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When the American journalist, I.F. Stone, published *The Hidden History of the Korean War* at the height of the military conflict in 1952, its message did not find a warm welcome at home. In a period of unhinged anti-communist fervor, mainstream media took little or no notice of such an iconoclastic work, and whatever impact it had would have to wait for a later time, when the Vietnam War encouraged more skepticism about the motives underlying U.S. war-making. Even so, mainstream receptiveness to critical analyses of US war-making in subsequent decades has not substantially improved, and Stone's book has spent far more years in out-of-print oblivion than in ready availability.

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As Stone explains in his book, he realized that he could be persuasive to a domestic audience only if he "utilized material which could not be challenged by those who accept the official American government point of view".² Consequently, Stone limited his sources to official US and UN documents and American and British newspapers. The approach he adopted was to compare sources and take note of discrepancies, omissions, emphases, and framing to arrive at a more accurate assessment of events. For alert readers, the book continues to serve as an object lesson in analyzing mainstream media, particularly regarding America's continual war-making.

Stone illustrates how the eruption of full-scale war on the Korean Peninsula advanced US geopolitical interests and those of its key Asian clients. The country had been unnaturally divided by the US in 1945 in order to protect its control of Japan and to provide a beachhead on the Asian mainland. The division was carried out without any consultations with the Korean people and was opposed across the political spectrum, which made the resulting reunification war virtually inevitable. The conflict itself boosted President Truman's "get tough policy", which Stone points out "required the maintenance of tension at home and abroad, in order to make politically possible the imposition of a heavier burden of armament and taxes, the rearmament

of Western Germany and Japan, and the imposition of ever greater restrictions on trade with the Soviet bloc".³ The war also provided the pretext for Truman to quadruple the military budget and create a militarized economy and foreign policy that remain with us to this day.

The war made permanent the US military presence in the Asia-Pacific, thereby removing any prospect of Taiwan's reunification with China. It also encouraged the deposed Chinese nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek to lobby conservative American political figures to support his goal of launching a cross-channel attack on the mainland from his base on Taiwan. For South Korean President Syngman Rhee, US involvement meant that he could continue in office in the southern part of Korea with the prospect of taking over the northern part, despite his deep unpopularity.

One of the book's central themes concerns US policy towards the socialist bloc, where conservative politicians and General Douglas MacArthur pursued goals that clashed with Truman's. "Truman wanted something which was neither war nor peace [with China and the Soviet Union]. MacArthur wanted war".⁴ MacArthur's habitual insubordination frequently crossed the line into acts intended to present Truman with a fait accompli of a political nature that would be awkward to undo. "It cannot be said that MacArthur hid his views", Stone writes. "His view was that the time had come for the US by military force to oppose Communism everywhere in Asia".⁵ Stone documents MacArthur's myriad machinations in eye-opening detail, noting that he "was trying to drag the US and United Nations into war with China and Russia. He was trying to start World War III".

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One of MacArthur's more provocative actions came in August 1950, as US and British airplanes crossed over into Chinese territory to strafe airfields and railways. A month and a half later, American fighter planes attacked an airport in Soviet territory. The US formally refused to accept the Soviet letter of protest, responding that it was a question for the United Nations to consider, as MacArthur ostensibly operated under the name of the UN, even though that organization had [no say in any of his actions](#). Similarly, when eleven American fighter planes shot down a Soviet bomber flying on a training mission over its own territory, the US refused to accept a protest note, using the same bogus argument.

MacArthur's headquarters repeatedly issued alarmist reports about the disposition and strength of Chinese forces in Korea, wildly inflating estimates of its military capability. Units based in China were continually portrayed as being on the verge of crossing the border in support of those fighting in Korea. As one of MacArthur's reports put it, China "might have as many as 500,000 men... capable of reinforcing the Communist forces in Korea". These units, it added,

are "immune from attack on the Manchurian side".⁷ Stone notes that "this emphasis on Manchuria's "immunity" to attack was to become a constant theme of MacArthur Headquarters".⁸

Indeed, MacArthur never relented in lobbying the Truman administration for permission to launch widespread bombing attacks on Chinese territory, fudging the distinction between Chinese units fighting in Korea and those who remained stationed at home. The aim behind MacArthur's persistent threat inflations was the same as with most of his public statements and many of his military moves. He wished to inculcate the American public and officials with a belief in the necessity of taking the war into Chinese, and ideally also Soviet, territory, and turning the localized Korean War into a world war in a grand campaign to crush the socialist bloc. The many millions of people who would lose their lives in such an endeavor never merited consideration.

