

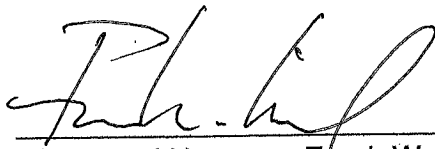
Unintended Negligence:
U.S.-South Korean Relations at the End of the Carter Administration

By
Anela M. Mangum

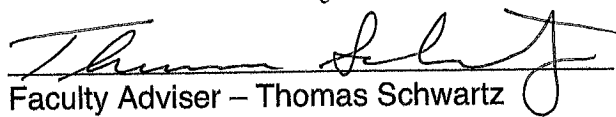
Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
Department of History of Vanderbilt University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For Honors in History

April 2017

On the basis of this thesis defended by the candidate on
4/27/2017
we, the undersigned, recommend that the candidate be
awarded HIGHEST HONORS
in History.



Director of Honors – Frank Wcislo



Faculty Adviser – Thomas Schwartz



Third Reader – Hye Young You

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Chapter 1: Carter and Korean Policy	12
American Perceptions and Pressures	15
Carter in Korea	21
Relations Peak after Summit	29
Chapter 2: Korea in Transition	33
Assassination of an Ally	34
DEFCON 3	37
Iranian Hostage Crisis	44
“Veteran Diplomat” in the Lead	46
Chapter 3: Chun in Charge	50
Chun’s Coup	51
The Reemerging Cold War and American Policy	58
Road to Gwangju	61
Gwangju Uprising	67
Conclusion	71
Works Cited	76
Primary Sources	76
Secondary Source	77

Introduction

*“Our policy is based on an historical vision of America's role. Our policy is derived from a larger view of global change . . . Our policy is designed to serve mankind. And it is a policy that I hope will make you proud to be Americans. It is a new world, but America should not fear it. It is a new world, and we should help to shape it. It is a new world that calls for a new American foreign policy--a policy based on constant decency in its values and on optimism in our historical vision.”*¹

President Jimmy Carter, Notre Dame Commencement Speech, May 22, 1977

When Jimmy Carter was elected in 1976, he hoped to redefine American foreign policy to focus on human rights and step away from traditional Cold War rhetoric. Early in his presidency, Carter spoke at Notre Dame's commencement saying, “we are now free of that inordinate fear of communism which once led us to embrace any dictator who joined us in that fear.”² President Carter's decisions deeply affected all of the United States' allies, including South Korea which was led by the authoritarian Park Chung Hee. This thesis will examine the relationship between the United States and South Korea during a tumultuous period of U.S. foreign relations in 1979-1980. This period illustrates American strengths and weaknesses in influencing foreign governments and highlights the U.S. Government's preference for security in the face of chaos. The events in South Korea and the American response can be used as a case study for the limits of idealism in foreign policy.

Jimmy Carter's foreign policy formed as a reaction to the political crises of the Nixon and Ford years. Barbara Keys outlines the transition to emphasizing human rights in American politics in her book, *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s*. After the Watergate scandal and the end of the Vietnam War, Carter's campaign “recognized and

¹ “Jimmy Carter: Address at Commencement Exercised at the University Dame – May 22, 1977,” The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=7552>.

² Ibid.

tried to address a generalized emotional longing to rise above the political muck that had engulfed the country.”³ Jimmy Carter’s presidency and his insistence on human rights can be partially explained by the emergence of international human rights as a major issue in the United States. By the election of 1976, Jimmy Carter’s appeals for morality in foreign policy, which included human rights, gained significant public support.

The Carter administration’s foreign policy was also determined by his advisors and their experiences. Betty Glad’s book, *Outsider in the White House: Jimmy Carter and the Making of American Foreign Policy*, examines the way in which President Carter used his advisors to cultivate his foreign policy and how the various crises during his presidency changed the administration’s approach. After the events in Iran and heightened tensions with the Soviet Union, President Carter became less likely to pursue human rights policies as the international order seemed to crumble. His advisors, namely National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, were more willing to use force to influence foreign governments. Glad’s book discusses the various crises of the Carter years in depth, but North and South Korea are mentioned on two pages only to illustrate the closeness between President Carter and NSA Brzezinski.

Burton I. Kaufman and Scott Kaufman’s revised edition *The Presidency of James Earl Carter, Jr.*, published in 2006 was the first major historical work to utilize materials from the Jimmy Carter Library. Their analysis of Carter’s presidency, using the declassified documents from the administration, shows that their lofty idealistic goals were tempered by pragmatic execution. However, Kaufman is critical of Carter’s foreign policy, as Carter “never adequately defined a mission for his government, a purpose for the country, and a way to get there.”⁴

³ Barbara J. Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s* (Harvard University Press, 2014) 216.

⁴ Burton I. Kaufman and Scott Kaufman, *The Presidency of James Earl Carter, Jr.* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 250.

Compared to other presidents, Carter struggled to build public support for initiative or to communicate his preferences to the public. His policies were increasingly difficult to implement as he was a “victim of economic and political developments at home and abroad . . . over which he had little or no control.”⁵

A more recent work by Scott Kaufman, *Plans Unraveled: The Foreign Policy of the Carter Administration*, continues to explain the difficulty in implementing a moral foreign policy. The moralist agenda the Carter administration pursued made it more difficult to negotiate with target states and less likely the United States would achieve its policy preferences. While this book has been criticized for its negativity, it gives an overview of the problems the Carter administration faced. This volume, in its attempt to detail individual problems of the Carter administration, discusses South Korea only in relation to Carter’s “determination to get all the U.S. troops off the peninsula in five years”⁶ and the difficulty President Carter faced to execute that policy. It does not address any of the major political and controversial events that took place in South Korea during Carter’s presidency.

Joshua Murachik’s book *The Uncertain Crusade: Jimmy Carter and the Dilemmas of Human Rights* and Gaddis Smith’s *Morality, Reason, and Power: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years* also analyze the implementation of Carter’s policies abroad. Murachik discusses the political aspect of human rights to use to decrease American interventionism and American foreign aid. The major criticism of this volume is the failure to link human rights and political system as a result of the inconsistent application of Carter’s human rights policy. The consistency problem was ultimately a reflection of American leverage and influence within the

⁵ Kaufman and Kaufman, xiii.

⁶ Scott Kaufman, *Plans Unraveled: The Foreign Policy of the Carter Administration* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008), 69.

country.⁷ Smith's volume shows the changing national priorities and public perception that challenged the implementation of Carter's policy. President Carter failed, according to Smith, because of his "lack of experience and historical perspective," which "fed his penchant for alarmist, exaggerated rhetoric."⁸ He also had to overcome a "double handicap:"⁹ his new idealistic foreign policy and the emergence of a more assertive Congress.

Gregg Brazinsky's book, *Nation Building in South Korea: Koreans, Americans, and the Makings of a Democracy*, delves in greater detail to the relationship between the United States and South Korea. He outlines American influence in South Korea after World War II. Brazinsky dedicates a significant portion of his book to American support for the development of a South Korean military, which, by 1960, was "the most dominant political institution in South Korean society."¹⁰ Given its security concerns on the Korean peninsula, the U.S. Government favored a strong political apparatus, particularly after the corruption, inefficiency, and instability of the governments that preceded Park. Brazinsky frames this preference succinctly: to make "the difficult decisions required for economic reform without excessive interference from the civilian population."¹¹ This became a standard that American policy favored because the United States could influence South Korean politics and keep them within "the broad political parameters that it could publicly endorse."¹² The U.S. favored stability over democracy, even at the cost of growing authoritarianism. Brazinsky's book focuses primarily on the years 1961 to 1972, as it was the height of American involvement on the peninsula. He argues that "American nation

⁷ Joshua Murachik, *The Uncertain Crusade: Jimmy Carter and the Dilemmas of Human Rights Policy* (Washington (D.C.): American Enterprise Inst. for Public Policy Research, 1988): 117.

