



**Samuel F. Wells Jr.** *Fearing the Worst: How Korea Transformed the Cold War*. Woodrow Wilson Center Series. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. Illustrations, tables. 600 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-54994-3.

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June 25, 2020, marked the seventieth anniversary of the start of the Korean War. Previous scholars have argued that the conflict was a watershed in the Cold War because it militarized the clash between the United States and the Soviet Union. Samuel F. Wells Jr. relies on extensive research in archival materials, memoirs, and recently accessible documents in China, Russia, and North Korea to explain this transformation. In response to the Korean War, “the United States,” he contends in his main thesis, “reluctantly funded massive increases in nuclear weapons, strategic bombers, and nuclear submarines because the leaders of the Truman administration concluded that [Soviet premier Joseph] Stalin was prepared to start World War III to advance his interests in Asia and Europe” (p. 2). They were not aware that Stalin wanted to avoid war and reluctantly supported North Korean leader Kim Il Sung’s plan to invade South Korea. Nevertheless, he provided huge amounts of arms, ammunition, and military supplies to North Korea and to China after it intervened in the conflict. More important, the Soviet Union had been developing nuclear weapons and long-range bombers since 1943, and, Wells argues, this program matched the worse case threat to US national security that the Truman administration believed existed after the start of the Korean War. Indeed, the author boldly

concludes that “the threat posed by the North Korean attack and the Chinese intervention, both fully supported by the Soviet Union, was *the worst case*” (p. 3).

Wells divides his study into two parts, beginning with “The War,” which consists of ten chapters and consumes roughly half of the book. Oddly, he starts with a description of Stalin’s ruthless and brutal style of decision-making. His suspiciousness in combination with his declining mental and physical health meant that, after 1948, he often “lacked the information and analysis necessary for making sound decisions” (pp. 16-17). As examples, Wells discusses Stalin’s split with Josip Broz Tito and the Berlin Blockade, before turning to his negotiations with Mao Zedong in Moscow beginning late in 1949, which led to the signing of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance. He summarizes Shen Zihua’s explanation for Stalin dropping his demands for economic concessions in Manchuria because he now saw Kim’s invasion plan as “a way to gain his goal of warm-water ports in East Asia, have a dependent ally in control of the Korean Peninsula, and build a bulwark against future influence of a revived Japan on the Asian mainland” (p. 24). Before covering Stalin’s discussions with Kim about the attack, Wells, in chapter 2, discusses events in Korea after its divi-

sion in August 1945. Instability in South Korea accelerated after US occupation leaders rejected an existing leftist government and supported conservatives, while allowing police repression of dissenters. Wells then describes the actions of two Soviet officials, Colonel-General Terrentii F. Stykov and Colonel Alexandre M. Ignatiev, in helping Kim become the supreme leader of North Korea because of “his war experience, ambition, and malleability” (p. 35).

Chapter 3 identifies the problems that President Harry S. Truman had after World War II in trying to reduce defense spending, while preserving national security. It also covers the familiar ground of his struggles to deal with Republican criticism for his alleged loss of China to Communism. Wells discusses such events as the Potsdam Conference before covering Truman’s adoption of the containment policy and its application in Western Europe. Regarding East Asia, although most scholars agree that there was no chance to drive a wedge between Moscow and Beijing, he optimistically asserts that “fear of more intense congressional attacks and a fundamental opposition to communist ideology prevented the administration from any serious pursuit of this promising policy option” (pp. 53-54). Truman and his advisors instead focused on strengthening Japan. “A strong factor behind Truman’s decisions to limit commitments to the Chinese Nationalists and South Korea,” Wells contends, “was a sharp downturn in the economy in the spring of 1949” (p. 56). Truman did not think the Soviets would initiate war because of US military strength, industrial superiority, and possession of the atomic bomb. McCarthyism presented a bigger challenge, as Wells explains in chapter 4, because it intensified “a firestorm of charges that the administration was soft on communism [that] threatened its ability to implement any of its policies” (p. 61). The Truman administration’s complacency, he argues, allowed false and baseless charges to create an atmosphere of national hysteria.

