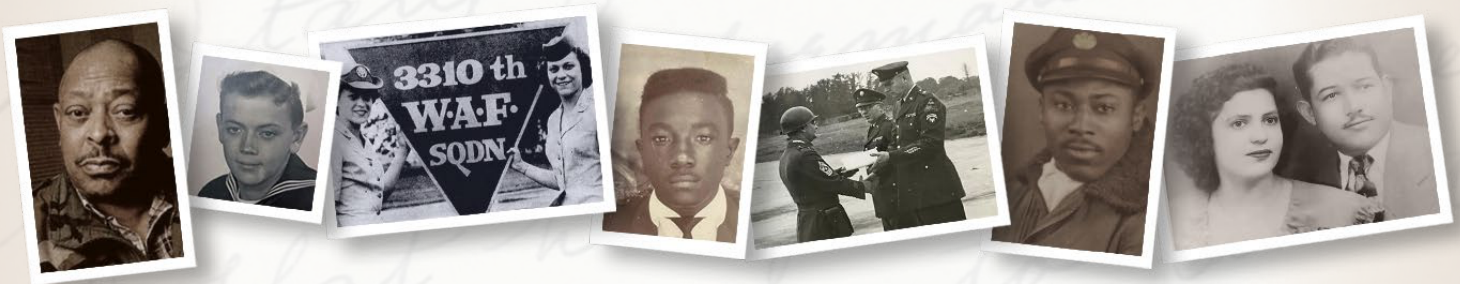


National History Day®

Silent Heroes®:

Untold Stories from the Korean War



UNDERSTANDING THE CAUSES OF THE
KOREAN WAR THROUGH PRIMARY SOURCES



NHD
NATIONAL
HISTORY DAY

About the Program

Since 2011, National History Day® (NHD) has led a variety of programs to engage teachers and students in the study of Silent Heroes®. Silent Heroes are the untold stories of history. While the majority of historical scholarship focuses on the leaders, NHD recognizes the value of studying the history of ordinary people.

In *Untold Stories from the Korean War*, NHD students and teachers study the stories of Korean War Veterans—their lives before the war, their communities, their military service in the Korean War era, and their experience as Veterans in their communities. This process helps students understand the role of the military and the conflict through the eyes of a Veteran. This is a powerful opportunity to personalize history and help students see the past through the eyes of those who lived it.

The program engages students and teachers in historical inquiry, using secondary sources to establish historical context and content. Students and teachers seek primary sources to help document their Silent Hero's life experiences. This can include manuscript census pages, birth certificates, school records, military files, newspapers, photographs, oral histories, materials from local libraries, historical societies, or families, and obituaries. When possible, students and teachers connect with family members, and with their consent, interview them to learn details about their loved ones that are often only recorded in the memories of those who knew them.

Throughout the process students and teachers learn how to identify sources, determine the validity of sources, supply evidence to support their claims, and properly track and cite their sources. Their research is synthesized and the students and teachers visit the cemeteries where their Silent Heroes are interred to offer eulogies to honor their lives. Sometimes family members will accompany the students. Their work is synthesized and cross-listed on NHD's Silent Heroes website (NHDSilentHeroes.org) and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Veterans Legacy Memorial (vlm.cem.va.gov).

This program is a powerful tool to help connect students with their home communities. As citizens of that community, they learn the importance of recognizing and honoring those from that community who served and sacrificed for the good of others.

Lesson Plan: Understanding the Causes of the Korean War Through Primary Sources

Objective

At the conclusion of this lesson, students will analyze primary sources to explore the causes of the Korean War and international tensions during the early Cold War era.

Documents Used

Primary Sources

Foreign office report on the Soviet Government's management of the Korean War, July 7, 1950
National Archives of the United Kingdom (FO 371/86738)

<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/cold-war-on-file/soviet-media-on-korea/>

Political cartoon, Paul Berdanier, *Rocky Road to Nowhere*, July 17, 1952

Leo and Marie Egla Collection, The Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum at The Ohio State University

<https://hti.osu.edu/opper/lesson-plans/cold-war-conflict-in-korea-the-powerful-and-powerless-united-nations/images/rocky-road-to-nowhere>

Poster, *Should There Be a War, the United States Will Not Remain Safe Either!*, c.1950

North Korean Poster Digitization Project. Korea Institute, Yenching Library, Harvard University.