⁸ Gaddis Smith, *Morality, Reason, and Power: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1991), 245.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 246.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹¹ Gregg Brazinsky, *Nation Building in South Korea: Koreans, Americans, and the Making of a Democracy* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007) 161.

¹² *Ibid.*, 160.

building and Korean agency worked in tandem to produce [the country's] distinct pattern of political evolution.”¹³ Brazinsky also analyzes the lack of American scholarship on the issue of South Korean development after 1953 as a consequence of a lack of English-language sources but also continued political strife in South Korea that affected native writers.

The United States' complicated relationship with the authoritarian leader Park Chung Hee can be explained by the cultural and economic development that occurred during his regime. Hyung-a Kim and Clark Sorenson collected and edited the material in *Reassessing the Park Chung Hee Era, 1961-1979: Development, Political Thought, Democracy, and Cultural Influence*. Published in 2011 and one of the only large-scale English-language projects to assess Park Chung Hee's role in post-war South Korean history, Kim and Sorenson's work shows that Park's emphasis on development was necessary after the economic devastation of the war. The country's strengthened economy, they argued, would further other goals like national security, democracy, and unification.¹⁴

Park's desire for an independent South Korea frustrated American attempts to influence South Korean politics toward greater democratic reforms. He rejected Western-style democracy, the authors argued, not because of “Confucian attitudes and custom-led ‘Asian values,’ but rather on the harsh reality of the Cold War.”¹⁵ American attempts to ease the tensions of the Cold War during Nixon and Ford's years of détente did not reach South Korea, which was confronted by communist North Korea, China, and the Soviet Union. To preserve security, the Park regime focused on “big freedom or the survival of the state [rather than] that of small freedom or the protection of individuals' rights.”¹⁶

¹³ Brazinsky, 5.

¹⁴ Ibid, 98.

¹⁵ Ibid, 13.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Other scholars have undertaken writing to describe the phenomenon of Jimmy Carter's foreign policy. Generally, these scholars view President Carter's approach as a reaction to the Vietnam War. Carter wanted to use his policy to unite the country. For South Koreans and contemporary historians, the year 1979 represented the "first cycle of liberalization."¹⁷ The historical audience criticizes Carter's administration for failing to redefine the international relations of the United States.¹⁸ The foreign policy of the Carter administration emerged from a historically complex US-South Korean relationship. The National Security Council defined South Korea as a top priority for the Carter administration soon after the 1976 election. Yet, President Carter, who had campaigned on creating a foreign policy with human rights at its center, seemed to "portend a more dramatic American campaign to restore political democracy and advance the cause of human rights" for South Korea, one commentator wrote.¹⁹

This thesis primarily uses memoirs and declassified government documents found at the Jimmy Carter Library to show the decision-making process for foreign policy during the Carter administration. Located in Atlanta, Georgia, the library houses donated historical documents, oral histories, audiovisual materials, and materials from the White House Staff. Because the library opened in 1980, it is not held to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), which provides that any person can request access to federal agency records to information. Additionally, many of the documents are still classified and cannot be accessed. The majority of the documents used in this thesis were donated by National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and describe foreign policy preferences during the administration. Access to the holdings are determined by

¹⁷ Brazinsky, 265.

¹⁸ Robert Alexander Kraig, "The Tragic Science: The Uses of Jimmy Carter in Foreign Policy Realism," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 5, no. 1 (2002); Schmitz, David F., and Vanessa Walker. "Jimmy Carter and the Foreign Policy of Human Rights: The Development of a Post-Cold War Foreign Policy." *Diplomatic History*, no. 1 (2004): 113-43; Park, Won Gon. "The U.S. Carter Administration and Korea in the 12/12 Incident: Concession of Moral Diplomacy." *Korean Social Sciences Review* 2, no. 2 (2012): 253-81.

¹⁹ Brazinsky, 228.

the deeds of the gift and papers are processed according to prioritized plans, which are often partially developed by the former President.²⁰

Because many documents are still classified, particularly those having to do with Park's death in November 1979 and the Gwangju (also spelled Kwangju) Uprising of May 1980, this thesis heavily relies on a considerable body of memoirs to conduct a narrative of these events. The most notable memoirs are *Massive Entanglement, Marginal Influence: Carter in Korea* written in 1995 by Ambassador William Gleysteen, who served in Korea from 1978 to 1980. The commanding officer of American forces in South Korea, General John A. Wickham, also wrote a memoir that details the close relationship between the U.S. Army and the Korean Army, *Korea on the Brink: From the "12/12 Incident" to the Kwangju Uprising, 1979-1980*. Jimmy Carter published his *White House Diaries* in 2010 after collecting the notes and diaries of his time in office. The entries are occasionally accompanied by Carter's reflections in 2010. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance published his memoir *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy* in 1983 describing his time as America's chief diplomat. Carter's National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, published his memoir entitled *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981* in 1983. The writings of Washington officials do not focus on South Korea or Asian policy but are useful to understand the administration's goals and how they approached international crises.

The major books outlined here cover separate topics but overview the environment the Carter administration faced when creating foreign policy. This project intends to synthesize these topics through the example of South Korean relations in 1979 to 1980. Foreign policy is created at the national level but instituted at the local level. By analyzing the works of ambassadorial and

²⁰ "Frequently Asked Questions." National Archives and Records Administration. Accessed April 2, 2017. <https://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/about/faqs.html>.

military staff in South Korea at the time, this will include a more complete picture of the effects of foreign policy within the country. Unlike most English-source authors, this project also utilizes a considerable amount of Korean history and culture. Domestic Korean concerns, which are not analyzed at this level, created a unique set of conditions in which the American officials operated. This thesis shows the impact of enforcing changing and complex American foreign policy within a specific set of circumstances. This project will attempt to fill the gap in the existing literature about American influence and policy in South Korea in 1979 and 1980.

The first chapter details Carter administration foreign policy toward South Korea by examining the only state visit President Carter took there in June 1979. It highlights the president's foreign policy preferences for political liberalization and prioritization of South Korean defense. By examining Carter's meeting with the political opposition and Christian leaders in Seoul, chapter one shows the deep connections of the American government to all segments of South Korean political life. Within the administration, the summit shows the distance between the staff in Washington, D.C. and the staff in Seoul, indicating the possibility for further miscommunication. The aloofness between the ambassadorial staff and the administration displays the difficulty in creating effective policy within a country.

Chapter Two examines how the policies in place were challenged by the assassination of President Park in late October 1979. Despite President Carter's emphasis on human rights in foreign policy, the immediate reaction to the South Korean president's assassination was a concern for the security of the country, especially given the onset of the Iranian hostage crisis in November. Between the multiple international crises and the quickly changing situation on the ground, the otherwise preoccupied Carter administration had to rely more on U.S. officials within South Korea. This was difficult because of the transitional government, led by Prime

Minister Choi Kyu-ha, needed to establish legitimacy after Park. Analyzing the relative successes and failures of the liberal transitional government, chapter two displays an opportunity for the American government to achieve its liberal goals after the removal of the powerful authoritarian leader. Because of an increasingly secretive Korean government and a lack in executive leadership, the American officials did not use their influence in South Korea to its fullest.

The third chapter analyzes the consequences of this American response in light of a military coup in December 1979 that culminated in the Gwangju Massacre of May 1980, the most infamous riot in South Korean politics. With the continuing executive focus on the Iranian hostage crisis, officials in South Korea were given little direction from President Carter on specific actions to take in the country. The sudden emergence of Chun Doo Hwan as a potential leader in South Korean politics highlights intelligence failures which did not predict the assassination or the execution of the coup. This chapter also explores the relationship between the U.S. Army and the ROK Army, as its traditional ally became increasingly elusive after the death of President Park. The traditional ideas of a close, respectful relationship between the two organizations is challenged by the activities in late 1979 and 1980.