Disagreement late in 1949 over whether the United States should develop a hydrogen bomb led to Truman instructing the National Security Council (NSC) to provide a recommendation on the matter. He approved its proposal to proceed with building the weapon in conjunction with preparing a review of US strategic programs. Chapter 5 examines how the director of the Policy Planning Staff, Paul Nitze, drafted NSC Paper 68. After describing George F. Kennan’s failed effort to moderate the document, Wells provides a detailed summary of its contents. In its rhetoric, he concludes, “lie the seeds of justification for many subsequent actions against the global communist movement” (p. 99). NSC 68 reiterated prior objectives but was “more hostile and more urgent,” as well as “amazingly incomplete and amateurish” (pp. 106, 107). Truman did not approve it because of his commitment to budget reduction. Wells joins other scholars in arguing that there would have been no great increase in US defense spending if North Korea had not attacked South Korea, which receives coverage in chapter 6. Although Kim was “the driving force” behind the invasion, “Stalin was the enabler and ultimate decisionmaker who shrewdly manipulated Mao into pledging to provide emergency rescue services” (p. 108). After describing the formation and strengths of the North Korean army, Wells emphasizes Soviet primacy in formulating the invasion plan. South Korea could not stop the advance due to inept leaders, but no internal uprising occurred to help the invaders.

Chapter 7 covers familiar ground in presenting the conventional interpretation of the Truman administration’s initial response to the start of the Korean War. US officials were certain the Soviet Union had ordered the attack and Truman was determined to defend South Korea. In assessing the deliberations at the Blair House meetings, Wells minimizes any evidence of hesitation and emphasizes the certainty of a full US military commitment to defeat the Communist invaders. A summary of well-known events follows, to include US actions at the United Nations, General Douglas

MacArthur's request to commit ground troops, Task Force Smith, the steady retreat of US forces, and stabilization of battle lines at the Pusan Perimeter. Wells considers it close to inevitable that Truman would intervene in Korea "to protect the nation and his presidency" but criticizes him for failing to secure congressional approval that he was certain to receive because of strong public support (p. 141). Indeed, chapter 8 begins with references to how some Republicans asked the president almost immediately why he had not consulted Congress. But Congress did approve supplemental appropriations requests reflecting Truman's decision to implement NSC 68. The president's other problem was MacArthur, who visited Taiwan in late July and criticized US policy regarding the island in his letter to the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Wells profiles MacArthur before describing the Inchon Landing, liberation of Seoul, and preparations for crossing the 38th parallel and reunifying Korea.

Chapter 9 starts with a description of Mao's initial policies to build a new China with sweeping social, economic, and political reforms. Although he was aware of North Korea's plan to attack, Kim withheld specifics, providing the basis for subsequent tensions. Wells provides a profile of Mao and a summary of his victory in the Chinese Civil War before relying on the most recent scholarship to trace Beijing's decision to intervene in Korea. Mao dominated what was a tortuous process in which he hesitated because of opposition from his colleagues who feared that war with the United States would devastate the People's Republic of China (PRC), as well as Stalin's refusal to provide air support. Wells contends that "Mao had no acceptable choice but to intervene in order to obtain the arms and supplies he needed, to prove to Moscow that he was a loyal ally, and to protect China's security interests against its principal enemy, the United States" (p. 197). At first, the Chinese volunteers, as chapter 10 describes, experienced complete success in pushing US forces south of the 38th parallel, despite disputes with North Korea "over

unity of command, strategy and tactics, allocation of supplies, control of the railroads, and treatment of deserters and captured prisoners" (p. 200). Wells provides a profile of Marshal Peng De-huai, commander of the Chinese People's Volunteers, just one-third the length of that for General Matthew B. Ridgway, commander of the US Eighth Army and then United Nations Command (UNC) forces, explaining how the latter revived the spirit of his troops for a counteroffensive pushing the Chinese back into North Korea. He concludes with an assessment of how China, the United States, and the Soviet Union all made gains from the war at the expense of both Koreas.

Part 2, titled "The Transformation," contains seven chapters that explain how the Korean War was responsible for igniting "a huge escalation of the strategic arms competition between the United States and the Soviet Union" (p. 234). Chapter 11 describes how Secretary of Defense George C. Marshall and his subordinate and then successor Robert A. Lovett guided the US military buildup during the Korean War. The two "already had an unusually close working relationship," having interacted regularly in the War Department during World War II (p. 238). When Marshall was secretary of state from 1947 to 1949, Lovett served as his undersecretary. After profiling the two men, Wells discusses British prime minister Clement Attlee's visit to Washington in December 1950 and the Truman administration's decision to seek a negotiated settlement to the war. He then traces Marshall and Lovett's role in gaining congressional approval for three defense budget supplements for fiscal year 1951 and 60.4 billion dollars for fiscal year 1952, "the largest military budget approved since 1945" (p. 261). Contrasting with this success, Secretary of State Dean G. Acheson labored to strengthen the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), rearm West Germany, and promote West European integration, which receives coverage in chapter 12. Wells also summarizes the "Great Debate" over deploying more US troops in West Europe. "Acheson," he concludes, "played the leading

role in building a strong, prosperous, and united Western Europe that frustrated any Soviet effort to divide and dominate the whole continent” (p. 303).