In general, American newspapers ignored the more sober-minded assessments that other US officials provided and instead ran with MacArthur's fear-mongering claims in their headlines. Regardless of the reality on the ground, what newspapers fed the American public was a steady diet of MacArthur's fabrications. Such stories began to produce the desired political effect. Stone reports that by January 1951, increasingly loud demands were being made in Congress to open a second front in China, to be led by a cross-strait attack by Chiang Kai-Shek's forces. Pressure continued to mount in Washington, but never enough to sway the Truman administration into following MacArthur's desire to light an international conflagration.

The one area where MacArthur and other rabidly anti-communist US politicians did march in lockstep with the Truman administration was in harboring the conviction that peace on the Korean Peninsula was to be avoided. That aim was shared by "the German and Japanese military who wanted to rearm, and for Chiang Kai-shek whose only hope was a new world war".⁹ Peace could have come early in the first year of the war when US and South Korean forces had essentially reached the 38th parallel that divided the two Koreas. It could also have come later that same year when US and South Korean forces had taken most of North Korea. On both occasions, the Soviet Union and China advocated a peaceful settlement. "Whenever peace came within talking range a common bond seemed to appear between Truman and [Secretary of State] Acheson on the one hand and MacArthur and [special advisor John Foster] Dulles on the other. While only the latter seemed bent on widening the war, none of them seemed eager for peace".¹⁰

The US pursued a scorched earth policy in Korea, as ground troops routinely burned villages and warplanes rained down death and destruction. Stone observes, "one of the problems which began to trouble the [US] Air Force in Korea, judging by the communiqués, was that there was nothing left to destroy. These communiqués must be read by anyone who wants a complete history of the Korean War. They are literally horrifying".¹¹ Stone proceeds to provide several

quotes which amply illustrate his point, with villages being attacked by rockets, strafing, and napalm saturation bombing. Typically, the tone of the reports demonstrated a "complete indifference to noncombatants", which Stone rightly found disturbing.

There were some passages about these raids on villages which reflected, not the pity which human feeling called for, but a kind of gay moral imbecility, utterly devoid of imagination – as if the flyers were playing in a bowling alley, with villages for pins.¹²

One of the examples listed is from a captain who led a group of four planes, whose mission report concluded, "You can kiss that group of villages good-bye".¹³ This destruction is all the more tragic as in the five years prior to the outbreak of war, a popular revolutionary movement in the north had begun to make [substantial improvements](#) in the lives of its villagers through land reform, popular literacy programs and other initiatives. Ironically, one of the victims of this scorched earth policy was Seoul itself, as the US bombed it in 1950 to slow the North Korean advance. At least [1,500 civilians](#) were killed, but an investigation into this bloodbath, along with many others, was later [covered up](#) by the Lee Myung-bak administration in 2010.

Stone is enlightening in his description of how the US undermined peace negotiations to ensure the continuation of the war. At one point, late in 1951, an "almost hysterical fear of peace made itself felt when the shooting stopped" after an agreement was reached on a ceasefire line, where "Red troops played volleyball within range of UN trenches".¹⁴ President Truman was insistent that fighting should continue until every point of disagreement had been negotiated. Progress, however, failed to materialize due to American intransigence. "One could almost feel the relief in Washington as the truce talks bogged down again in an endless wrangle over air bases and the exchange of prisoners".

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US negotiators succeeded in drawing out the process for another year after the publication of Stone's book, as tactically pointless conflict added to the death toll, all to serve Washington's geopolitical ambitions and the machinations of Syngman Rhee and Chiang Kai-shek.

