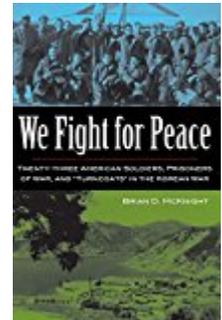


Brian D. McKnight. *We Fight for Peace: Twenty-three American Soldiers, Prisoners of War, and "Turncoats" in the Korean War.* Kent: Kent State University Press, 2014. 344 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-60635-207-6.



Reviewed by Paul Springer

Published on H-War (May, 2016)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Brian D. McKnight is an associate professor at the University of Virginia's College at Wise. His previous books have examined lesser-known aspects of the American Civil War, but in his most recent foray, he has decided to tackle a twentieth-century topic. I find it refreshing when historians move into different chronological periods over their career, although it may be a bias emerging from his own habit of the same behavior. That said, the danger of such a shift is that the newcomer may not be familiar with the literature and context of the new subject, and may make errors that an established expert would avoid. In the current case, McKnight quickly demonstrates that he has mastered the materials available for this narrow topic, and thus, he is well prepared to reacquaint the American public with one of the least-remembered aspects of the so-called Forgotten War. McKnight offers an analysis of twenty-three American prisoners of war (POWs) who chose to remain with their captors at the end of the conflict, rejecting repatriation to the United States. Each had his own reasons for such a mo-

mentous decision, and in fact, nearly all of the men who chose to stay eventually opted to leave China, their new home, and return to the United States. Their reception depended largely on their timing—those who returned quickly found an American public in the throes of a Red Scare that was none too forgiving of soldiers who renounced their allegiance to the nation. However, as time passed, so did the drive to punish these men, and most of them were eventually able to resume their lives in the United States as something of an oddity but not necessarily an object of vitriol and scorn.

McKnight begins his study with an overview and background account of the twenty-three POWs. There is no discernible order to the presentation, but there is no compelling reason for why one might be required, other than allowing the reader a bit of an advantage in keeping the stories straight. After establishing their identities, McKnight then examines their military service records, although he is only able to present detailed information about half of his subjects.

While pinning down details of the missing individuals might have been impossible, it is likely that the circumstances of each capture might have been determined from the available unit records. Unfortunately, McKnight appears to have bypassed the records of the Eighth US Army in Korea, held by the National Archives, even though he cites other materials from the same facility. Those records contain a wealth of information regarding the POW camps established by the North Koreans and Chinese, and might have filled in many of the gaps in this chapter.

McKnight hits his stride when discussing the captivity conditions in North Korea and how they might have contributed to the decisions of these men to defect. He skillfully interweaves a general examination of the camps with specific details provided by many of his subjects. In addition to showing the terrible conditions, he also illustrates the gradual rise in collaboration by the mass of POWs in enemy hands. These collaboration activities provoked a substantial amount of conflict within the camps, with the Chinese heavily favoring the “Progressives” and heaping additional abuse on the “Reactionaries.” It seems that most, if not all, of the twenty-three deserters deliberately turned on their comrades and engaged in severe acts of self-service to the detriment of their fellow prisoners. For their part, the Chinese captors carefully selected and recruited POWs who they thought might agree to refuse repatriation, supplying a potential propaganda victory for the Communists.

Two prisoners, Edward Dickenson and Claude Batchelor, initially refused repatriation, but then changed their minds during the window of time set aside for such switches. The US Army sought to use both as a means to influence the other non-returnees, promising that neither would be punished for their initial decision to renounce their citizenship and move to China. While that promise was technically upheld, both were prosecuted for their crimes committed while POWs, as soon

as the chances of getting more Americans to agree to repatriation had evaporated. In these cases, McKnight passionately argues, while the army might have been telling the legal truth, it was deliberately obfuscating the issue and had planned to prosecute any of the soldiers to the maximum extent possible. McKnight suggests that the army should have treated Dickenson and Batchelor in good faith, and might have done so, were it not for the ongoing political fight with Joseph McCarthy over the possibility of Communist sympathizers within army ranks. Due to this political situation, though, the two men were railroaded through sham trials with dubious evidence and essentially turned into scapegoats to prove that the army would not coddle Communists.

The Army dishonorably discharged the twenty-three non-returnees, a decision that came back to haunt army leaders determined to punish the men if at all possible. Because they had been discharged, when they began to return, they were no longer subject to military justice and hence could not be held responsible for any acts committed while a POW. Ironically, by seeking to impose the only punishment available while the men were in China, the army denied itself the chance for a stronger form of vengeance. Life in China proved to be much more difficult than expected for most of the former POWs, leading most to decide, for intensely personal reasons, to return to the United States. McKnight winds down his narrative by examining the departures of each surviving non-returnee and the life of most of them upon their return. Some essentially fled into anonymity, and beyond the reach of McKnight’s historical skills, while others remained somewhat in the public eye, with a few publishing articles and books detailing their decisions to remain and their life in Communist China.

In the conclusion, McKnight makes some comparisons, with rather unsuccessful results, between the lives of the twenty-three defectors and other oppressed populations throughout history.

In particular, he reasons that the men held in the North Korean POW camps might be compared to chattel slaves, and hence, their desire to please their captors might have resulted in a handful of men making the decision to remain when the vast majority returned to the West at the first opportunity. The comparison is spurious, at best, and really mars a work that until the final chapter has an excellent discussion. The final paragraphs present an unfounded and fairly bizarre explanation of the Stockholm Syndrome as another potential explanation, despite the fact that the Stockholm Syndrome has really only been applied to long-term hostage situations without a support network such as the one possessed by military captives. When coupled with a completely inappropriate comparison to the individual cases of Jaycee Dugard and Elizabeth Smart (two young girls kidnapped and held for very long periods who eventually seemed to identify with their captors), the final chapter makes a terrible conclusion to an otherwise fine work.

McKnight's work does a solid job of pulling together all of the stories of the defectors and reminds us that the captivity conditions in Korea presented a terrible situation for the men held in the POW camps. Those camps had a higher mortality rate than any other military captivity situation in American history, including the horrors of Andersonville. McKnight does an admirable job of placing a very strange tale into its historical context. This work is highly recommended for scholars of the Korean War, the Cold War, and American society in the mid-twentieth century. All should find some utility in the work.

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Citation: Paul Springer. Review of McKnight, Brian D. *We Fight for Peace: Twenty-three American Soldiers, Prisoners of War, and "Turncoats" in the Korean War*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. May, 2016.

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