Chapters 13 and 14 explain how Soviet aeronautical engineer Andrei Tupolev and US Air Force lieutenant general Curtis LeMay played the central role in the origins and development of the strategic air power programs respectively of the Soviet Union and the United States. During World War II, US rejection of requests for B-29s motivated Stalin’s decision to build his own strategic bombers. He selected Tupolev as chief designer because he “had an enviable international reputation in the rapidly developing field of aeronautical design and engineering” for reasons that Wells describes in detail (p. 305). Tupolev reverse-engineered US B-29s that Stalin refused to return after their wartime landings in Siberia to design a Soviet strategic bomber. But he did not perfect his jet-powered Tu-95 that could deliver atomic bombs on the United States until 1957, accomplishing this feat “under constant police supervision and suspicion and with inferior technology in electronics, computers, and metallurgy” (p. 326). By that time, the United States possessed a far superior atomic strike force because of the leadership of LeMay.

The Strategic Air Command (SAC) after its creation in 1946 had suffered from misplaced priorities and unpreparedness for combat until LeMay became its commander in October 1948. Wells explains why he emerged from World War II as an air force hero before focusing his postwar attention on putting “the United States at the forefront of aviation and space technology” (p. 349). He improved training and discipline at SAC, making it “the most powerful and best-prepared deterrent force in the world” (p. 365).

Wells introduces Igor Kurchatov in chapter 15, explaining how the physicist was the key figure in the development of Soviet nuclear weapons. The Soviets “had created the world’s best espionage service” before World War II and “learned quickly of each step taken in British and American [nucle-

ar] research” (p. 375). In March 1943, Kurchatov became the director of a new Soviet program to develop nuclear energy. A year later, he audaciously wrote Stalin directly, emphasizing his desperate need for critical raw materials, machinery, and scientists. The US atomic attack on Hiroshima gave Stalin the incentive to comply. With intensive post-war mining of uranium in Eastern Europe, serious work began on building a reactor in early 1946. Technical and safety problems delayed progress until August 1949 when Kurchatov’s team successfully tested the first Soviet nuclear device, but at a huge financial cost and with the loss of many lives to radiation and damage to the environment. This event shocked US leaders and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) did not expect it. Until the Korean War, the CIA lacked a clear mission and strong leadership. Walter Bedell Smith, the subject of chapter 16, reluctantly submitted to Truman’s pressure on him to become CIA director in July 1950 and then acted vigorously to centralize management, improve the quality of personnel, and promote collaboration and efficiency. While he succeeded in persuading MacArthur to cooperate with CIA agents, efforts to penetrate Korea and China with hastily recruited agents failed miserably.

Clear and engaging prose is a strength of this study. Wells deserves special praise not only for his extensive research in primary documents but also for his consultation of a long list of secondary works. In addition to a good map of Korea, there is a table charting increases in US defense spending and military manpower in each service from 1950 to 1953, another listing the number of personnel and bases in SAC, and five more displaying annual totals of various SAC aircraft from 1946 to 1954. Scattered throughout the text are nineteen photographs, mostly of Truman with top advisors, but also of Mao and Stalin in Moscow, US soldiers in combat, MacArthur at Inchon, Smith in South Korea, Kim (twice), Senator Joseph McCarthy, Peng, Ridgway, Tupolev, LeMay, and Kurchatov. A chronology identifies significant events beginning with British initiation of nuclear weapons research

in September 1941 to the Soviet Tu-95 strategic bomber's entry into service in September 1957. Dominating the narrative are personal profiles of both US and Soviet leaders, but some are excessive in length, notably the one on Smith. Wells includes much detail that is unnecessary, for example, telling readers about the musical talent of Tupolev's wife and that LeMay "greatly desired" the birth of his daughter (p. 339). Disregard for chronological sequence often causes confusion, such as coverage of NSC 8/2 before a description of NSC 8, which initially defined prewar US policy in Korea. Repetition of information also is not uncommon. For example, Wells notes twice how, at Inchon, MacArthur was the first unified commander to accompany a US assault force into battle.