The *Hidden History* was published nearly 70 years ago but wears its age remarkably well. As Bruce Cumings points out in his 1988 preface, the book concludes with "tantalizing uncertainty" and "many still-unanswered questions".¹⁶ That is one of its strengths;

Stone eschews glib certainties and doesn't claim to know more than he can know. Later investigators have access to information not available to Stone, such as archival records, but more importantly they know what came next so they come at the issues with a different perspective. However, it is more than a matter of fresh information coming to light. Stone follows Socrates in focusing on the question even if that does not lead to a definitive answer. We cannot know what public figures such as Acheson really thought, we can only surmise from what they do and say. Uncertainty is never completely vanquished and the questioning must go on.

There are at least four major reasons that make Stone's book enduring: the crucial role of the Korean War, the concept of "limited war" as a proportional instrument of imperial power, the role of local clients within the broader canvas of imperialism, and the false narratives of imperialism that validates the book's title of "Hidden History".

The Korean War as a Pivotal Event

The Korean War was a pivotal event, bedding down the Cold War, establishing the permanent war economy and putting imperialism at the center of US foreign policy. It was the moment when the [business of America](#) moved from commerce to war. The [Military Industrial Complex](#), despite Eisenhower's valedictory warning, became a major economic and political pillar of the US state, if not its keystone. The military carved out a hallowed place in American society and for years has been the most [trusted institution](#) in the country.

Although the fighting on the Korean Peninsula has been suspended by an armistice, the US continues to wage war on North Korea, mainly through the use of sanctions, causing economic distress, food insecurity and [malnutrition](#). The war continues because the US wants to preserve its monopoly, vis-à-vis small countries, on nuclear weapons ("non-proliferation") and its forward military position against China. Korea remains America's longest war (1950 to the present) and the peninsula is the likeliest place for war between the US and China to break out. [\[4\]](#)

Limited War and Imperial Power

Both "World Wars" were just that – wars unlimited by geographical constraints. The Soviet breaking of the US monopoly on the combination of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles, together with its support for anti-colonialism, raised the specter that a local war against a country which could not retaliate would become not merely a global war, but one in which, for the first time, the US would be vulnerable. The rise of China has compounded that danger. The opposition of Truman and the Joint Chiefs of Staff to MacArthur's desire to extend the war to China resonates in Washington today: while planning to win a war with China remains necessary, it is no longer sufficient, the US must also consider how to limit war and its costs. [\[5\]](#)

The Korean War took total war, that involving all of society with no distinction between military and civilian components, to new extremes, particularly through the use of indiscriminate mass [bombing](#) that was worse even than that of the Second World War, but it also marked the end of US invulnerability and hence delineated the limits of its global power. This was particularly evident in the Vietnam War, where the US was very careful not to provoke Chinese [intervention](#). It is also the main [reason](#) the US has not invaded North Korea since the armistice.

The Role of Clients in Imperialism

Throughout history, imperialist expansion and rule have been based on much more than the deployment of overwhelming, brute force. They have always involved an alliance between the imperial power and local clients. The alliance is unequal of course, but is nonetheless subject to constant negotiation. Stone brings the role of local agents, Syngman Rhee and Chiang Kai-shek into focus. They served America but with their own agenda in mind. Chiang Kai-shek had far more substantial credentials than Rhee. He was a genuine national leader but was incapable of solving China's problems. Having lost both popular support and then the civil war, he looked to Washington to rescue his fortunes. The Chiefs of Staff were too canny to attempt to restore him to power, but they did afford him protection on Taiwan and that separation from the mainland continues up to today. The "Taiwan issue" faded from prominence after Nixon's rapprochement with China, but has resurfaced as the US confrontation with rising China has intensified.

Syngman Rhee was of less standing as a national figure but more central to US involvement in Korea. He was brought in by the US and airlifted out by the CIA in 1960 when popular opposition made him too much of a liability. The history of South Korean leaders since then has

been a checkered one. Dictators such as Park Chung-hee have been more successful in handling US pressure than the progressive democratic ones such as the present incumbent [Moon Jae-in](#).

