, Ridgway downplayed the feasibility of the Van Fleet proposal in order to minimize his own responsibility for the costly stalemate.

### *Timing and Feasibility*

Millett's questions surrounding the timing of the landings are important. Had Ridgway approved the landings, would Van Fleet have been able to mount the operation in time? The record of the Inchon preparations gives us one possible yardstick. On May 28, 1951, Van Fleet proposed a division minus landing for June 6, 1951. For comparison, MacArthur received formal authorization to proceed with Operation Chromite on September 9, 1950 and landed a much larger force six days later at Inchon. While it can be argued that MacArthur had begun a number of preparations in advance of formal JCS approval (e.g. early staff planning, dispatching certain slower vessels on September 5, 1951), the Inchon timeline suggests that a smaller landing (regiment plus or division minus compared to the two divisions plus at Inchon) by more experienced forces in a less challenging landing zone in the first week of June 1951 was within the realm of the possible.

The support of Van Fleet's subordinates adds weight to his assertion of operational feasibility. When Van Fleet proposed the Tongchon operation on May 28, 1951, he did so with the endorsement of two subordinate commanders with extensive experience in amphibious operations in Korea: Marine Major General Gerald Thomas (Commander, 1st Marine Division) and Lieutenant General Ned Almond (X Corps Commander).<sup>1</sup> Had Van Fleet's proposal been unsound or operationally suspect, one would have expected to see calls from one or both of these commanders for modification, delay or cancellation of the operation. Instead, we are left with a record of unanimous endorsement below the CINCFE level and strident opposition above.

### *American Policy and Strategic Choice in Korea*

The nature of Professor Matray's commentary makes a focused response more challenging. While he clearly disagrees with many of the conclusions presented in the article, his critique lacks a clear center. I will do my best to address his identifiable criticisms and clarify the core of the argument.

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<sup>1</sup> In his most recent volume, Millett asserts that it would have taken more than a week to disengage the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division for use in the Tongchon or Wonsan landings (Allan Millett, *The War for Korea, 1950-1951: They Came from the North* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010), pp. 451). I argue that the division commander, General Thomas, was the best judge of the ability to move his division, less heavy equipment, from its ongoing operations to the proposed staging areas on the east coast. Thomas endorsed the Tongchon concept in full knowledge of the logistical challenges the maneuvers entailed.

From the outset, Matray seems upset by the use of counterfactual analysis. This objection is narrow-minded and simplistic. As a number of scholars have pointed out,<sup>2</sup> counterfactual reasoning is implicit in almost any act of historical explanation. To say that some factor caused a particular outcome is to say that in its absence the outcome would have been different. Diplomatic and military history is the record of choices and outcomes; it is equally a record of choices not taken.

If we can move beyond the a priori taboo on counterfactual reasoning, two more important questions emerge: what makes a good counterfactual and does the counterfactual reasoning in the article meet such a standard? Many scholars have proposed lists of criteria. Rather than recapitulate these in detail, I would propose a modified version of Tetlock's list.<sup>3</sup> Any good counterfactual should address a clearly identifiable decision, involve minimal rewrite of the historical record, and have substantial consequences.

I argue that the Tongchon decision meets this standard. First, the decisions in question were openly debated and there were clearly discernable alternatives to Ridgway's choices in May and June 1951. Second, the consequences of the decision were substantial. American decisions to suspend offensive military operations and pursue armistice negotiations at or around the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel did not produce the desired, speedy end to the war. Instead they produced stalemate. The human cost of the second half of the Korean war was immense. Some 40% of the US casualties were suffered after the end of the war of movement in the summer of 1951;<sup>4</sup> this does not include the countless Korean military and civilian losses incurred during the final phase of the war. Given the appalling costs of the decisions taken in May and June 1951, it seems reasonable to assert that there was room for improvement in US strategy.

My article revolves around three questions. Was the Tongchon operation operationally feasible? If so, would it have been strategically wise to pursue the option? What explains

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<sup>2</sup> Philip E. Tetlock, Aaron Belkin (eds.), *Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics: Logical, Methodological and Psychological Perspectives* (Princeton University Press, 1996); Alexander George, Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (MIT Press, 2005); James Fearon, "Counterfactuals and Hypothesis Testing in Political Science," *World Politics*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (January 1991); Richard Ned Lebow "What's so different about a counterfactual?" *World Politics*, Vol. 52, (July 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., Tetlock, pp. 16-18.

<sup>4</sup> The data were drawn from the Mossman's official history (*Ebb and Flow, November 1950-July 1951*, pp. 502-504) and the Anne Leland's, "American War and Military Operations Casualties: Lists and Statistics" (Congressional Research Service, Feb 26, 2010), pp. 10. Using the same sources, we find that 39% of all US Army deaths occurred after July 1951.

Ridgway's decision to reject the proposal in late May 1951? I dealt with each of these at some length in the original article; I will limit my comments here to the last two questions.

As Matray concedes, the wisdom of Ridgway's choice depends on the costs, benefits and risks of Van Fleet's proposal. The potential benefits included a shortened and more defensible line – a very important issue in the protracted siege conditions that prevailed after 1951 – and potential leverage at the bargaining table. That a shortened line would have exposed fewer UNC units to combat losses is straightforward. The direct costs of the Tongchon operation would have to be measured in casualties. In forming any estimate of such losses, we must bear in mind the state of Chinese forces in the in the first week of June. All things being equal, pursuit operations, particularly those involving something other than frontal attack, result in far fewer casualties than similar assaults against prepared positions and rested opponents. While it is true that Ridgway and the JCS were sensitive to the threat of additional US casualties, their reluctance was based in large part on the assumption that the end of the war was near. The likely incremental cost of a successful or unsuccessful Tongchon operation appears small in comparison with the cumulative losses sustained in the stalemate that followed.

