

## **The Possibility of Democracy: The United States Role in State Building in the ROK**

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South Korea as we know it today would not exist in the absence of American intervention and large-scale assistance during the years between 1945 and 1950. During these years, the United States played a critical role in the division of the Korean peninsula and the creation of a separate government for the Republic of Korea. Many on the left – both in the United States and Korea -- have been deeply critical of the role that the United States played in Korea during these years. They argue that American support for Syngman Rhee at the expense of an indigenous mass based movement amounted to the denial of national liberation and true independence.<sup>1</sup> Leftist scholars have placed a great deal of emphasis on the Rhee government's autocratic nature and ruthless suppression of dissidents. It is undeniable that the regime built and supported by Americans in South Korea had many flaws. But the role that U.S. state building during the early Cold War played in enabling South Korea to become the prosperous democracy that it is today has not been given sufficient attention. The very real aspirations that Americans had for seeing democracy flourish in Korea have largely been ignored.

In this paper I will argue that for Americans, building and supporting a South Korean state that was centered around Syngman Rhee and his conservative allies represented a realistic compromise. On the one hand, they recognized that the ROK would not become democratic in the near future under Rhee's leadership. On the other hand, however, as long as Rhee's government survived, American influence would

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<sup>1</sup> The most well-known work to advance such arguments in English is Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War: Volume I Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes, 1945-1947*, (Princeton, 1981). Several South Korean scholars have made similar arguments. See for instance Chōng Yonguk, *Haebang chōnhu miguk ūi daehan chōngch'aek*, (sôuldae ch'ulp'anbu, 2003); Yi Manyôl, *Han'guk hyôndaesa ūi hûrûm kwa dongnyok* (dosô ch'ulp'an orûm, 1998).

continue to play a significant role in shaping South Korea's political future. Supporting a full-fledged democracy in Korea during this period would have been impossible.

Economically destitute and divided into fiercely hostile political factions, Korea lacked the basic socio-economic prerequisites which history has proven over and over again are essential to the establishment of a stable, liberal democracy. But having a conservative, pro-American regime in South Korea at least opened avenues for the United States to slowly build institutions and disseminate ideals that would eventually help to assure Korea's democratization. It offered the *possibility of democracy*, which is more than can be said for the regime that gained power in the north.

### **The Impossibility of Democracy in Post-World War II Korea**

When American forces occupied the southern half of Korea in 1945 they found themselves in a land whose social, economic and political problems seemed to defy comprehension. The demise of Japanese colonialism at the end of World War II left a raucous and highly fragmented political scene in Korea where groups of leftists, rightists, nationalists, and former collaborators competed for power. Commercial ties between northern and southern Korea and between the Korean peninsula and Japan were severed, leaving this once tightly knit economic unit in shambles. Although some dimensions of traditional Korean culture might have been consistent with democracy, the vast majority of Koreans had never experienced this form of government. These conditions did not augur well for liberal democratic state building on either the northern or southern half of the Korean peninsula.

Nevertheless when Americans first approached and considered this difficult situation, they still concluded that an effort should be made to turn southern Korea into a

democracy. President Truman and many of the highest-ranking American officials shared this view. They even believed that given time Korea could become a powerful demonstration of the universality of democratic ideals. Such beliefs were readily apparent in an exchange between Edwin Pauley, an advisor to Truman who toured the Far East in 1946 and the president. Pauley described what he saw as the importance of Korea in a memo to the president. He wrote that:

While Korea is a small country, and in terms of our total military strength is a small responsibility, it is an ideological battleground on which our entire success in Asia may depend. It is here where a test will be made of whether a democratic competitive system can be adapted to meet the challenge of defeated feudalism, or whether some other system i.e. Communism will become stronger.<sup>2</sup>

Truman agreed with Pauley that Korea had become an “ideological battleground.” The President expressed his resolve to foster the growth of democracy in Korea. In his response to Pauley he argued that the “most effective way to meet the situation in Korea is to intensify and persevere in our efforts to build up a self-governing and democratic Korea, neither subservient nor menacing to any power.” Truman had in mind policy initiatives that would both disseminate democratic ideas and give Koreans the opportunity to participate in democratic institutions under American tutelage. The United States would “carry on an informational and educational campaign to sell to Koreans our form of democracy.” More importantly, the U.S. would seek to include Koreans in the administration and governance of southern Korea by holding local elections and creating a new legislative assembly that would give Koreans a greater voice in policy matters.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ambassador Edwin Pauley to President Truman, 22 June, 1946, *FRUS 1946, Volume VIII: Korea*, 706.