<https://www.harvard-yenching.org/research/a-collection-of-500-north-korean-posters/>

Press release, President Harry S. Truman's statement on U.S. involvement in Korea, June 27, 1950

National Archives and Records Administration (NAID 76089606)

<https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/truman-statement-korea>

Secondary Source

Story Map, A Prewar Context: The Buildup to the Korean War

Korean War Legacy Foundation

<https://www.arcgis.com/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=ee5b764f934b4b04b462ec0d1e7e8c99>

Teacher-Created Materials

- ▶ Primary Source Graphic Organizer
- ▶ Primary Source Graphic Organizer Answer Key
- ▶ Discussion Questions Answer Key

Lesson Preparation

- ▶ Make one copy of the Primary Source Graphic Organizer for each student.
- ▶ Make one copy of the primary source set for each group of three or four students (or distribute electronically).
- ▶ Print one copy of the Primary Source Graphic Organizer Answer Key and the Discussion Questions Answer Key for teacher use.

Procedure

Activity One: Building Historical Context (10-15 minutes)

- ▶ Project the Korean War Legacy Foundation's story map series titled, *A Prewar Context: The Buildup to the Korean War*, and deliver a short illustrated overview of Korean history and the events leading to the start of the Korean War.
- ▶ Post the following guiding question in a prominent place: *How did tensions between the U.S., the Soviet Union, and China contribute to the Korean War?*

Activity Two: Primary Source Analysis (45 minutes)

- ▶ Organize students into groups of three to four students each.
- ▶ Distribute one copy of the Primary Source Graphic Organizer to each student.
- ▶ Provide each group with a printed or digital set of primary sources related to the start of the Korean War and copies of graphic organizers on which to record their observations and conclusions.
- ▶ Provide time for students to analyze the sources and complete their organizers. Circulate and assist as needed.
- ▶ Lead a class discussion. Use the Discussion Questions Answer Key as needed. Ask students:
 - ▷ *What were the immediate causes of the Korean War?*
 - ▷ *How did Cold War rivalries shape the conflict?*
 - ▷ *What responsibilities did the U.S., Soviet Union, and other countries have in escalating or resolving tensions? Support responses with evidence from the primary source activity.*

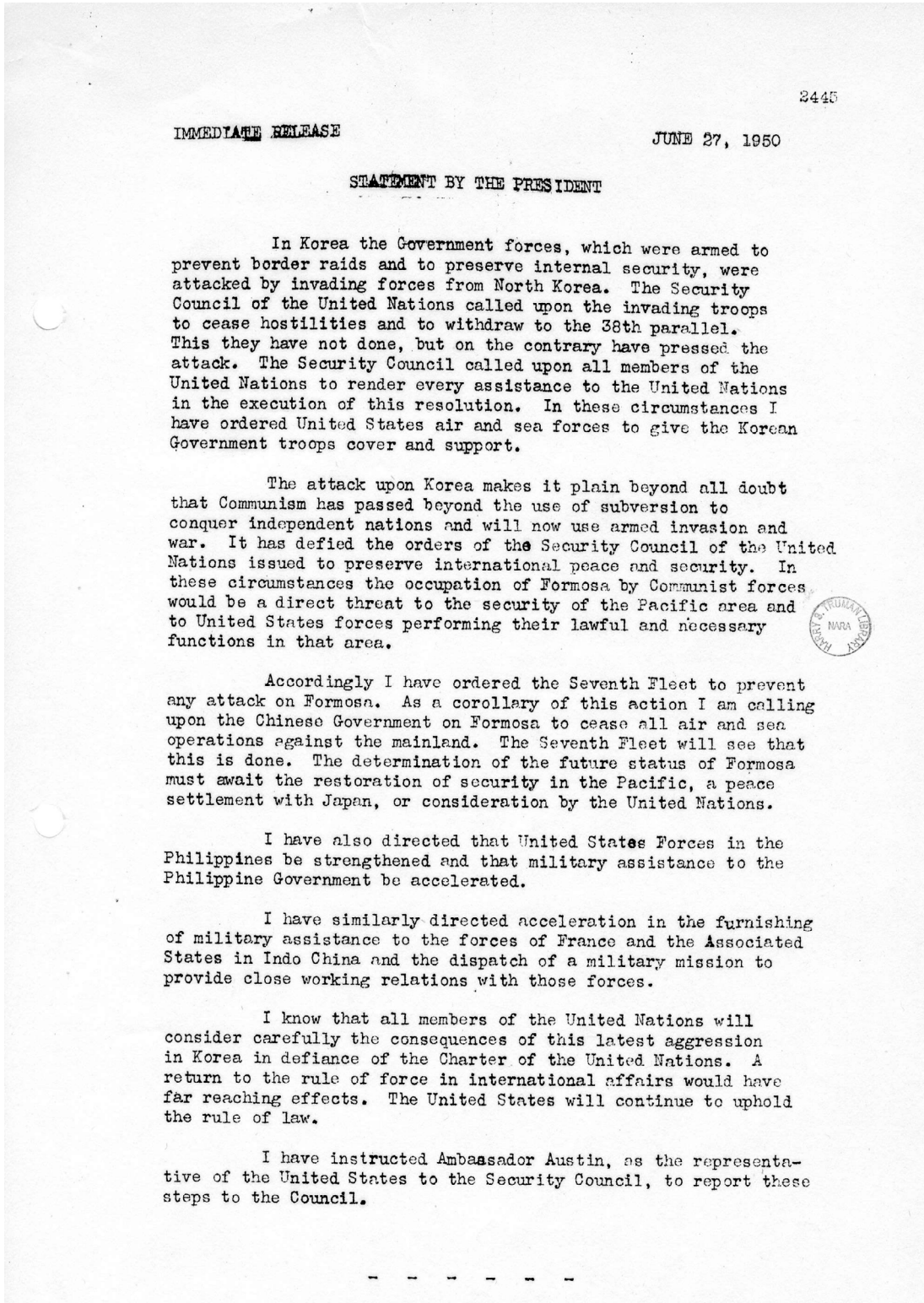
Activity Three: Exit Ticket (5 minutes)