Coverage of the reasons for the division of Korea at the 38th parallel is virtually nonexistent in this study. Wells states erroneously on both points that the United States and the Soviet Union "created a version of trusteeship in early 1946 as the Joint Commission, but this body was doomed from the start because neither power would accept the operating conditions for Korean institutions that the other proposed" (p. 28). He also claims falsely that "South Korea informally became part of the Marshall Plan assistance program" (p. 29). Moreover, there is an assortment of additional factual errors. Japan surrendered in August, not September, 1945. The United States exploded the first atomic bomb not at Alamogordo, New Mexico, but one hundred miles northwest of that city. Wells identifies Prime Minister Winston Churchill alone as representing Britain at the Potsdam Conference, ignoring Attlee, his replacement. Tito, not the Soviet Union, was threatening the internal stability of Greece in 1946. The Communists staged the coup in Czechoslovakia in February, not March, 1948. The Berlin Blockade began not in early May but in late June 1948. It was in the spring and summer of 1949, not during early 1950, that "skirmishes increased in frequency and intensity between the two Koreas" (p. 277). Since the armistice in July 1953, the demilitarized zone in Korea has not been

at the 38th parallel. Wells also misspells "Gallop poll" and Charles A. "Lindberg" (pp. 48, 330).

Wells advances some interpretive arguments that are unpersuasive. For example, he reports that Truman traveled to Potsdam "with a desire to continue cooperation with the Soviet Union," but this attitude would evaporate after Japan's surrender (p. 46). This certainly was not true of Korea, as he purposely refused to discuss a previously agreed on plan for a postwar trusteeship for the country. "Yet we now know," Wells writes, "that Chinese leaders were deeply troubled by [US movement of the Seventh Fleet into the Taiwan Strait and aid to Chiang Kai-shek's government], which they saw as Washington again siding with the Nationalists in the civil war" (p. 164). In fact, Beijing publicly condemned these actions at the time. Wells relies on a presidential press statement of July 13, 1950, alone to prove that Truman "wanted to delay any policy decision [to cross the 38th parallel] until [he] saw a successful US counteroffensive at Inchon and had a better sense of Soviet and Chinese intentions" (p. 163). Most important, Wells does not establish consistently the relationship between the Korean War and specific events he describes that transformed the Cold War. An exception is the LeMay chapter, where he explains the expanded role of air power in the war and deployment to Okinawa and placement under SAC control of nuclear bombs. Similarly, in the Smith chapter, Wells shows how the Korean War forced decisions that improved the organization and effectiveness of US intelligence agencies. By contrast, the word "Korea" appears just once in the Tupolev chapter and the conflict receives only slightly more coverage in the Kurchatov chapter.

Wells rarely presents proof for his main thesis that the Korean War justified US leaders fearing the worst. An exception is when he twice relates Truman's reaction after reading a CIA report of Chinese prime minister Zhou En-lai's remark to the East German ambassador that the PRC was preparing for a third world war. "It looks like World War

III is here,” he declared (pp. 205, 488). Wells in fact presents evidence that contradicts his main thesis. In January 1952, Truman proposed 48.6 billion dollars in defense spending for fiscal year 1953 and Congress approved 47 billion dollars (p. 267). Significantly, this action resulted in a decrease from the prior year of more than 13 billion dollars in the US defense budget, indicating that neither the Truman administration nor Congress were fearing the worst. “The combination of budget pressure and frustration with the land war in Korea,” he observes, “had persuaded Congress and the reluctant administration to resume a fundamental shift in US strategy—begun in 1949 and delayed during the war in Korea—toward a clear priority for air power focused on the delivery of strategic nuclear weapons” (p. 268). Wells does not explain why the Korean War failed to persuade US leaders to maintain or raise levels of defense spending after the first eighteen months of the conflict. Inexplicably, like many early histories of the Korean War, Wells devotes less than four pages to examining the last two years of the conflict.

*Fearing the Worst*'s final chapter is its conclusion. There, Wells repeats information and arguments that he has presented in this study. However, he also advances a few new surprising contentions. For example, he states that because US leaders “had no hint of Mao’s personal decision in July 1950 to intervene in Korea,... the Truman administration was justified in directing MacArthur to cross the 38th Parallel and try to crush the disorganized North Korean Army” (p. 487). Truman fired MacArthur, Wells claims, because his “appeal for Republican support in Congress was the final straw,” even though the president later said that he decided to remove him after the general issued a public demand for the enemy’s surrender that torpedoed a planned peace initiative (p. 480). According to the author, “the immense resources Stalin invested in his programs for nuclear weapons and long-range bombers and the difficulties the Truman administration had in winning congressional support for necessary funding” made it “necessary

for the administration to argue that the Korean conflict could develop into a global war if the United States did not make a strong stand for strategic superiority” (p. 488). Wells, in his second to last sentence, argues that Korea thus initiated a military buildup that gave President John F. Kennedy the “instruments ... to force the Soviets to back down and remove their nuclear weapons and missiles from Cuba” (p. 489). Of course, Kennedy’s tradeoff of agreeing to remove US missiles from Turkey exposes this argument as interpretive hyperbole.

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