<sup>3</sup> President Truman to Edwin Pauley at Paris, 16 July, 1946, *FRUS 1946, Volume VIII: Korea*, 713-714. This agenda had already been laid out in a previous State Department policy papers. See Memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of State for Occupied Areas (Hildring) to the Operations Division, War Department, 6 June, 1946, in *FRUS 1946, Volume VIII: Korea*, 692-694.

In the months that followed, American occupation forces made a genuine effort to follow through on the agenda laid out by Truman. The United States sought to get Korea's left and right to cooperate in the formation of temporary political institutions that would be guided by the United States. The occupation first created the Coalition Committee (CC) whose objective was to sponsor discussions between competing Korean factions that could pave the way for free elections. Later in the year Koreans chose representatives for the South Korean Interim Legislative Assembly. Although many leftists boycotted the elections, the U.S. Military Government used its power of appointment to assure a balance between different factions.<sup>4</sup> Between December 1946 and the spring of 1948 the South Korean Interim Legislature did hold regular sessions and some of its members showed a sincere interest in cooperation despite their disagreements.<sup>5</sup>

Ultimately, however, American efforts to bring Korea's mutually antagonistic political factions together in ways that could lay the basis for democratic rule were a failure. Americans learned a lesson in Korea between 1946 and 1948 that they would have to learn again painfully in Iraq after 2003. Namely, that the passions ignited by the demise of a long-standing, repressive political structure cannot be defused simply by holding elections and building formal representative institutions. Unresolved social and political frictions that are forcefully contained under authoritarian rule inevitably burst to the forefront when the existing system of government collapses. The left and right wing factions that emerged in Korea with the shattering of Japanese colonialism had such sharply divergent visions of what their nation's future should be that neither of them

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<sup>4</sup> George McCune, *Korea Today*, (Cambridge, 1950), 77-80, Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, 259-262.

<sup>5</sup> McCune, *Korea Today*, 80-84.

could ever accept a settlement that did not give it the upper hand. Korean leftists regularly boycotted efforts sponsored by the U.S. military government to establish provisional legislatures and other institutions because they realized that any government that came under such strong American influence would be unable to carry out a radical reform program. But Syngman Rhee and other Korean conservatives did not necessarily make things any easier for the American military government. When the United States attempted to negotiate the terms of a four-power trusteeship for Korea with the Soviet Union in 1947, Rhee vigorously protested and rallied conservatives to demonstrate against any potential compromise agreement.<sup>6</sup> Conservative protests were fueled partially by nationalist determination to create an independent Korean government as soon as possible but also by a realization that cooperation with the Soviet Union would create avenues for the left to expand its influence in the south. Under such conditions, creating a unified government that could have fairly represented all of the existing political factions was virtually impossible.

Even if the United States had continued indefinitely with these efforts to build a democracy in southern Korean in which all groups were represented, it is unlikely that they would have succeeded. It was not only the political conditions in Korea that militated against a stable democratic government, but also economic conditions. Political scientists such as Seymour Lipset have long argued that without a middle class and a relatively advanced level of economic development, liberal democracy is almost never possible.<sup>7</sup> Although some have partially disputed this argument, even its critics have acknowledged that there is very solid empirical evidence that economic prosperity

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<sup>6</sup> William Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History*, (Princeton, 1995), 22-27.