- ▶ Ask students to respond to the reflective question: *What do these sources tell us about how international conflicts begin, and what responsibilities nations have in addressing them?*

Source A

Press release, President Harry S. Truman's statement on U.S. involvement in Korea, June 27, 1950
National Archives and Records Administration (NAID 76089606)

<https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/truman-statement-korea>



Source A: Transcription

Press release, President Harry S. Truman's statement on U.S. involvement in Korea, June 27, 1950
National Archives and Records Administration (NAID 76089606)

<https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/truman-statement-korea>

2445

Immediate Release

June 27, 1950

Statement by the President

In Korea the Government forces, which were armed to prevent border raids and to preserve internal security, were attacked by invading forces from North Korea. The Security Council of the United Nations called upon the invading troops to cease hostilities and to withdraw to the 38th parallel. This they have not done, but on the contrary have pressed the attack. The Security Council called upon all members of the United Nations to render every assistance to the United Nations in the execution of this resolution. In these circumstances I have ordered United States air and sea forces to give the Korean Government troops cover and support.

The attack upon Korea makes it plain beyond all doubt that communism has passed beyond the use of subversion to conquer independent nations and will now use armed invasion and war. It has defied the orders of the Security Council of the United Nations issued to preserve international peace and security. In these circumstances the occupation of Formosa by Communist forces would be a direct threat to the security of the Pacific area and to United States forces performing their lawful and necessary functions in that area.

Accordingly I have ordered the Seventh Fleet to prevent any attack on Formosa. As a corollary of this action I am calling upon the Chinese Government on Formosa to cease all air and sea operations against the mainland. The Seventh Fleet will see that this is done. The determination of the future status of Formosa must await the restoration of security in the Pacific, a peace settlement with Japan, or consideration by the United Nations.

I have also directed that United States Forces in the Philippines be strengthened and that military assistance to the Philippine Government be accelerated.

I have similarly directed acceleration in the furnishing of military assistance to the forces of France and the Associated States in Indochina and the dispatch of a military mission to provide close working relations with those forces.