The conclusion synthesizes the issues of international relations with local knowledge. It discusses the broader implications of American foreign policy preferences in South Korea. In the face of chaos within a sensitive security situation, the American government will pursue military security, even at the cost of larger hopes for liberalization and human rights. President Carter's initial idealistic foreign policy transitioned to a more traditional Cold War-oriented policy, portraying the difficulty in pursuing a foreign policy based on morals.

Chapter 1: Carter and Korean Policy

Once in office, Jimmy Carter pursued a foreign policy based on American moral values that complicated foreign relations and obstructed national security goals. Carter's National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, supported increased action against the Soviet Union. The Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance, supported increased promotion of human rights. The ideological opposition between the two officials could lead to inconsistent foreign policy. Ultimately President Carter had to "regain mastery over his circumstances [through] calls [from those in his administration] to be tough, to demonstrate and prepare to use force."¹ After the Vietnam War, American politicians began to examine the government's support of other authoritarian, anti-communist leaders, like Park Chung Hee in South Korea, and to publicly criticize their actions. This was difficult because of the complex relationship between the South Korean and American governments that began after the Second World War.

With the division of the Korean peninsula in 1945, the U.S. Government "invested a substantial amount of its own credibility in the survival and success of anti-communist South Korea."² Officially marking the end of Japanese colonization, the U.S. Army established the United States Military Government in Korea (USMGIK) in 1945 and modeled South Korea's constitution upon that of the United States. For the United States, the maintenance of South Korea as a "bulwark" against international communism "often meant support for anti-Communist autocrats abroad even if the costs were exorbitant."³ The first leader of South Korea, Syngman Rhee, created policies that sacrificed economic development to the goal of consolidating power, and persecuted political rivals and possible communists. The United States

¹ Glad, 286.

² Brazinsky, 2.

³ Ibid, 13.

was aware of the corruption within the fledgling government but believed “American interests and credibility were so intertwined with the fate of the Rhee regime that taking action to discipline Rhee would jeopardize America’s strategic position in Northeast Asia.”⁴

When Rhee was ousted in April 1960, the United States worked with the transitional government, which attempted to democratize. Shortly after, the military executed a coup in 1961. General Park Chung Hee, who led the coup, was a popular figure within the army and garnered a lot of support from his counterparts in the military. The United States held sufficient influence within South Korea to undermine Park but they saw his military background and youth as beneficial for modernization. Park Chung Hee visited the White House at President Kennedy’s invitation in the fall of 1961 as the leader of the military junta, which was significant in making Park’s government stable and legitimate. The recently appointed Ambassador Sam Berger told Secretary Rusk in 1961 that the junta had “established themselves as a group of capable, energetic, and dedicated men determined to make genuine reforms, to lay the foundations for honest and effective government and devoted to the return of representative government,”⁵ With pressure from the Kennedy administration, South Korea held an election in 1963, which Park narrowly won.

The presidential election in 1971 was also a great challenge for Park, as he had a viable opponent in Kim Dae Jung. Kim was a prominent dissident who served in the Korean National Assembly and advocated for democracy in South Korea. Facing Kim Dae Jung, who was widely popular, Park received 53% of the vote. Park responded to this opposition by consolidating power and strengthening authoritarianism even further through the Yushin Constitution, which significantly changed South Korea’s government. The establishment of the Yushin System was

⁴ Brazinsky, 39.

⁵ Ibid, 124.

also a “denunciation of liberal democracy that Park Chung Hee came to perceive as a political system of inefficiency and disorder.”⁶ Under Yushin, the president could appoint a third of the National Assembly, had sole authority to determine his cabinet, and the power to issue emergency decrees. The most infamous of the emergency decrees was EM-9, which restricted citizens from speaking out and criticizing the government. Widespread anti-government protests, fueled especially by university students, ensued.

While Park was in power, South Korea’s GNP grew 8.5% per year and exports increased from \$100 million to \$10 billion in 1978.⁷ Park’s economic policies began the “miracle on the Han River” and economic prosperity came to Korea through its industry and export-driven economy. While this benefitted many within the country, it also allowed the South Korean government to maintain more autonomy and rely less on the U.S. Government and “instilled greater self-confidence.”⁸ The situation in Korea was “quite different from the period after Park seized power in May 1961 . . . by 1979 ROK leaders were far less willing to take American advice.”⁹ Despite the continued presence of American troops and other American officials in South Korea, the government under Park Chung Hee consolidated to prevent extensive outside influence.

Shortly after Jimmy Carter’s inauguration, the National Security Council “met informally and identified Korea as one of the priority issues facing the administration.”¹⁰ South Korea was an area to display his foreign policy preferences. Since Park Chung Hee’s successful coup in

⁶ Young Jak Kim, “Park Chung Hee’s Governing Ideas: Impact on National Consciousness and Identity,” in *Reassessing the Park Chung Hee era, 1961-1979: Development, Political Thought, Democracy & Cultural Influence*, ed. Hyung-a Kim and Clark Sorenson (Seattle, Wash: University of Washington Press, 2011), 100.

⁷ Kim, Hyung-a, and Clark Sorenson, 4.

⁸ John A. Wickham, *Korea on the Brink: From the “12/12 Incident” to the Kwangju Uprising, 1979-1980* (Washing, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1999), 64.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ William H. Gleysteen, *Massive Entanglement, Marginal Influence: Carter and Korea in Crisis* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), 22.

1961, the United States was more concerned with security on the peninsula and South Korea's economic success. In Carter's attempt to continue the policy of détente and changing Cold War rhetoric, American influence in South Korea presented an opportunity to deescalate conflict with communist powers and to further human rights by liberalizing an increasingly authoritarian government.

Thus, the summit scheduled for late June 1979 allowed President Carter to show his dedication to his campaign promises and demonstrate presidential leadership, even during the ongoing energy crisis. The Carter administration struggled with the energy crisis through 1979 "because of a reputation of inaction."¹¹ President Carter could use the summit with South Korea to show the American public his determination and authority after a "failure in public relations" and "a net negative of news stories."¹²

American Perceptions and Pressures

Within the Carter administration, American officials were worried about the upcoming election in 1980. In September 1979, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote a memorandum for the President about their foreign policy successes and how to emphasize them for the campaign. With an emphasis on human rights, some Americans thought that President Carter was "soft" and that he needed to be more assertive through foreign policy. Two "perplexing and troublesome" questions for the president: "why is the public not giving this Administration due credit for genuinely substantive foreign policy accomplishments? And why is public opinion in the world at large viewing this administration as perhaps the most timid since World War II?" Brzezinski believed that a misinformed, biased Washington press corps shaped

¹¹ Jimmy Carter, *White House Diary* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Girous, 2010), 306.

¹² *Ibid*, 319.

public opinion, which perceived the administration as “excessively acquiescent” at a time when the country “craves both a more assertive tone and a more assertive substance to our foreign policy.”¹³ While there had been some diplomatic successes in his administration, like normalization with China, the “tough decisions—on such matters as China, the MX, the defense budget, or even arms to Yemen – have been interpreted as primarily motivated by the desire either to compensate for past weaknesses or to obtain some other desired result.” Brzezinski recommended that President Carter “deliberately toughen both the tone and the substance of our foreign policy,” as the country often “associates assertiveness with leadership.”¹⁴

Domestic issues had exacerbated the public’s concerns about President Carter’s administration. By late January 1979, Carter knew that Ted Kennedy would run for the nomination in 1980. The president confided to his diary that he suffered no “timidity about Kennedy running or anyone else,”¹⁵ but acknowledged his team’s concern about Kennedy’s “instantaneous access to the news media [and that] he was an overwhelming favorite in public opinion polls.”¹⁶ In light of the “hard-fought midterm election” in 1978, President Carter needed to show his supporters that he was a powerful president, dedicated to his campaign promises of human rights. Carter could do so through the summit with South Korea and meeting with its controversial leader, Park Chung Hee.

