Korea and Vietnam

Tragedies Forgotten
In the over two hundred-year history of the United States of America, there have been many events that have defined life for Americans.

Few have touched more American lives and left deeper wounds in American hearts than the Korean and Vietnam conflicts.
“Emerging from WWII as the undisputed victor and most powerful nation on Earth, the United States entered the postwar era with a cockiness about the quality of its military personnel and equipment. This overconfidence cost the lives of thousands in the early days of the Korean War”

John R. Bruning (author of *Crimson Sky: The Air Battle for Korea*)

54,246 U.S. Soldiers Killed

8,177 U.S. Soldiers Missing

103,284 U.S. Soldiers Wounded

“…none of us were prepared.”

Stanley Nelson, 1st Calvary Division, Korea.
"No event in American history is more misunderstood than the Vietnam War. It was misreported then, and it is misremembered now. Rarely have so many people been so wrong about so much. Never have the consequences of their misunderstanding been so tragic." ..... Richard M. Nixon

58,178 U.S. Soldiers Killed
2,338 U.S. Soldiers Missing
303,704 U.S. Soldiers Wounded
In the years following WWII, the victorious Allies divided the world amongst themselves, often relying upon arbitrary lines on a map instead of cultural and historical commonalities of the people they were dividing to determine boundaries.

Underlying these decisions were the tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union, whose differing ideologies would soon plunge the world into the Cold War.

As a result, countries such as Vietnam and Korea were divided in half, with the northern governments tied to Communist Russia, and the southern governments tied to Democratic America.

The Stage was set for tragedy.
The U.S. fear of Communism, and its policy of containment, all led to circumstances surrounding the two conflicts so strikingly similar that the failure of the United States to learn from the Korean Conflict and adapt in Vietnam is painfully obvious.
Korea versus Vietnam

Peoples of K and V

Terrain

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The weapons

The home front

The fighting

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The soldier

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Political Circumstances/
The start of war
Political Circumstances/
How it started

Communist Takeovers

The North
Versus
The South

Headlines

US Political Response
On June 25, 1950, after repeated skirmishing and threats in the areas surrounding the U.S. and U.S.S.R. brokered Korean boundary at the 38th Parallel, Communist North Korean armies under the leadership of dictator Kim Il Sung storm across the border, threatening to completely overrun the U.S. backed South Korea.

As a result, the United States and soon the United Nations took aggressive action against North Korea in an attempt to save South Korea from its Communist aggressors.
Communist North Korea

VERSUS

U.S. Backed South Korea

38th Parallel

MAP 1

From: Hbb And Flow, November 1950-July 1951
Center of Military History, 1990
By Billy C. Mossman
June 25, 1950

The North Korean armies met with overwhelming early victories against the U.S. and S.K. troops, and trapped the remaining American and South Korean forces at the port of Pusan.
After being trapped at Pusan, the combined U.S. and UN forces under General McArthur mounted a stunning amphibious assault, driving all the way to the Yalu River, the border between N. Korea and Communist China. This caused the Chinese to enter the war, and once again the Allied troops were pushed against the ropes.

“American leadership was simply dumbfounded by the turn of events.”

Randy Mills, author of Honoring Those Who Paid The Price
So, in 1965 when Communist North Vietnamese troops began infiltrating and sabotaging the U.S.-backed South Vietnam Government, and the United States responded by sending in soldiers, the North Vietnamese were ready.
Unlike the immense offensive the North Koreans attempted, the North Vietnamese used much smaller groups of guerrilla warriors in South Vietnam during the beginning of the conflict, often confusing and frustrating modern American soldiers who could not distinguish between the enemy and civilians they were there to “protect”.

“How do you tell the good guys from the bad?”

(Chief James Watson, U.S. Navy SEALs, 1967)
Peoples of K and V

Children

Peasants
Not unlike China, North and South Korea were agricultural rice-growing nations, full of small farming villages rich in traditions and customs.

Two third-world countries (outside of the major cities), the peoples of North and South Korea were thrown into the midst of a modern war the likes of which none of them had ever imagined, becoming refugees at the whims of the sparring and vengeful armies.
As with Korea, the people of Vietnam were mainly rice farmers and agricultural peasants, ignorant to many of the technological advances of the 20th Century. Similar to Korea, United States troops often had trouble distinguishing between the peaceful citizens and the enemy guerrillas, often leading to tragedy.

The peoples of South Vietnam were often set upon by both the United States troops and the North Vietnamese troops, resulting in a no win situation for the innocent and sometimes guilty.
Vietnam was an agricultural society
Fear of the subversive Viet Cong led to suspicion of everyone American troops often burned entire villages that they felt harbored the enemy Viet Cong.

As in Korea, refugees would swarm the roads and ports, fleeing from the aggressive Northern Communists.
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**Terrain**
Due to the terrain and exhaustive nature of the war, the fighting turned to a static trench war from 1951-1953.

After 1950, when the Korean conflict became a static trench war, "The fighting which resulted seemed like a deadly form of shadow boxing."

S.L.A. Marshall, author of *Pork Chop Hill*

The terrain of Korea pushed the United States Army Engineers to their limits. "We lived under the ground, in sandbagged bunkers, and stood watch in the trenches."

Lt. James Brady, 1st Marine Division, Korea. 1951
The cold weather was as formidable an enemy as the Chinese. "Rarely did the reports exceed zero degrees, and there were lows of twenty below." -Lt. Joseph R. Owen, U.S. Marines. December 1950, Korea.
Supplying the troops sometimes was an especially daunting task.
Vietnam's tropical terrain was no less of an obstacle for American soldiers, although a stark contrast with the rugged mountainous Korean Peninsula.