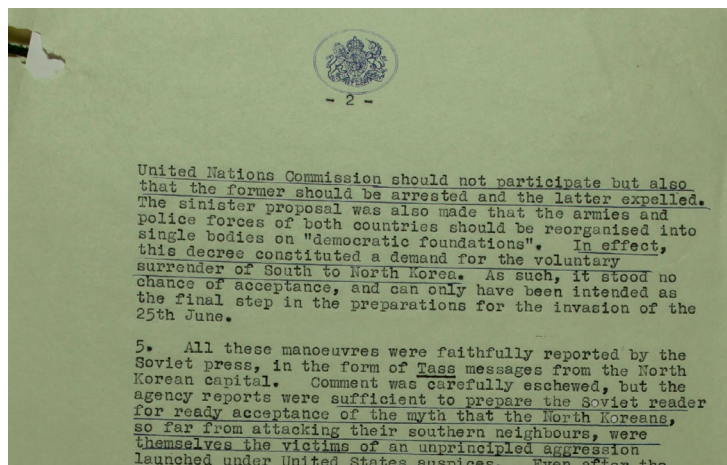
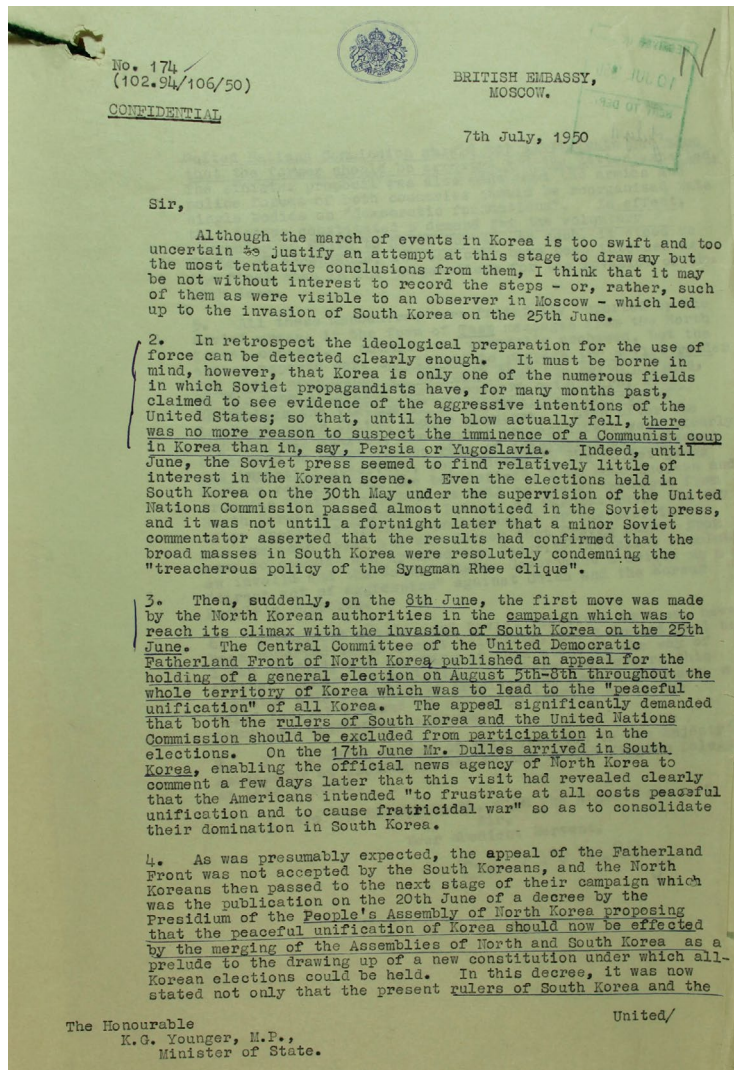
I know that all members of the United Nations will consider carefully the consequences of this latest aggression in Korea in defiance of the Charter of the United Nations. A return to the rule of force in international affairs would have far-reaching effects. The United States will continue to uphold the rule of law.

I have instructed Ambassador Austin, as the representative of the United States to the Security Council, to report these steps to the Council.

Source B

Foreign office report on the Soviet Government's management of the Korean War, July 7, 1950
National Archives of the United Kingdom (FO 371/86738)

<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/cold-war-on-file/soviet-media-on-korea/>



Source B: Transcription

Foreign office report on the Soviet Government's management of the Korean War, July 7, 1950
National Archives of the United Kingdom (FO 371/86738)

<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/cold-war-on-file/soviet-media-on-korea/>

British embassy, Moscow

7th July 1950

Sir

Although the march of events in Korea is too swift and too uncertain to justify an attempt at this stage to draw any but the most tentative conclusions from them, I think that it may be not without interest to record the steps – or, rather, such of them as were visible to an observer in Moscow – which led up to the invasion of South Korea on the 25th June.

