

U.S. Reviews Korean War Misjudgment

By Jack Anderson

Scarcely 17 years ago, Gen. Douglas MacArthur began his confident thrust into North Korea. The story of what happened as his troops pushed toward the Chinese border is available in secret documents which no longer involve any military security.



The Supreme Commander didn't think the Chinese would enter the war. Although his intelligence had detected a Chinese troop build-up in Manchuria, he assured the Joint Chiefs this was "not an immediate index of warlike intentions."

Less assured, the Joint Chiefs flashed their concern to MacArthur by telecon across the Pacific. Their message, No. TT-3848, dated Oct. 4, 1950, warned: "The potential exists for Chinese Communist forces to openly intervene in the Korean war if U.N. forces cross the 38th parallel."

But MacArthur, hard on the scent of victory, was driving northward. By Oct. 7 he was in North Korea. By the month's end his forces were fanned out across the top of North Korea, approaching the Yalu. He was mopping up the last pockets of resistance when the

Chinese suddenly thundered down upon Korea.

MacArthur at first refused to believe what was happening. Four days after the Eighth Army's northward push had been brought to a jolting halt, he advised the Joint Chiefs in message No. C-6825, dated Nov. 3, 1950, against "hasty conclusions which might be premature."

But he became convinced as the Chinese drove a wedge between his Eighth Army and Tenth Corps, forcing retreats. On Dec. 7, anniversary of Pearl Harbor Day, a desperate MacArthur drew up plans for evacuating Korea. The plans were approved by the Joint Chiefs two days later, but never had to be carried out.

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Today, as the air war against North Vietnam moves ever closer to the Chinese border, a few cautious generals are reviewing their military history.

The situation, of course, is not the same. Red China is not now menaced by American troops. The Russians, who backed the Chinese play in Korea, are now engaged in actual border clashes with their erstwhile allies. And the aging Red Chinese emperor, Mao Tse-tung, is unable to control the strife within his own borders.

Yet, Chinese troops and planes are poised across the border for a move into North

Vietnam. Like MacArthur 17 ago, Gen. William Westmoreland, the American commander in Vietnam, does not believe they will intervene. The Joint Chiefs tend to agree with him. But some generals have not forgotten that the Chinese, if sufficiently agitated, will fight.

President Johnson is also under pressure, as was President Truman 17 years ago, to end the war quickly with a nuclear knockout.

In Korea the Eighth Army urged the use of atomic weapons to halt the Chinese advance, and the Fifth Air Force drew up targets for a nuclear strike. But military surveys produced no troop concentrations or supply depots large enough to justify nuclear weapons. The mountains and forests simply afforded too much natural camouflage.

The Army's brain trust, the Operations Research Office, conducted a study in early 1951 on the destructibility of atomic weapons in Korea. The conclusion was that atomic weapons might have taken a heavy toll of Chinese troops if the reaction could have been swifter. But every troop concentration that was located disappeared before bombers could have attacked.

There are even fewer nuclear opportunities in Vietnam, where the enemy troops are better camouflaged and dispersed. The strategic targets can also be knocked out

more efficiently with conventional bombs.

Meanwhile, our generals with all too typical hindsight, prepared for a Korea-style war in South Vietnam. The South Vietnamese government pleaded for the United States to train and equip provincial militiamen to resist guerrilla warfare on their home grounds.

But U.S. generals insisted upon building a conventional army to withstand a Korea-like invasion. For 12 years the South Vietnamese army has been trained to fight a conventional war along a defined front.

Our own forces, under Gen. Westmoreland's leadership, quickly adjusted to guerrilla warfare. But the South Vietnamese have stuck largely to the conventional tactics their American advisers taught them.

Twelve years too late, our generals have admitted their mistake, and now want to revamp the South Vietnamese army into a counter-insurgency force. The South Vietnamese will now receive the training and equipment that they originally requested.

More than a few generals, meanwhile, privately believe about Vietnam what Gen. Mark Clark said about Korea. After he took command of the American forces in Korea, he wrote: "Never again should we be mousetrapped into fighting another defensive war on that peninsula."