Since the economic miracle led by Park Chung Hee, South Korea “far outstripped North Korea in economic growth.”¹⁷ According to American Ambassador to South Korea William Gleysteen, Americans reacted to the “surge of political oppression [by bashing] Korea quite

¹³ Memo, Brzezinski to President Carter, “NSC Weekly Report #109,” “Weekly Reports to the President, 102-120” Folder, Subject File Box 42, Jimmy Carter Library.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ White House Diaries, 326.

¹⁶ Ibid, 283.

¹⁷ Oberdorfer, Don. “S. Korea Economy Outstrips the North’s, CIA Study Says.” *The Washington Post*. February 27, 1978.

indiscriminately.”¹⁸ When the U.S.-South Korean summit was announced, there was a significant backlash against the decision among Korean dissidents and liberals to Carter’s left. The Washington Post reported in May that the president’s visit, “which [could] only be taken as a gesture of support for Mr. Park,” would “[put] the prestige of the United States on the line, once again, for a failing dictatorship.”¹⁹ The American news media found Carter’s actions regarding human rights a “bitter disappointment.”²⁰ Church leaders met with White House staff to “urge the president not meet with Park Chung Hee” because of his “continued human rights violations.”²¹ Kim Dae Jung, the prominent opposition leader who ran against Park in the 1972 presidential election, asked President Carter to “call off his planned visit to South Korea unless the government . . . frees political prisoners and discards rules forbidding criticism of its acts.”²² Kim believed that Carter’s visit would “bolster the [South Korean] government and indirectly, its methods against South Korean dissidents.”²³

Almost a year previously, following the so-called Koreagate bribery scandal, forty-two Congressional representatives from both parties already were on record in a letter to President Carter of August 23, 1978 expressing their “continuing concern over the plight of democracy in the Republic of Korea,”²⁴ particularly in the light of President Park’s fourth inauguration. Their unease extended to the impact of South Korean domestic politics and the U.S. Government’s security commitment in Northeast Asia. “Our most durable alliances,” according to the Congressmen, “are with government which owe their authority to the freely expressed will of a

¹⁸ Gleysteen, 1.

¹⁹ Yong, Hung Kee. “The President ‘Should Not Go to Korea’” *The Washington Post*, May 08, 79.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ “President Plans to Travel to South Korea in Late June, April 20, 1979.” *The Washington Post*, April 20, 1979.

²² Chapman, William. “Korean Dissident Urges Carter to Press for Human Rights.” *The Washington Post*, May 16, 1979.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Letter, Various Congressmen to President Carter, August 2, 1978. Box CO-41, “Executive, co 82 1/20/77 through General Co 82-2 1/20/77-12/31/77” Folder, Jimmy Carter Library.

majority of the people.”²⁵ Citing again the reluctance of American peoples to support antidemocratic governments, they urge the President “to indicate strongly that authoritarianism among allies is inconsistent with the aims of our alliances.”

Beyond human rights, President Carter also aimed to reduce American troop levels in South Korea, especially after the controversy of the Vietnam War. Assuming the presence of what Ambassador Gleysteen called a “moderate, if not large, groundswell in America against the kind of military commitment that had entangled the United States in Indochina”,²⁶ President Carter pursued this policy of troop withdrawal, much to the dismay of President Park in South Korea. In 1979, there were 40,176 American servicemen stationed in South Korea²⁷, and President Carter pledged to withdraw 3,000 ground forces by the end of the year. The constant ideological and physical threat of North Korea had threatened the stability of Park’s government since its inception. President Carter, however, believed that the continued human rights violations conducted in South Korea, which would lower American public support for South Korea and potentially necessitate a complete withdrawal of ground forces, constituted an equally grave threat to the country’s national security. While the President proposed a withdrawal, the South Korean public and U.S. military officials saw the threat of North Korea too great to ultimately pursue.

Ambassador Gleysteen agreed with the president that the United States “military presence and defense commitment in Korea required political stability, while political stability in turn required some sense of progress among Koreans toward a more pluralistic society”²⁸

Gleysteen was stationed at the Seoul embassy from 1976 until 1981 and had a long career within

²⁵ Letter, Congressmen to President Carter, August 2, 1978.

²⁶ Gleysteen, 17.

²⁷ DOD Fact Sheet, June 6, 1979, “Japan and Korea June-July 1979, Background Papers” Folder, Box 41, Jendrik Hertzberg Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

²⁸ Gleysteen, 32.

the Department of State focusing on Asian issues. While the ambassador wanted the government of South Korea to liberalize and offer more civil liberties to the population, he was primarily focused on political stability. Troop withdrawal threatened it. Gleysteen's deputy, Thomas Stern, later recalled that the U.S. Embassy was "interested in maintaining an American military presence not only as a deterrent against North Korean adventurism, but also because [it] had some questions about South Korean intentions,"²⁹ namely Park's fascination with nuclear weapons. President Carter pursued troop withdrawal from the beginning of his administration, Gleysteen argued, despite opposition among many in the Departments of State and Defense. President Carter instructed Secretary of State Cyrus Vance that their "review should not examine the consequences of proceeding with partial or complete troop withdrawal, only the manner of implementing the policy of complete withdrawals already publicly enunciated by the president".³⁰

The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor in the State Department, created by President Carter,³¹ advocated for more aggressive action to enact change within South Korea. The American government had many policy options to motivate President Park to change his actions: a security treaty, the presence of American troops, economic and trade deals, and diplomacy. However, there was an obvious miscommunication or disconnect between the officials in Washington and Seoul—especially in the United States Embassy and the commanding officer of American military forces in the ROK. The top priority for American officials in Seoul and the South Koreans themselves was stability on the peninsula and to avoid another war. According to Thomas Stern, the "[Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs]

²⁹ Kennedy, Charles Stuart. "Thomas Stern." Oral History Interviews. 1998. <http://adst.org/oral-history/oral-history-interviews>, 71.

³⁰ Gleysteen, 23.

³¹ "Carter and Human Rights, 1977-1981." Office of the Historian. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/human-rights>.

understood that; the Pentagon understood that and I would guess most of Washington did. But there was the Human Rights Bureau, which was doing its job and kept pushing for stronger actions against the Koreans”,³² against official recommendations from officials in Seoul. Stern, who was still stationed in Seoul during the US-ROK summit, noted the insistence of the Carter administration about human rights. The embassy would receive “periodic messages reminding [them] of the importance of human rights to the U.S. and requesting us to make the appropriate representations to the Koreans, particularly about ‘political’ prisoners”.³³

For South Koreans, the American military presence was necessary. Because of the U.S. Government’s role in shaping South Korea’s government and military, it viewed the United States as its “big brother.” As South Korea’s older brother, the United States had to protect the country through military force but also took on a “special responsibility to take of Korea”.³⁴ While this relationship was challenged by Americans’ condescending attitudes toward the South Korean government on issues of human rights and civil liberties, the South Korean government and military greatly valued this relationship. Because the U.S. Army had such influence in Seoul, South Korean officials “confronted us periodically with the dilemma of who represented the United States.”³⁵ The U.S. Embassy, despite its close relation to the State Department and the executive branch in Washington, was not seen as the representative of the American government, showing the priorities of Park’s government and how they tried to influence American perception through the military. Against military assessments, the Carter administration did not “take the North Korean military threat as seriously as the Nixon and Ford administrations had,

³² Stern, 71.

³³ Ibid, 71.

³⁴ Ibid, 73.