<sup>7</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (Baltimore, 1981); Lipset's thesis was further developed by works such as Samuel Huntington's, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, 1968).

contributes greatly to the sustainability of democracy if it does not create it.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, numerous scholars have pointed to the extreme difficulties faced by newly democratizing societies, especially when poverty and social divisions are prevalent, as they were in Korea after World War II. Thus, regardless of whether Americans managed to bridge the divide between conservatives and radicals in Korea, most social scientific scholarship tells us that the odds would have been stacked heavily against fostering a democratic government there that could survive more than a few years.

Despite the difficulty of the task that they were faced with, Americans would have likely continued with their efforts to build a democracy if not for the dawning of the Cold War. As frictions with the Soviet Union escalated, American priorities began to shift. Democracy remained a concern but security and containment became the most important American objectives. Fred Charles Thomas Jr., who served as a political officer in the U.S. occupation of southern Korea recalled that: “After that article by George Kennan in Foreign Affairs … you could feel there was this complete change in attitude about this whole effort of ours to work with the left and try to get the left and right to work together in a unified Korea.”<sup>9</sup> Although Americans were highly ambivalent about Syngman Rhee, who the State Department considered a “right wing extremist,” by late 1947 they saw few alternatives.<sup>10</sup> In the context of the early Cold War, the United States was anxious to have a Korean government in place that was stable and resistant to the influence of Communism. Over the next year, the United States would not only endorse the creation of a separate South Korean state but also give their tacit approval to Syngman Rhee’s

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<sup>8</sup> See for instance, Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi, “Modernization: Theories and Facts,” *World Politics* (January, 1997), 155-183.

<sup>9</sup> Fred Charles Thomas Jr., Oral History Interview, in Frontline Diplomacy: The Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.,

fledgling government as it resorted to police state measures to control and destroy its opposition.

Historians in both the United States and South Korea have been fiercely critical of American policy makers for sacrificing democracy for the sake of security during this period. What they neglect to mention, however, is that this was not the simple direct trade-off that it has been made out to be. By 1947, Americans could easily see how the global expansion of Communist influence was destroying human liberty and any chance of democracy in much of Eastern and Central Europe. There was every reason to believe that it would have done the same in Asia if allowed to expand there. In Poland, Hungary, Romania and elsewhere it was the *absence* of security against Communism that made democracy impossible, at least until the Soviet Union collapsed. Americans believed, rightly, that without security there could also be no democracy in places such as South Korea. Although finding a political leadership that could provide security against Communism required that democracy in Korea be deferred, it did not mean that democracy would be completely precluded as it was throughout the Soviet empire. Americans reluctantly enabled Syngman Rhee to gain power in South Korea not because they sought to build a conservative autocracy but because they did not want to see the country's chances for democracy completely destroyed.

### **Institution Building in a Rentier State**

The role of the United States in South Korea's state building process extended far beyond the American decision to support Syngman Rhee. Only through massive American economic and military assistance during the years immediately before and after the Korean War could this new Korean state survive. Between 1948 and 1960, Rhee's

constant manipulation of American largesse to serve his own objectives created a very distinctive political economy in South Korea. It was one that allowed for a substantial degree of autocracy on the part of the Rhee regime. But South Korea remained very dependent on the United States and this dependence enabled Americans to influence many sectors of Korean society and culture.

How exactly did South Korea's political economy work under Syngman Rhee? In its early years, the ROK resembled what political scientists have called a "rentier state." The term basically applies to political systems that do not need to rely heavily on taxation as a source of revenue. Because the government does not have to extract resources from its population to support defense or administrative structures, it does not need to bargain and compromise with its citizens to support itself. The people therefore have few mechanisms to make demands on the state for more rights and greater autonomy. As long as the state can acquire "rents" in one form or another it has little incentive to liberalize. Scholars first used this concept to describe the resource rich autocracies of the Middle East and parts of Africa that drew most of their revenues from oil, minerals or other natural endowments.<sup>11</sup> But the term also has clear applicability to regimes like South Korea's during the 1940s and 1950s where foreign economic aid provided a level of resources that was far in excess of what could have drawn from the population.<sup>12</sup>

The ways that rentierism worked to strengthen the Rhee regime were perhaps most readily apparent in the realms of defense and economic development. The United States invested hundreds of millions of dollars into strengthening the ROK militarily and

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<sup>11</sup> See Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani eds., *The Rentier State: Nation, State and Integration in the Arab World* (Routledge, 1987).