2. In retrospect the ideological preparation for the use of force can be detected clearly enough. It must be borne in mind, however, that Korea is only one of the numerous fields in which Soviet propagandists have, for many months past, claimed to see evidence of the aggressive attentions of the United States; so that until the blow actually fell, there was no more reason to suspect the imminence of a Communist coup in Korea than in, say, Persia or Yugoslavia. Indeed until June, the Soviet press seemed to find relatively little interest in the Korean scene. Even the elections held in South Korea on the 30th May under the supervision of the United Nations Commission passed almost unnoticed in the Soviet Press, and it was not until a fortnight later that a minor Soviet commentator asserted that the results had confirmed that the broad masses in South Korea were resolutely condemning the “treacherous policy of the Syngman Rhee clique”.

3. Then, suddenly, on the 8th June, the first move was made by the North Korean authorities in the campaign which was to reach its climax with the invasion of South Korea on the 25th June. The Central Committee of the United Democratic Fatherland Front of North Korea published an appeal for the holding of a general election on August 5th-8th August throughout the whole territory of Korea which was to lead to the “peaceful unification” of all Korea. The appeal significantly demanded that both the rulers of South Korea and the United Nations Commission should be excluded from participation in the elections. On the 17th June Mr. Dulles arrived in South Korea, enabling the official news agency of North Korea to comment a few days later that this visit had revealed clearly that the Americans intended to “frustrate at all costs peaceful unification and to cause fratricidal war” so as to consolidate their dominion in South Korea.

4. As was presumably expected, the appeal of the Fatherland Front was not accepted by the South Koreans, and the North Koreans then passed to the next stage of their campaign which was the publication on the 20th June of a decree by the Presidium of the People's Assembly of North Korea proposing that the peaceful unification of Korea should now be effected by the merging of the Assemblies of North and South Korea as prelude to the drawing up of a new constitution under which all Korean elections could be held. In this decree, it was now stated not only that the present rulers of South Korea and the United Nations Commission should not participate but also that the former should be arrested and the latter expelled. The sinister proposal was also made that the armies and police forces of both countries should be reorganised into single bodies on “democratic foundations”. In effect the decree constituted a demand for the voluntary surrender of South to North Korea. As such, it stood no chance of acceptance, and can only have been intended as the final step in the preparations for the invasion of the 25th June.

5. All these manoeuvres [by the North Koreans] were faithfully reported by the Soviet press, in the form of Tass messages from the North Korean capital. Comment was carefully eschewed, but the agency reports were sufficient to prepare the Soviet reader for ready acceptance of the myth that the North Koreans, so far from attacking their Southern neighbours, were themselves the victims of an unprincipled aggression launched under United States auspices.

Source C

Poster, *Should There Be a War, the United States Will Not Remain Safe Either!*, c.1950

North Korean Poster Digitization Project. Project, Korea Institute, Yenching Library, Harvard University

<https://www.harvard-yenching.org/research/a-collection-of-500-north-korean-posters/>



English translation: “Should There Be a War, the United States Will Not Remain Safe Either!”

Source D

Political cartoon, Paul Berdanier, *Rocky Road to Nowhere*, July 17, 1952

Leo and Marie Egla Collection, The Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum at The Ohio State University

<https://hti.osu.edu/opper/lesson-plans/cold-war-conflict-in-korea-the-powerful-and-powerless-united-nations/images/rocky-road-to-nowhere>



Primary Source Analysis Graphic Organizer

Source	Who created the source?	What is the purpose of the source?	Select a key quotation or visual detail from the source	What does this source reveal about Cold War tensions?
A: Truman's statement on U.S. involvement in Korea, July 26, 1950				
B: Foreign office report on the Soviet government's management of the Korean War, July 7, 1950				
C: Poster, <i>Should There Be a War, the United States Will Not Remain Safe Either!</i> , c.1950				
D: Political cartoon, Paul Berdanier, <i>Rocky Road to Nowhere</i> , July 17, 1952				