³⁵ Ibid, 68.

believing that, . . . the ROK could provide most of the muscle for its own defense,” Lieutenant Colonel Young, the military attaché in 1979, argued in his memoir published in 2011.”³⁶

Carter in Korea

While President Carter’s chief foreign policy advisers agreed that a face-to-face meeting with Park was necessary, they debated whether to go to Seoul or to invite Park to Washington, D.C. Secretary Vance and Brzezinski recommended a 24-hour summit immediately after the trip to Tokyo, where President Carter would focus on oil consumption.³⁷ The administration had to consider the press and American public opinion about President Park and South Korea in the United States, and partisan Korean-American groups if they invited the president. If President Carter went to Seoul, the visit would reassure people in Asia about the U.S. Government’s commitment in the region, permit American officials to meet with non-governmental actors to show support for the country more broadly than the leader and his controversial policies, and to better communicate his stance on human rights and the troop withdrawal issue.³⁸ They decided to go to Seoul and relied on people within the embassy to help coordinate. However, Ambassador Gleysteen felt “out of touch with White House thinking [despite the plethora of messages, phone calls, and even a trip back to Washington]”.³⁹ Gleysteen knew the logistics and schedule of the trip but was not entirely aware of the administration’s strategy in South Korea as a whole.

President Carter arrived at Gimpo Airport on June 29 at 9 p.m. after a full day of activities in Japan. After greeting the South Korean officials gathered to meet him, including

³⁶ Young, James V. and William Whitney Stueck, *Eye on Korea: an Insider Account of Korean-American Relations* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), 40.

³⁷ White House Diaries, 334.

³⁸ Vance, Memorandum for the President, Scheduling a Meeting with South Korean President Park, “Republic of Korea, 1-6/79” Folder, Brzezinski Material Box 44, Jimmy Carter Library.

³⁹ Gleysteen, 37.

Park Chung Hee, the President, accompanied by his wife and daughter, were driven immediately to Camp Casey, a U.S. Army base forty miles from Seoul after Carter's political advisors convinced him to go.⁴⁰ He woke up the next morning to go on an early three-mile run with some of the American soldiers stationed there. From his arrival in South Korea and until his arrival in Seoul, General Vessey, the commander of American forces in South Korea, was the only American official stationed in Seoul around him. Despite the competence and ability of General Vessey, American general officers spend approximately two years at every assignment with a small amount of cultural immersion and language training. Ambassador Gleysteen, who had spent most of his career in the State Department in Asia, was not at Camp Casey and was "prevented from speaking with the president before his first session with President Park, because his schedule arrival back in Seoul was greatly delayed by fog".⁴¹ The schedule illustrates the importance of the American military stationed in South Korea to President Carter. When he arrived in Seoul, President Carter conducted a brief troop review and greeted several South Korean Assemblymen before leaving for the Blue House, the presidential residence, with President Park and his daughter.

Apparently, President Park wanted President Carter to ride with him on the way to the Blue House but had a difficult time convincing Secret Service and also the president.⁴² A Washington Post journalist noted before the trip that being photographed together in the same car would become "propaganda [that] would serve to legitimize Park's regime and oppression."⁴³ The Koreans eventually succeeded in confirming one ride together through Seoul. During this

⁴⁰ Gleysteen, 46.

⁴¹ Ibid, 46.

⁴² Stern, 36.

⁴³ Ju, Woo Jung. "Cancel the Seoul Summit." *The Washington Post*. June 5, 1979, A16.

ride, one million people came to welcome President Carter on the streets, who called it “the most impressive welcoming ceremony [he’d] ever seen”.⁴⁴

At the meeting itself, also attended by a number of American and South Korean officials, President Park and President Carter clashed over disparate concerns, security and democracy. What began as a civil and open debate turned into what Ambassador Gleysteen called a “schoolmarm-ish lecture on the North Korean threat”⁴⁵ by President Park. In his diary entry of June 30, Carter wrote that he “was prepared to be very forthcoming on troop commitments, but Park read an abusive harangue for more than hour.”⁴⁶ President Carter described the U.S. Government’s global commitments and described how South Korea fit into that plan, arguing that he had only planned to withdraw 3,000 troops in 1979--“quite disingenuously given his initial sweeping plans”, Gleysteen observed.⁴⁷ Additionally, the President criticized President Park for allowing North Koreans to gain an advantage in stockpiles of military equipment over the more technologically advanced and economically successful South. The two “mangled the process of communication”⁴⁸ during the meeting that morning. While Park and Carter met privately, the American officials and South Korean officials did not interact, affected by the strain in the meeting.⁴⁹

Carter avoided commenting specifically about the controversial human rights issue until they could meet in relative privacy, away from the contingent of domestic officials. Writing in his diary afterwards, Carter characterized this private meeting as “unsatisfactory.”⁵⁰ President

⁴⁴ White House Diaries, 338.

⁴⁵ Gleysteen, 46

⁴⁶ White House Diaries, 338.

⁴⁷ Gleysteen, 46.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 47.

⁵⁰ White House Diaries, 338.

Park “continued to be evasive on human rights”⁵¹ (White House Diaries, 338) in South Korea. Additionally, Park did “not plan to increase the number of ground forces,” based on “a 1954 agreement with the U.S. that freezes the level at six hundred thousand.”⁵² President Park was equally reluctant to discuss raising the percentage of GNP spent on defense, which would assist President Carter’s troop withdrawal policy. Ambassador Gleysteen noted in his memoir, that negotiations would have been more effective if the “White House [knew] the importance of giving the Koreans positive signals in advance.”⁵³ Regardless of Gleysteen’s personal beliefs about the administration’s foreign policy, the ambassador understood the importance of success of the trip. While “trying desperately to grasp the consequences of the summit’s failure for our relations with South Korea (and, of course, my own future),”⁵⁴ Ambassador Gleysteen used his existing relationships with South Korean officials to convey his “optimism about the evolution of Carter’s policy, [which] was enough for President Park until [the Americans] reached the final stage of negotiating the language of the summit communiqué”.⁵⁵

The lack of communication between the White House and the Embassy in Seoul shaped the way President Carter approached the summit, as Gleysteen could not prepare him for the meetings with Park. In a memorandum subsequently summarizing this conversation, both the personal incompatibility and policy disagreements between the two leaders were on full display. Both expressed their views harshly, seemingly unable to acquiesce to the other for fear of seeming weak. Speaking through interpreters, Park told Carter he wanted to “prevent miscalculation . . .” There could be “no further withdrawal of U.S. forces until the disparity

⁵¹ White House Diaries, 338.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Gleysteen, 38.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 48.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 41.

between North and South Korea is changed and until North Korea changes its policy.”⁵⁶

President Park cited the growth of the South Korean economy to defend his government’s current defense spending levels; the money spent on the military was the same for both North and South Korea, with North Koreans spending 20% of their GDP on defense.⁵⁷ President Carter disagreed with President Park and insinuated that the South Koreans did not build up their military in order to force the U.S. troops to stay indefinitely and keep the country under the U.S. nuclear umbrella. Pushing President Park to address human rights, Carter urged him to rescind EM-9 and release political prisoners. Ambassador Glysteen in retrospect argued that the president was motivated to argue in this way less out of hope for influencing Park on the subject but more because “it would permit [President Carter to wipe out the unpleasant picture of [South Korea] that Americans have.” President Park defended his stance on human rights, with the DMZ so close and the possibility that South Korea “might fall into the same situation as the Vietnamese”.⁵⁸ While President Park supported Carter’s policy, he told President Carter that “the survival of 37 million people is at stake, and some restraint is required [while] people are trying to overturn this government.”⁵⁹

After the relatively unsuccessful meeting, Ambassador Gleysteen describes a tense moment between the President and him on the way back to the Ambassador’s residence. The meeting obviously had frustrated Carter, who asked Gleysteen why Park was hesitant to increase his country’s defense spending. Gleysteen “told the president quite bluntly that, although Park’s own behavior was ill advised, he was obviously upset by Carter’s refusal to reassure him about