<sup>12</sup> I have described how this worked in great detail in Gregg Brazinsky, *Nation Building in South Korea: Koreans Americans and the Making of a Democracy* (Chapel Hill, 2007). The discussion that follows is loosely based on the first three chapters of the book.

economically during its early years. Much of this assistance was necessitated by the war and the urgency of reconstruction once the war ended. But while extensive American assistance may have been a foregone conclusion given South Korea's dire circumstances and importance to U.S. security, it was not inevitable that this assistance would strengthen the state so much at the expense of its citizens. Rhee proved supremely skilled at assuring that American aid provided security to his regime as well as his country.

Raising an army or other security forces is generally one of the most daunting tasks faced by political rulers. It requires not only soldiers but also resources to pay and equip recruits. In Europe during prior centuries, political rulers seeking to build national militaries almost always had to make bargains with the governed in order to acquire the essential finances.<sup>13</sup> In South Korea, however, no such bargaining was necessary. The security situation in the ROK was urgent throughout the period between 1948 and 1953. During these years, the new South Korean state managed to suppress large-scale domestic insurgencies and survive an invasion by its northern rival. For the United States, the need to assure that the ROK did not collapse in this difficult period was a more than adequate justification not only for dispatching its own forces to South Korea but also for funding the creation of a South Korean Army that was far in excess of what the Rhee regime could have afforded with its own resources. This military was indispensable for South Korea's survival as an independent state, but it also gave Rhee a powerful weapon that he could use to quiet dissent. Since funding for the army did not come from the citizenry or need to be approved by any legislature, Rhee did not hesitate to use security forces against his political adversaries. In the midst of the Korean War, for instance,

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<sup>13</sup> Charles Tilly, "Reflection on the History of European State Making," in *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*.

Rhee used the army to compel members of the General Assembly to amend the constitution so that he could remain in power for another four years. The United States did not endorse such misuses of South Korea's armed forces but given the exigencies of the wartime situation, it was hesitant to take action to prevent them.

Rhee made similar use of the hundreds of millions of dollars in economic aid that flooded into South Korea during the late forties and fifties. Americans hoped that this assistance would stimulate economic development and make the ROK self-supporting. But the South Korean president persistently rejected American advice that he try to increase exports and encourage the growth of light industries. Instead, he used import licenses, American aid goods, and other state monopolies to award select entrepreneurs who had demonstrated their loyalty to the regime.<sup>14</sup> Such maneuvering allowed Rhee to build a highly dependent class of industrialists and strengthen his own grip on power. But it did little to stimulate economic growth, which fell far below American expectations throughout the Rhee era, frustrating the demands of many Koreans for improved living standards. If Rhee had drawn the resources necessary for his development policy from the South Korea's civilian population, then he might have been more easily held accountable for his failures. Until the late 1950s, however, American aid helped to insulate Rhee's economic policies from popular dissatisfaction.

Yet while the "rents" that the Rhee regime derived from American military and economic assistance helped to strengthen it at the expense of civil society, South Korea's dependence on the United States also worked to limit the power of the state and open windows through which the cause of democracy could be promoted. Along with the

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<sup>14</sup> Brazinsky, *Nation Building in South Korea*, 31-38.

hundreds of millions of dollars that the United States invested in Korea during the 1950s and 1960s sent thousands of American advisors charged with the tasks of rebuilding South Korea's education system, training its young bureaucrats, and building other key institutions. Because Americans provided both funding and personnel to assist with institution building in Korea, they also gained a good deal of influence over what those institutions should look like and what their ideological orientation should be. South Korea differed markedly from North Korea in this regard. In the DPRK, Kim Il Sung and the Korean Worker's Party used their nearly absolute control over military, educational and cultural institutions to turn them into organs for mobilizing and indoctrinating the population at large, breeding unquestioning loyalty to the government. The Rhee regime could never use state institutions in the same manner because the American presence limited its capacity to control them. In fact many officers in the military and officials in the bureaucracy were more loyal to the United States than they were to Rhee.

