

## World History and United States History

### (Document-Based Essay Question on the Korean War)

**World History: Standard:** 10.9 (3) Understand the importance of the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, which established the pattern for America's postwar policy of supplying economic and military aid to prevent the spread of Communism and the resulting economic and political competition in arenas such as Southeast Asia (i.e., the Korean War, Vietnam War, Cuba, and Africa).

**United States History: Standard:** 11.9 (3) Trace the origins and geopolitical consequences (foreign and domestic) of the Cold War and containment policy, including the Korean War.

**Directions:** The following question requires you to construct a coherent essay that integrates your interpretation of Documents A-K and your knowledge of the period referred to in the question. High scores will be earned only by essays that both cite key pieces of evidence from the documents and draw on outside knowledge.

Until the mid-1960s, most Americans interpreted the United States entry in the Korean War as a war to stop communist aggression. After the war in Vietnam, many historians have argued that the conflict was basically a civil war. Using the documents and your knowledge of the period 1945-1975, assess whether the Korean War was primarily a conflict between the major powers or a civil war between the Korean people themselves.

#### Document A

**Source:** *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman: Years of Trial and Hope* (1956),

Communism was acting in Korea just as Hitler, Mussolini, and the Japanese had acted ten, fifteen, and twenty years earlier. I felt certain that if South Korea was allowed to fall, Communist leaders would be emboldened to override nations closer to our own shores. If the Communists were permitted to force their way into the Republic of Korea without opposition from the free world, no small nation would have the courage to resist threats and aggression by stronger Communist neighbors. If this was allowed to go unchallenged, it would mean a third world war, just as similar incidents had brought on the second world war. It was also clear to me that the foundations and the principles of the United Nations were at stake unless this unprovoked attack on Korea could be stopped.

#### Document B

**Source:** James I. Matray, "The Korean War 101: Causes, Course, and Conclusion of the Conflict, *Education About Asia*, Winter 2012.

US military occupation of southern Korea began on September 8, 1945 with very little preparation. Washington redeployed the XXIV Corps under the command of Lieutenant General John R. Hodge from Okinawa to Korea. US occupation officials, ignorant of Korea's history and

culture, quickly had trouble maintaining order because almost all Koreans wanted immediate independence. It did not help that they followed the Japanese model in establishing an authoritarian US military government. Also, American occupation officials relied on wealthy landlords and businessmen who could speak English for advice. Many of these citizens were former Japanese collaborators and had very little interest in ordinary Koreans' reform demands.

### Document C

**Source:** Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreans: A Contemporary History*, 1997.

Documents from the Soviet archives recently made available to historians show clearly that in March, August, and September 1949 and January 1950, Kim implored Stalin and his diplomats repeatedly to authorize an invasion of the South....On at least two occasions in 1949, Stalin turned down Kim's requests, but the documents establish that in early 1950 he approved the war plan due to the "changed international situation." At this writing, scholars are still unsure what led to Stalin's reversal. Was it the victory of Mao's Communist Party in China, the development of the Soviet Union's atomic bomb, the withdrawal of U.S. forces from south Korea, or Secretary of State Dean Acheson's famous statement excluding South Korea from the U.S. defense perimeter – all of which took place in 1949 or early 1950 – or a combination of these and other causes? We still do not know.

### Document D

**Source:** Republican Senator Robert A. Taft, Speech to the 81<sup>st</sup> Congress, *Congressional Record*, June 28, 1950.

If we are going to defend Korea, it seems to me that we should have retained our armed forces there and should have given, a year ago, the notice which the President has given today. With such a policy, there never would have been such an attack by the North Koreans. In short, this entirely unfortunate crisis has been produced, first, by the outrageous aggressive attitude of Soviet Russia, and second, by the bungling and inconsistent foreign policy of the administration.