"For a solid week the rains never stopped, not once…"

Tim O'Brien, author of *The Things They Carried*
Korea versus Vietnam

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The soldier
Preparedness

The Soldier

The Draft  Ages
Average age of men killed in Vietnam: 22.8 years
Both conflicts saw sometimes heroic, and many times pitiful, performances by those nations we were supposedly saving.

It was thought the Republic of Korea soldiers and the ARVN forces would turn the tide in our favor, but it was not to be.

Often these allies paid the ultimate price…
"They [the S Koreans] carried tremendous loads …"

Lt. James Brady, 1st Marines, Korea.

These supply columns were commonly referred to as the "gook trains"
G.I.s in Vietnam had many of the same experiences with the ARVN troops that their Korean predecessors had with the RoKs. Often in Vietnam, U.S. soldiers would have to pay special attention to their ARVN allies, as sometimes they would "get scared" and end up "nowhere to be seen."

Linderer, Gray A. U.S. Rangers, Vietnam

"As soldiers, the ARVN were useless..."

Tim O'Brien, U.S. Army, Vietnam
Korea versus Vietnam

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Weapons

- Flamethrowers
- Tanks
- Napalm
- Vehicles
- Guns
- Helicopters
- Artillery
- Planes
- Land Mines
M1 carbine shown above an M1A1 carbine with the stock folded.
Leftover WWII machine guns, like this .30 Caliber were used by U.S.
Vietnam
“..deadly miniguns were soon turning damaged forest into toothpicks.”

Gary A. Linderer, U.S. Army Ranger, Vietnam
The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese used all sorts of weapons against the American G.I.s.
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The Enemy

Motivation

Guerrillas

Weapons

Prisoners

Action shots
U.S. and United Nations forces in Korea fought a combination of Communist North Korean and Chinese regular soldiers, who at times unleashed the infamous human wave attacks.
Chinese human wave attack
Chinese crossing the Yalu River
North Korean POWs

Murdered POW

North Korean POWs
In Vietnam, the Americans never knew just who the enemy was: they could be disguised as farmers, they could be women, and sometimes they could even be children.
VC Prisoners
Korea versus Vietnam

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The fighting in Vietnam was just as vicious and bloody as in Korea, often consisting of small unit action and hit-and-run missions with heavy casualties on both sides.

“Success weighed on a balance, tipped by the courage of Americans-most barely out of their teens, whose valor would take them well beyond those measures that determine the call of duty.”

Charles Henderson, author of *Silent Warrior.*
To combat the emotional and strenuous rigors of battle, troops on R & R were temporarily entertained by USO Shows and camp animals.
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The wounded
The Wounded

Korea

Wounded in action: 103,284

Corpsman, Oh God! Corpsman.

Wounded Marine at Chosin Reservoir, 1950

Vietnam

Wounded in action: 303,704

5,283 lost limbs: 1,081 sustained multiple amputations
Korea versus Vietnam

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7,484 American women served in Vietnam.
6,250 were nurses.

8 nurses died: 1 was Killed in Action
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Unfortunately, the North Koreans were not the only ones to commit mass atrocities. The UN and South Korean soldiers were also guilty of atrocities that are all too common in war. "Heaps of Dead now blocked the entrances to the No Gun Ri underpass." The human wreckage of two villages lay there…"

Charles J. Hanley, author of *The Bridge At No Gun Ri*
Korea versus Vietnam

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Conclusion
Korea was, for most Americans, something not important in their everyday lives, and most average Americans knew little about the conflict and cared even less. Unlike during Vietnam, there wasn’t the mass protests or angry crowds in the streets.

When soldiers returned home, they found that: “no-one seemed interested in where they had been.”

Brian Catchpole, author of *The Korean War*
Conversely, during the conflict in Vietnam nearly every American was aware, and millions staged protests across America in city streets and college campuses.

“In August, 1968, as Democrats met to nominate a presidential candidate, the streets of Chicago erupted into violent antiwar demonstrations and police riots.”

James S. Olson, *Where the Domino Fell*
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Memorials
With both conflicts turning out to be anything but victory for the Americans, the disappointment, embarrassment, shame, and especially pain felt by our nation after both ended all but brought us to the brink.

We have tried to heal these wounds and remember our fallen in many various ways.
WE REMEMBER
Unlike Americans, the citizens of North and South Korea, as well as Vietnam, cannot simply choose to forget these horrific conflicts.

The disaster waged upon their countries and the people in them is beyond American comprehension. Americans have the luxury of forgetting, for these peoples who live with the effects of the wars to this day... there is no forgetting.
Casualties included 480,000 soldiers from South Korea and the 16 UN countries, 1-2 million Communist soldiers from North Korea and China, and 4.5 million civilians.

During the Korean Conflict, over a million North Korean refugees fled to the South, and as a result of fighting and the confusion, over 3 million children became orphans. Millions to this day spend their lives wallowing in sorrow and wondering if their long lost relatives just might still be alive, looking for them as they are looking. War is a terrible thing.

Korea today is still very much a tense, war-ready nation with two major standing armies staring each other in the face every single day, and still shows remnants of the bloody war.
Even worse than in Korea, U.S. forces destroyed both Vietnam's population and the environment, through the American policy of fighting a war of attrition and ecological warfare. Too often civilians and not enemy soldiers were the victims. During the conflict Vietnamese civilians were introduced to more misery and orphaning of children, as well as Agent Orange, the legacy of Agent Orange lives on in the form of birth defects, affecting generations decades after the conflict ended. Vietnamese children
After all the pain and destruction, only one question remains……..

Why can’t we learn?
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