⁵⁶ Memorandum of Conversation, President Carter and President Park, 7/5/79, “Republic of Korea, 5/78-11/80” Folder, Plains File Box 2, Jimmy Carter Library.conversation.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

the troop issue”.⁶⁰ While South Korea experienced an economic boom in the 1970s, the country was not as developed as the United States and could not replicate the same spending level for defense, especially since the good economic times were coming to a close. Secretary Brown and Secretary Vance came to Gleysteen’s aid and supported his opinions, while Brzezinski reportedly remained silent in the car.⁶¹ ⁶² After the Ambassador prompted him, President Carter said that he would back down on the troop withdrawal issue if Park could get defense spending up to 6% of GDP and make a significant move on human rights.⁶³

While President and Mrs. Carter spent the rest of that day in public ceremonies honoring the Korean military at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and paying their respects to President Park’s deceased wife, who was killed in a presidential assassination attempt in 1974, his aides set to work devising a plan to convince South Korean officials to agree with President Carter’s suggestions. President Carter, however, continued to push human rights. At a state dinner that evening, he said that “there is abundant evidence in Korea of the dramatic progress a capable and energetic people can achieve by working together. I believe that this achievement can be matched by similar progress through the realization of basic human aspirations in [sic] political and human rights”.⁶⁴ For the Koreans, this insistence on political liberalization and human rights remained disconcerting. Park’s toast to Carter in response avoided all mention of human rights, and emphasized instead South Korea’s economic achievements, as “proof that demonstrates the superiority of a free, open society we have defended together, but also constitutes a valuable national asset.”⁶⁵ President Carter the next day met with several prominent opposition leaders

⁶⁰ Gleysteen, 48.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Vance, 130.

⁶³ Gleysteen, 52.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 39.

⁶⁵ “Carter in South Korea; Stresses Rights, Reunification; Other Developments.” *Facts On File*, July 6, 1979. Accessed January 26, 2017.

within the legislative branch and religious leaders, thus keeping his promise to show support for South Korean civil society and not only President Park's government.

On July 1, President Park and President Carter met once again to draft their joint communiqué, which stressed the United States continued commitment to South Korea's defense.⁶⁶ In their joint communiqué, the leaders described their discussions of "vital mutual interest" occurring within "an atmosphere of cordial respect and confidence." They also note that "their meeting had deepened understanding and cooperation on many matters of mutual interest . . . [in a] new era of mature partnership based on mutual respect and confidence." The South Koreans gave five million to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees after the crisis in Indochina. By giving money, Park could convey his personal adherence to human rights and to help end human suffering in a way that did not threaten the security of the country or degrade his own personal power. With a promise for a major move for human rights in South Korea and a financial contribution to further human rights outside of South Korea, President Carter could agree with Park to "maintain a high degree of strength and combat readiness to deter and defend against possible aggression." However, this so-called strength was an "important contribution to peace."⁶⁷ Finally, in the joint communiqué, President Carter promises to attend future meetings with the North Koreans as an ally of South Korea, not merely a moderator. Concluding the statement, they discuss the need to "preserve and further cultivate the close partnership existing between their two countries."⁶⁸ While the communiqué addresses trade and security cooperation,

<http://wnd.infobaselearning.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/recordurl.aspx?wid=98259&nid=137769&umbtype=0>. World News Digest.

⁶⁶ "Carter in South Korea; Stresses Rights, Reunification; Other Developments." July 6, 1979. World News Digest.

⁶⁷ Joint Communiqué between President Park and President Carter, July 1, 1979. "6/25/79-7/1/79 President Trip to Japan Economic Summit and Korea: Press Releases re Korea, 6-7/79" Folder. Brzezinski Material Box 17. Jimmy Carter Library.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

it also shows the dominant position of the U.S. Government as Park conceded on liberalization which would weaken his regime.

The last personal interaction between the two leaders occurred in the car on the way to the airport. President Carter asked Park about his religious beliefs, saying that he would “like one of the Baptists to explain our faith, and would send Billy Kim to see him.”⁶⁹ Later in the United States, President Carter discussed this with a Bible class at First Baptist Church of Washington. As a Christian, President Carter felt he “had a duty to attract new followers,” discussing Christianity with Park “at the urging of Reverend Billy Kim.” Park’s Buddhism was a reflection of his upbringing in South Korea, where Buddhism remains one of the most influential and popular religions.⁷⁰ Apparently, the conversation continued “by an exchange of letters.” This discussion about spirituality aided Carter in his desire to further human rights, “now it’s in God’s hands.”⁷¹

Although President Carter proposed trilateral talks with North Korea during his visit in Seoul,⁷² they did not occur because of North Korean government’s refusal to meet with the American government.^{73 74} But American officials left Seoul feeling like they accomplished their goals and the South Koreans were reassured in their physical safety in deterrence against North Korea. Despite these obvious cleavages within the U.S. officials and the cultural divide between the Koreans and the Americans, the summit was ultimately a success and a “good trip.”⁷⁵ Ambassador Gleysteen related the response of the Korean officials as Carter flew away, as

⁶⁹ White House Diaries, 339.

⁷⁰ Political Overview of South Korea, “Japan and Korea Trip Background Papers” Folder. Donated Historical Materials Hendrik Hertzberg Collection Trip Files Box 41. Jimmy Carter Library.

⁷¹ “Religion: Carter Discloses Effort to Convert Park.” *Facts On File*, August 24, 1979. Accessed January 26, 2017. <http://wnd.infobaselearning.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/recordurl.aspx?wid=98259&nid=138511&umbtype=0>. World News Digest.

⁷² White House Diaries, 318.

⁷³ Religion, World News Digest.

⁷⁴ White House Diaries, 340

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 339.

President Park “looked at [Gleysteen], laughed in appreciation, and gave [him] a big bear hug.”⁷⁶

Despite the struggles at the beginning of the conference, the experienced American officials guided the South Koreans and the Americans to come to a successful conclusion of the conference.

Relations Peak after Summit

The Washington Post lambasted President Carter’s “hypocrisy of [his] fine words on human rights”⁷⁷ before meeting President Park. After the summit, reporters praised him for “applying new pressure on the South Korean government [and winning] the strong praise of the country’s dissident religious leaders today.”⁷⁸ This praise continued through July with Congressional testimony of general officers about the troop withdrawal issue and the release of eighty-six political prisoners in South Korea on July 17th.⁷⁹ Several of the prisoners, Reverend Park Hyung Kyoo and Reverend Yeon Ban Gung, were connected to Reverend Billy Kim.⁸⁰ Carter’s visit with Reverend Kim and recommendation that he meet with President Park shows the influence of the American government throughout Korean society, completing one of the goals of the summit. Korean officials were “surprised by the strong pressure exerted by Mr. Carter” during the summit on human rights and increasing domestic military spending. President Park decided to increase military spending to 5.6% GNP, which was “one of two major objectives” for the summit.⁸¹

⁷⁶ Gleysteen, 50.

⁷⁷ Hung Kee Yong, *The Washington Post*

⁷⁸ Chapman, William. “S. Korean Dissidents Praise Carter for Pressing Rights Issue with Park.” *The Washington Post*. July 2, 1979.

⁷⁹ Memo, August 1979, Brzezinski to White House, Carter’s letter to Park about prisoner release, Republic of Korea: President Park Chung Hee, 1/10/79,” Brzezinski Materials, Box 12, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁸⁰ “South Korea Frees 86 Prisoners, July 1, 1979.” *The Washington Post*. July 17, 1979.

⁸¹ Stokes, Henry Scott. “Seoul Will Increase Military Spending.” *The New York Times*. August 9, 1979.