Despite having been swept into power by the Candlelight Revolution, which toppled Park's daughter, Park Geun-hye, and the opportunities presented by Kim Jong Un's peace offensive in 2018 and Trump's fumbling willingness to engage with Pyongyang, he has been [too weak](#)

to stand up to American pressure and will finish his term of office with little achieved in respect of peace with the North. The role of President of South Korea has always been a limited one because of US dominance, but as Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun demonstrated, there is some potential to nudge the US towards peace.

Hidden War – Deceptions, Machinations and Obscured Motivations

All war utilizes deception but American imperialism positions it at the epicenter. Duplicity is America's very essence, if for no other reason that it denies its imperialism.

Too often even critical reassessments of US foreign policy take the line that it was a matter of good men, with the best of intentions being misled by faulty intelligence and over-confidence:

... we escalated the war in Vietnam on wrong information, on mistaken and misinterpreted reports of torpedo attacks. In 2003, we launched a pre-emptive war on the grounds that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction at the ready. Wrong again. Today the fog of this war is also lifting....¹⁷

Stone generally goes beyond this superficiality, though he is not immune from it. Truman he sees as an "honorable and decent specimen of that excellent breed, the plain small-town American" who wanted peace but was constrained by domestic considerations – the charge of appeasement:

... how to fight off the Red-scare bogey at home, if one was also open to attack for making an agreement with Moscow? The difficulty of dealing with the Russians was clear enough, but

even clearer was the political danger at home. How negotiate without give-and-take? But how give anything at all without being charged with “appeasement”? To “get tough,” to avoid negotiation, to carry on a sniping campaign just short of actual warfare-this was the line of least political resistance.

His analysis of the domestic constraint is astute enough; it remains a basic reason why the US finds it so difficult to negotiate, and to keep to deals – what the Russians have labelled ‘not-agreement-capable’.¹⁸ It manifests itself in respect of Korea today but is a more general problem of governance. However, Truman is the president who started the Cold War, so Stone’s assessment of him here is inadequate. Truman was also deeply racist.

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With the passage of time and the exigencies of power – it was Truman who [desegregated](#) the US military – his racism was muted though “even after blacks hailed him as their champion, he continued to sprinkle his private conversation” with crude racial slurs.

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It is reasonable to assume that Truman, along with other American leaders then, and now, were more willing to accept the carnage deployed on Korea, as with Japan before and Indochina later, than they would have against Europeans.

Stone was a man of his times, who had to make a living, with inevitable compromises, but who in general stands out as a beacon of good journalism. How he styled his name illustrates some of the issues he faced. Born Isidor Feinstein Stone he was persuaded in 1937 to call himself I. F. Stone to hide his Jewishness; we tend to forget how prevalent anti-Semitism was in America before the postwar rise of Jewish political power made it unfashionable in public. “Jew” and “Communist” were often used interchangeably. But he personally called himself “Izzy” and was very active in leftwing politics. He was not lacking in courage.

It is not that Izzy Stone provided conclusive answers to these four themes and the other topics covered in his book. How could he? What he does, however, is far more important. He starts the process of investigation, of challenging conventional wisdom and in so doing, provides empirical evidence upon which Marxists and anti-imperialists can build subsequent analysis. He followed in the footsteps of radicals such as Mark Twain, Jack London, and Upton Sinclair but reached further into foreign affairs. He has been followed by others, but far too few, with most people working in mainstream media or academia being either stenographers, mindlessly (but safely) regurgitating the official line, or megaphones, spewing out propaganda to serve some hidden objective of the ruling elite.

We would well do with more Izzy Stones – they are a rare breed – but perhaps the real solution lies within ourselves. *The Hidden History* is not the product of access to secret stashes of information. He used what is now called open-source materials and that is accessible to us, much more than it was in his day. This surely means that Stone's most important lesson is that we can all try to do what he did – read carefully with a critical eye. There are plenty of other histories hidden behind curtains of deceit.

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