Primary Source Analysis Graphic Organizer

Source	Who created the source?	What is the purpose of the source?	Select a key quotation or visual detail from the source	What does this source reveal about Cold War tensions?
A: Truman's statement on U.S. involvement in Korea, July 26, 1950	U.S. President Harry Truman	To justify U.S. military involvement in Korea, show the threat posed by Communist aggressors, and outline actions to support peace and international security under the United Nations.	Answers will vary.	This source shows the growing conflict between communist and democratic countries and highlights how determined the U.S. was to stop communism and support U.N. peace efforts.
B: Foreign office report on the Soviet government's management of the Korean War, July 7, 1950	British Embassy in Moscow	To document and analyze the Soviet media's narrative and propaganda strategies leading up to the North Korean invasion of South Korea on June 25, 1950.	Answers will vary.	This source shows how Cold War tensions were amplified by propaganda. The USSR painted the U.S. as imperialist aggressors and described the invasion as a defensive move. It shows how both sides are using the media to explain their actions and sway global opinion.
C: Poster, <i>Should There Be a War, the United States Will Not Remain Safe Either!</i> , c.1950	North Korean government	To instill fear and rally support for North Korea's stance against the U.S., the poster portrays the nation as powerful and capable of striking back. It seeks to bolster morale at home and intimidate foreign enemies.	Answers will vary.	This poster reveals deep hostility and mutual fear between North Korea and the U.S. It illustrates how both sides used the idea of total destruction to scare each other, relied on propaganda, and tried to show their strength.
D: Political cartoon, Paul Berdanier, <i>Rocky Road to Nowhere</i> , July 17, 1952	Cartoonist Paul Bernadier	The cartoon criticizes the U.N.'s involvement in the Korean War and highlights the difficulties faced during the conflict. It points out high costs, setbacks, and a clear lack of progress, illustrating public frustration with the war.	Answers will vary.	The cartoon describes the frustrations with the stalemate, high costs, and losses. It also shows how alliances (China helping North Korea, backed by the USSR) increased tensions and made the war even more difficult.

Discussion Questions Answer Key

1. What were the immediate causes of the Korean War?

The Korean War began when North Korea, backed by the Soviet Union and China, invaded South Korea in 1950, with the aim of unifying the country under communist rule. The division of Korea at the 38th parallel after World War II, with North Korea aligned with communism and South Korea with democracy, created tensions that led to the conflict.

2. How did Cold War rivalries shape the conflict?

The Korean War was part of the Cold War struggle between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. These two superpowers backed different sides, making the war a fight between communism and democracy. China joined North Korea's side, with the Soviet Union providing indirect support through weapons and training, while the U.S. led a United Nations coalition to help South Korea, which showed how the Cold War turned local conflicts into global battles.

3. What responsibilities did the U.S., Soviet Union, and other countries have in escalating or resolving tensions? Support your responses with evidence from the primary sources.

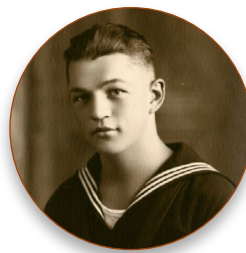
The U.S. escalated the conflict by sending troops to push North Korea past the 38th parallel, which provoked China to join the war on North Korea's side.

- ▶ President Truman's statement on U.S. involvement described how determined the U.S. was to stop communism as part of a global effort to protect democracy under the United Nations.
- ▶ As evidenced in the British Foreign Office report, the Soviet Union worsened tensions by giving North Korea weapons and by disseminating propaganda describing the invasion as defensive. Both sides escalated tensions through employing psychological methods to scare the enemy and build support among their own people.
- ▶ One example of this was depicted in the North Korea propaganda poster that threatened retaliation against the United States with some sort of weapon of mass destruction.
- ▶ Paul Berdanier's cartoon, which was critical of the UN, showed how alliances and unreach goals extended the stalemate instead of resolving tensions.

This lesson plan was funded by a grant from the United States Department of Veterans Affairs. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of Veterans Affairs.



National History Day® (NHD) is honored to help students and teachers across the nation to honor and tell the stories of American men and women who served their nation and lost their lives either in service to the United States of America or after living as Veterans. We seek to teach the historical research process through these biographical profiles. The stories contained on NHDSilentHeroes.org are gathered from NHD programs from 2012 to the present. To learn more about the program and discuss bringing it to your classroom, contact programs@nhd.org.



FOLLOW NHD ON SOCIAL MEDIA



facebook.com/nationalhistoryday



linkedin.com/company/nationalhistoryday/



[@nhdcontest](https://instagram.com/nhdcontest)



[@NationalHistoryDay](https://youtube.com/NationalHistoryDay)



[@NationalHistory](https://twitter.com/NationalHistory)



Subscribe to our newsletter:
nhd.org/subscribe

National History Day
4511 Knox Road, Suite 205
College Park, MD 20740
301-314-9739