### Document E

**Source:** General of the Army, Douglas MacArthur, *Reminiscences*, 1964.

Even then, it was evident that this far more than "a police action," as President Truman was to euphemistically characterize it, far more than any localized clean-up of border-raiding North Koreans. In Korea, Communism had hurled its first challenge to war against the free world. Now was the time for decision. Now it was as clear as it would ever be that this was a battle against imperialistic Communism. Now it was the time to recognize what the history of the world has taught from the beginning of time that timidity breeds conflict, and courage often prevents it.

## Document F

**Source:** Carter J. Eckert et al, *Korea Old and New: A History, 1990.*

It is impossible to comprehend the events and significance of the period of liberation without reference to the previous four decades of Japanese rule. Colonial policies had shattered the foundations of a remarkably stable nineteenth-century bureaucratic agrarian society and unleashed, new forces in conflict with the old and with each other. Korean society in 1945 was a maelstrom of old and new classes, political groups, and ideologies....Communism in Korea had also developed as a radical response to colonialism, and like other nationalist groups, the Korean communists were also divided by their experience and goals.

## Document G

**Source:** T. R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War: A Study in Unpreparedness.*

Equally important, Red China was ready and spoiling for war. The Chinese Communists, newly come to power, were driven by that dynamic puritanism that accompanies all great revolutions. Like the French in 1793, they not only desired conflict with the “evil” surrounding them; they needed it....there was both a sullen sense of grievance against the West and a passionate national pride in China’s millions....The West has dismissed the painful humiliations repeatedly visited upon the ancient Sinic culture in the past hundred years.

## Document H

**Source:** Dae-sook Suh, *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader, 1998.*

Kim Il Sung wanted to reunify his country, if and when the international political situation surrounding the Korean peninsula was suitable for such an undertaking. Kim considered military reunification to be the most efficient solution and he was not alone in this line of thinking. Many Korean revolutionaries who returned from abroad thought that Korea should be reunified, and Syngman Rhee in the South made his intention, “to march North,” known to the people of Korea....From the time he was installed as head of the provisional People’s Committee on February 8, 1946, to the outbreak of war in June 1950, Kim never advocated peaceful reunification of Korea. He thought that the only way to achieve national reunification was by force of arms.

## Document I

**Source:** John Mack Faragher, Mari Jo Buhle, Daniel Czitrom and Susan H. Armitage, *Out of Many: A History of the American People, 1997.*

Some experienced diplomats, such as George Kennan regarded the conflict between the two Koreas as a civil war. Truman, however, treated the invasion as a major Soviet test of the U.S. policy of containment, and act of aggression that had to be met with force....The Soviets, on the

other hand, regarded the invasion as the consequence of former anti-Japanese military leader Kim Il Sung's plan to overthrow a government of past collaborators with the Japanese and unite the two Koreas. Having recently been accused of "selling out" eastern Europe and "losing" China, Truman felt compelled to act.

### Document J

**Source:** Carter J. Eckert et al., *Korea Old and New: A History*, 1990.

While there is little room for doubt that the north actually launched the attack across the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel on June 25, 1950, it is also important to place that attack in the context of the increasingly violent political polarization of the peninsula in the previous five years, especially in the two years following the establishment of separate Korean regimes in 1948. Between the end of 1948 and June 1950 South Korea, Korea was the scene of a bloody and ultimately unsuccessful, indigenous leftist guerilla war that erupted on Cheju Island...and spread throughout much of the country. During the same period military conflicts along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel between northern and southern forces, many of which appear to have been initiated by the south, became increasingly frequent and intense and continued right into the spring of 1950.

### Document K

**Source:** Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History*, 1997.

Whatever happened on or before June 25, it was immediately clear that this war was a matter of "Koreans invading Korea"; it was not aggression across generally accepted international lines. Nor was this the point at which the civil conflict began....Someday Koreans in North and South will reconcile as Americans eventually did, with the wisdom that civil wars have no single authors. It took Americans about a century to do so; it is therefore not surprising that Korean reconciliation is still pending after fifty years.

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