The real risks of Tongchon centered on threats of enemy escalation and protraction. Would continued US pursuit have prompted escalation by the Chinese or Russians? Would successful UNC pursuit north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel have lengthened the war?

An answer to the first question depends on the risk appetite and capability of each member of the Communist coalition. The North Korean leadership stood to lose the most in a UNC advance north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel; it is equally clear that, by 1951, they lacked the military capability to do much about it. As Shu Guang Zhang has so effectively recounted,<sup>5</sup> Mao was highly risk acceptant throughout the first half of the war; in most instances, Mao sought to push his commander Peng Dehuai to maintain aggressive, offensive pressure. Here again, the binding constraint was capability rather than desire. Over the short run, the ability of the Chinese to mount major counterattacks was, by their own admission, very limited. This is a point of fundamental disagreement between Professor Millett and myself. Millett, relying on American intelligence estimates of the time, argues that the Chinese were prepared to respond to American amphibious operations in late May and early June. Mao's private correspondence tells a different story. In his June 14, 1951, private cable to Kim Il Sung and Gao Gang, Mao, the quintessential gambler, ruled out the possibility of offensive operations before August 1951. He went on to note that the resumption of offensive operations in August would be feasible only if UNC amphibious operations were not launched first.

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<sup>5</sup> Shu Guang Zhang's, *Mao's Military Romanticism: China and the Korean War, 1950-1953* (Lawrence:

University of Kansas, 1995).

While the PRC could, over the long run, draw on their manpower reserves,<sup>6</sup> the spring 1951 offensives had revealed the ability of UNC forces to stop Chinese offensives and inflict enormous casualties and equipment losses in the process. In light of the UNC's pronounced artillery and aviation advantages, it is hard to see what a new Chinese offensive would have accomplished in the summer or fall of 1951. It is telling that Mao, the military romantic, never again ordered large offensive operations after May 1951.

Stalin, by contrast, possessed the capacity to escalate but showed no inclination to do so. Recent scholarship suggests that Stalin was comfortable with protraction in Korea and disinclined to risk general war over midwar developments in Korea. On balance, it appears farfetched to imagine dramatic escalation by Stalin in Korea based on a UNC advance to the 39<sup>th</sup> parallel. At the same time, Stalin appeared content to prolong the war so long as the price was paid in Chinese blood.

My opinion on the balance of risks is straightforward. The historical outcome of operational restraint in May and June 1951 was abysmal; as Kissinger noted later, it was proof positive that the reciprocity norm seldom holds in relations between combatant powers. US restraint was met with Chinese and Soviet intransigence; having forfeited the opportunity to secure objects of value to the Communists, the US found itself without any meaningful leverage at the bargaining table. Stalemate benefited Stalin alone.

The Tongchon operation offered a reasonable chance of an outcome superior to the historical stalemate. There were four possible outcomes of a decision to pursue the Tongchon option: counter-escalation by the Communists, stalemate at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, stalemate at the 39<sup>th</sup> parallel, or an exchange of land for rapid war termination. I have argued that the Chinese lacked the means and the Soviets the inclination for significant escalation in late 1951. Stalemate at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel is the historical baseline. Protraction at lower cost at the 39<sup>th</sup> parallel is clearly preferable to stalemate at the 38<sup>th</sup>. And the capture of territory north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel would have given American negotiators a plausible bargaining chip at the armistice talks. Admiral Joy and other participants emerged from the talks convinced that lack of such leverage explained the failure to conclude the war in 1951.<sup>7</sup> A bargaining chip was not a guarantee of a quicker and less costly end to the war; still, the possession of some positive leverage would have been preferable to reliance on the good will of the Communist coalition.

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<sup>6</sup> Professor Millett argues that the residual capability of the CPVF-KPA was substantial, perhaps amounting to as many as ten additional Chinese divisions (*The War for Korea*, pp. 450). Mao's cable throws this assumption into question, suggesting that the Chinese reserves ready for action in June were in fact quite limited.

<sup>7</sup> Admiral C. Turner Joy, *Negotiating While Fighting: The Diary of Admiral C. Turner Joy at the Korean Armistice Conference* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1978).

The last question is why Ridgway rejected the Van Fleet proposal. In the article, I argue that the MacArthur hearings locked the JCS and the Truman administration into reflexive opposition to escalation in any form. Had Ridgway endorsed the Van Fleet plan, it would have required the Administration and the JCS to explain why MacArthur's proposals for escalation were bad but more limited escalation in the form of amphibious landings north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel might be prudent. This was, in my opinion, a tragedy of conflation; Ridgway balked at explaining the distinctions between Van Fleet's proposal and MacArthur's calls for a wider war. The MacArthur firestorm made anything that resembled escalation a very hard sell to an embattled JCS and Administration.

I do think that this particular controversy over restraint and intrawar escalation has broader relevance. It is true that excessive ambition can lead states engaged in limited wars to pass what Clausewitz called "the culminating point of victory," the point at which further pursuit jeopardizes the political objectives of the war. Korea is generally presented as an illustration of the dangers of inadvertent escalation<sup>8</sup> with the race to the Yalu as the centerpiece. By extension, Ridgway's restraint in May and June 1951 is cast as an example of strategic prudence. What the lost chance at Tongchon suggests is that the potential for strategic failure in limited war is symmetric; one can fail by overreaching or by not going far enough to secure the desired political objective. I argue that the race to the Yalu is an example of inadvertent escalation and Tongchon inadvertent de-escalation. The conduct of limited war would be far simpler if the only affliction were victory disease. It is not.

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<sup>8</sup> Here I borrow a phrase from Barry Posen's work on Cold War nuclear dynamics (*Inadvertent Escalation* (Cornell University Press, 1991)).

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