Americans attempted to use their influence over South Korea's civil institutions to deepen the possibilities for democracy that had been created by limiting Communism to North Korea. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s for instance, the United States provided continuous assistance to help the ROK develop what is probably one of the most essential prerequisites for durable liberal democracy – an educational system. Money provided by the United Nations Korea Reconstruction Agency (UNKRA) and several private American foundations went toward building new schools throughout the country and training teachers. Americans involved in this vast effort sought to introduce democratic concepts into the ROK's educational curriculum and promote teaching techniques that were conducive to participatory democracy. The United States might not have entirely

succeeded in its efforts to reform South Korea's education system. But American assistance did help to assure that growing numbers of Koreans could attend schools at all levels. As it did elsewhere, the increasing availability of educational opportunity, especially at the university level, fostered the emergence of literate, civic-minded young people who were not afraid to question authority in South Korea.<sup>15</sup> The explosive growth in the size and quality of the South Korean education system would eventually become a critical factor in the democratization of the country.

Americans played a similarly important role in building other kinds of civil institutions. During the years before and after the Korean War they were particularly interested in promoting a free press and building a corps of highly trained civil servants. Subsidies from the United States Information Agency helped numerous South Korean journals and newspapers to get off the ground. In choosing journals to fund, Americans were often surprisingly tolerant of those that criticized U.S. policy on some issues. The USIS provided assistance for the influential journal *Sasanggye*, for instance because, despite the fact that it did not always side with the U.S., Americans thought that it would contribute to a meaningful discussion of democracy among intellectuals and the media.<sup>16</sup> Americans also tried to create opportunities for promising South Korean bureaucrats and civil servants. They recognized that one of the reasons that democracy proved so evasive in Korea during the 1940s and 1950s was that the country lacked a group of administrators who had the experience and outlook to provide the bureaucratic backbone for a democratic government. In the early years of the ROK special American programs

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<sup>15</sup> Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest* (Cambridge, 2004) is good on the influence of the global expansion of educational opportunity that occurred during the Cold War.

<sup>16</sup> American efforts to promote a free press in South Korea are covered in greater detail in Brazinsky, *Nation Building*, 50-59.

sent thousands of Koreans to the United States to study in fields such as public administration, business management and engineering. Through such programs, the United States did help to build an elite tier of competent bureaucrats who were committed to developing the economy and reducing corruption in public life.

Thus American policy toward South Korea's rentier state featured a combination of support for conservative autocracy at the highest level and lower level efforts to encourage democratization and, to some extent, resistance to the Rhee regime. Americans made a compromise when they supported Syngman Rhee. It was a compromise that may have deferred democracy but it was also a compromise that eventually enabled democracy in South Korea to endure. My point here is not to exonerate U.S. foreign policy makers for at times being overly tolerant of Rhee's despotism but to create a more balanced understanding of the role of U.S. nation building in shaping both autocracy and democracy in Cold War South Korea. Whatever we may think of the policies that Americans chose and the state that they helped to build, it is important to recognize that the prosperous, democratic South Korea that we know today cannot be decoupled from its history.

The South Korean State that came into being in 1948 was of course not democratic. But it did at least offer the eventual possibility of democracy. And both Americans and South Koreans understood that the possibility of democracy was better than the certainty of totalitarianism, which existed in most of the Communist world including the other new Korean state that was established north of the thirty-eighth parallel. It was for this possibility of democracy that Americans and South Koreans ultimately fought side by side in an alliance forged by blood. And it was to preserve this

possibility of democracy that thousands of Americans and millions of Koreans paid the ultimate price. As we look at what South Korea has become sixty years later, the sacrifices upon which it was built and sustained must not be forgotten.