General Jones, General Meyer, and General Vessey testified in front of Congress July 17, 1979 about the security implications of North Korea's military capability, which had been under review since the previous February in response to a suspected North Korean military build-up. From the United States' continued role in South Korea to concerns about U.S. interests throughout the area, Generals Meyer and Vessey stressed the "menacing military and political shadow over prospects for peace on the divided peninsula."⁸² With the contradictory interests of China, the Soviet Union, and the United States, a conflict on the Korean peninsula "could lead to dangerous and unpredictable consequences." On July 20th, President Carter announced the freeze on troop withdrawals, which had been finalized in the first week of July. These plans would "assure the maintenance of our security commitment, preserve an adequate deterrent, nurture the resumption of a serious North-South dialogue, and stabilize a favorable U.S. strategic position in East Asia."⁸³ Despite his desire to "reduce U.S. military forces gradually and let the South Koreans build up their own strength accordingly," President Carter, as he related to his diary on date, was "never able to accomplish this [because] there were very close ties between military leaders in our two countries, so a lot of pressure also came from the Pentagon and the CIA."⁸⁴

While the relations between the United States and South Korea progressed as a result of the summit, President Carter and his administration still faced growing political opposition at home. On July 4, days after returning from an East Asian tour, Carter wrote: "Our trust among the American people is low, and the number of people who listen to my voice is minimal."⁸⁵ He

⁸² Congressional Testimony, Investigations Subcommittee, House Armed Services Committee on Korean Withdrawal, July 17, 1979. "Republic of Korea, 7-12/79" Folder. Brzezinski Material Country File Box 44. Jimmy Carter Library.

⁸³ Statement on Korean Troop Withdrawals, 7/79, "Republic of Korea: 7-12/79" Folder, Brzezinski Material Country File Box 44, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁸⁴ White House Diaries, 280.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 340.

then set out to meet with various government officials to create and deliver what is now known as the “malaise” speech. The core question of this work at Camp David was: Could President Carter govern the country?⁸⁶ Evaluating the speech and American public opinion, there was a boost in Carter’s ratings, showing that the “public agrees on confidence crisis.”⁸⁷ However, “previous gains in public opinion have proved short-lived.” In the wake of the speech, Carter “made a mistake when [he mishandled the decision to change a few members of [his cabinet].” While this decision was already made, the public announcement “created an impression of crisis and sent the wrong message about my confidence in the remaining cabinet members.”⁸⁸ While the “malaise” speech was given in relation to the ongoing energy crisis, the “crisis of confidence” in the American government shows the challenges facing international relations.

The domestic concerns about the energy crisis left the State Department and the U.S. Army to maintain the change in policy in the country. While other Departments had easily identifiable products, the State Department did not have a way of relating ideas to tangible resources, and thus “could not articulate very clearly what we wished to accomplish in a particular country and how we might go about doing so”.⁸⁹ South Korea went from an administration priority to a pit stop in between previously scheduled visits to Japan and Hawaii. The summit demonstrates the distance between the American government and the South Korean government and the distance between the Americans in Washington and Seoul. The disagreements during the conference resulted from a lack of communication and were resolved through the political maneuverings of Americans who could navigate the societal differences.

⁸⁶ White House Diaries, 342.

⁸⁷ Clymer, Adam. “Speech Lifts Carter Rating to 37%; Public Agrees on Confidence Crisis.” *The New York Times*, July 18, 1979.

⁸⁸ White House Diaries, 345.

⁸⁹ Stern, 42.

Carter “pushed human rights [everywhere he went,]”⁹⁰ and his insistence aggravated larger security concerns with the South Korean government and the local officers with cultural context.

⁹⁰ White House Diaries, 339.

Chapter 2: Korea in Transition

Both the Americans and the South Koreans felt relieved after the summit and believed that the relationship would only improve over time. However, Park did not continue with Carter's preferred human rights policies by continuing to exercise complete control over the government and suppressing civil society. President Carter's visit on the one hand legitimized Park's regime but also challenged it through pushing Park on human rights abuses and the American presence in South Korea. This ultimately weakened Park and led to larger changes in South Korean politics. The transition that occurred during this time took the South Korean government away from the United States and its previous with Gleysteen and Wickham to consolidating South Korean networks in bids for personal power.

President Park ousted Democratic Republican Party leader, the major opposition party Kim Young Sam on October 4. All 66 opposition party members resigned from the Korean National Assembly on October 13 to "protest the expulsion from the assembly of their party leader" and the "shameful proceedings of the parliament."¹ Following Kim's ouster, protests began in his home province near Pusan. These disturbances quickly spread north of Pusan to its sister cities of Masan and Changwon. On October 20th, 800 university students demonstrated by "throwing rocks and fire bombs at police posts, shops, houses, and the local office of President Park's Democratic Republic Party."² The New York Times reported the next day that the students were met with "policemen [who] used tear gas"³ to disperse them.

¹ Chapman, William. "Seoul Opposition Quits parliament." *The Washington Post*, October 13, 1979. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

² Henry Scott Stokes, "Seoul Orders Army to Maintain Order in Two More Cities: It Acts after Riot at Masan," *The New York Times*, October 21, 1979.

³ Ibid.

Although no real threat to the Park regime, these protests were, according to a New York Times dispatch, the “worst of their kind since President Park took power in a bloodless 1961 coup”⁴ and were illegal under the Yushin Constitution. They showed “that discipline in South Korea was deteriorating after seven years of a system of Government.”⁵ The mass resignation and the protests “represent a blow to [Park’s] prestige domestically” and “reflects a considerable grass-roots opposition to the expulsion Park’s party engineered nine days ago.”⁶ After Kim’s expulsion from the National Assembly, the KCIA stated that it would censor and restrict press relating to the expulsion itself, the government’s handling of the expulsion. Kim Young-sam told a New York Times reporter after his expulsion that “The time has come for the United States to make a clear choice between a basically dictatorial regime . . . [and] the majority who aspire to democracy.”⁷ The President’s Daily Report File from October 11th noted that the “greater restrictions” placed upon Korean press and that “public reaction to the incident indicates that the Koreans feared the U.S. would link the expulsion directly to further withdrawals of U.S. combat troops from South Korea.”⁸ Despite the success of the summit in June, Koreans officials feared that the incident would prompt another reassessment of troop withdrawal.

Assassination of an Ally

Amidst growing unrest, crisis came on October 26, 1979. President Park Chung Hee, widely criticized for his human rights policies, was assassinated by the head of the KCIA, Kim Jae-kyu, at a private dinner party that had been arranged by the Blue House Chief of Security,

⁴ Stokes, Henry Scott. “Korean Students Extend Protests Against Regime: Official Denies There Were Deaths Korean Students Extend Protests Against Regime Riots Followed Kim’s Ouster.” *The New York Times*, October 20, 1979. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *New York Times*, October 13, William Chapman.

⁷ Lee, Chong-sik. “South Korea 1979: Confrontation, Assassination, and Transition.” *Asian Survey* 20, no. 1 (January 1980): 68. Accessed October 20, 2016. JSTOR.

⁸ President’s Daily Report File, Jimmy Carter Library, October 11, 1979.

Cha Chi-chul. Cha and Kim were great political rivals and offered different policy options for the president. The threat of political fragmentation divided Park's advisors. Cha, the security chief, wanted to use more physical force in suppressing these movements while Kim Jae-kyu advocated for a more tolerant approach to the dissidents. When the protests spread from Masan and Pusan, Cha blamed Kim because he thought Kim was too close to the Americans and too "soft." Park benefitted from his relationship with Americans but he did not want to encourage close relationships with officials. In fact, Park would not promote army officers and give them important positions if they spoke English. Kim, who did have a good relationship with some Americans, felt threatened by Cha and thought he would be fired soon.

Kim believed that Cha would undercut him at every opportunity, as he "blocked most of Kim's reports and recommendations from reaching President Park."⁹ Cha had supported Park since the 1961 coup and was one of his closest advisors. By comparison, Kim had a largely unsuccessful career until suddenly Park had promoted him to a three-star general commanding front-line corps. Kim was not an effective leader and was relieved for incompetence. However, Park continued to support his friend and appointed him to the head of the KCIA. Kim was by no means the only person who benefitted from Park's patronage, but could not keep the President's support and trust because of his incompetence.¹⁰

On the same day, Director Kim invited General Chung, the Army Chief of Staff, to a dinner at the same time, near the room where Kim would meet President Park for dinner. General Wickham, who replaced General Vessey as the commander of U.S. forces in Korea in July, speculated that Kim wanted to implicate General Chung in the assassination attempt and take advantage of his martial law powers afterward. At the time of the dinner, Kim went to Chung to

⁹ Butterfield, Fox. "Seoul Leaders Say K.C.I.A. Chief Killed Park in Policy Rift: Account is Altered." *The New York Times*, October 29, 1979.

¹⁰ Wickham, 14.

explain the “expected” dinner with Park, organized by Cha, and that he would be back in two hours to have dinner with Chung.¹¹ During the dinner with Park, Cha was also present. Typical of a Korean meal, they drank to excess, adding to the heated arguments between the two men. Cha, who also “[halted] most of the reports and recommendations to the President,” “rudely berated Kim.”¹² Kim left the room in the middle of the argument with Cha, came back with a pistol, and shot Cha and President Park.¹³

General Chung went to the ROK army headquarters bunker, where he met with the Minister of National Defense and Joint Chiefs of Staff. Prime Minister Choi Kyu-ha and Secretary Kim called the bunker from the Blue House. According to General Rhu who relayed the contents of the meeting to General Wickham, Director Kim had not yet admitted to the assassination of Park Chung Hee and wanted the military leaders to take over the government. He believed “that most of the population, at least in Seoul and the other major cities, had grown angry with the bureaucracy.”¹⁴ Eventually discovered as the assassin, Kim was immediately disarmed and arrested. The military police in the bunker did not have ammunition loaded in their weapons, which General Wickham and other American officials believe shows the military’s and General Chung’s innocence in the assassination attempt. Everyone in the bunker focused on the security of the country and how to ensure the government’s continuity. Now Acting President Choi Kyu-ha appointed General Chun Doo Hwan the prime investigator of the president’s murder.¹⁵ At this time, General Chun was the commander of the Defense Security Command, which “functioned within the military as a powerful counterintelligence and internal security

¹¹ Wickham, 14

¹² Butterfield, Fox, October 29, 1979.

¹³ Wickham

¹⁴ Ibid, 15.

¹⁵ Ibid.

apparatus,”¹⁶ General Chun, who was close to President Park since the coup in 1961 and was personally appointed to the position of Director by the now deceased leader, began to gather information about potential suspects. An early official press report from the government maintained that Kim Jae Kyu “testified today he assassinated President Park Chung Hee to end one-man rule and restore democracy to South Korea.”¹⁷ The Park regime could not “carry the day against communism in neighboring North Korea.”¹⁸

For all the political turmoil and security instability that the assassination caused, a telegram sent by Ambassador Gleysteen the next day suggested that the average citizen’s daily life had changed little. Despite continuing martial law, Seoul traffic was heavy and stores were open. The government declared “partial” martial law, excluding the southern island of Cheju. Activity in Gwangju and Taegu was also reported as almost normal after the president’s death. However, the military and political elite had to assess the situation to see who would become the next leader of South Korea.

DEFCON 3

The assassination came as a total shock to the American officials in Seoul. President Carter’s first reaction was to tell Secretary Brown “to alert armed forces throughout the western Pacific, and to notify the Soviets, Chinese, and North Koreans that we would not permit any disturbance in South Korea.”¹⁹ General Wickham, who commanded the American forces in South Korea, was not even in Seoul at the time, but in Washington, D.C. Defense Secretary Harold Brown called General Wickham and told him about a meeting in the White House

¹⁶ Wickham, 19.

¹⁷ “Accused Slayer of Park Calls Democracy His Goal.” *The Washington Post*, December 9, 1979.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ White House Diary, 365.

Situation Room to coordinate action. At this point, they did not know the identity of the assassin and were primarily concerned about security on the peninsula. The representatives at the meeting were worried about the possibility of a coup but particularly of North Korean aggression.

General Wickham went to the White House to discuss the plan of action but could not receive a full brief because of the lack of a secure line at his lodgings in Washington. When he arrived at the White House, Wickham had “virtually no knowledge of what was happening in Korea.”²⁰ However, everyone was familiar with the military and political situation in South Korea and General Wickham was impressed with “the resolve of the attendees,”²¹ which included Secretary Vance, Secretary Brown, NSA Brzezinski, and representatives from the State Department and the CIA. They determined that the military in South Korea should make a strong, demonstrative response to deter North Korean action. Even with a continuous debate about deterring versus provoking North Korean action, this logic won out with plans to interact diplomatically with North Koreans as well. The meeting lasted about an hour and General Wickham flew back to Seoul immediately, but the Korean government and military acted without American input or influence. Without General Wickham present in Seoul during this time, the American officials in South Korea had limited access to information from the army.

The Americans were largely left out of the political developments, but General Wickham relied on the relationships he had cultivated within the ROK Army as well as the traditional relationships between U.S. Forces and the South Korean army he now helped command. General Wickham planned to increase U.S. intelligence collection concerning North Korea and meet with Ambassador Gleysteen and Minister of National Defense Rho Jae-hyun as soon as

²⁰ Wickham, 7.

²¹ Ibid, 9.

possible.²² Once he returned to Seoul, he planned a series of immediate field visits to ROK and U.S. units near the DMZ to further deter North Korean action and to set an example of professionalism for South Korean military leaders, who had been more concerned with political machinations in the capital. Lieutenant Colonel Young, a military attaché in Seoul, commented in his memoir that South Korean “generals sometime appear more concerned with politics than with strictly military matters.” After the assassination of President Park, the general officers saw an opportunity to use their rank to gain influence in the new government and were less focused on a possible threat from North Korea, which was the U.S. Government’s main concern.

Despite the relative shock about the assassination, South Koreans in the army and the government suspected American complicity in the tragic event. Several Japanese and American newspapers published articles that stated the U.S. Government’s criticism of Park “sent a signal to would-be coup makers and saviors of the nation.”²³ The United States countered these allegations with limited success by publishing facts to foreign governments and the public with as much transparency as security allowed. This perception continued and was aided by a report where Kim Chae-kyu stated, “a former American ambassador told him that President Park had been in power too long.”²⁴ Ambassador Gleysteen quickly told American officials in Washington that no such exchange occurred between him or his predecessor Ambassador Sneider. He then recounts a meeting with Director Kim on September 26, where he and Bob Brewster, the CIA representative in Korea, expressed their concerns about political polarization and “the ability of the current constitution and political institutions to ensure a peaceful transition of power.”²⁵ President Park was an institution of South Korean politics. Without him, it was unclear where

²² Wickham, 25.

²³ Gleysteen, 58.

²⁴ Ibid, 58.

²⁵ Ibid, 59.

power would move or how the government could change, as it changed drastically under Park since 1961.

Instead of dealing with the relatively stable government, U.S. officials had to determine correct action in an environment of instability and uncertainty. According to Gleysteen, they lacked even basic information to make sound decisions and were denied contact with key Korean leaders at critical points.²⁶ The primary goals of the American military in Seoul were to guard against North Korea exploiting the weakness in South Korea's governing structure, deter fighting between military units in South Korea, and prevent hostile confrontation between U.S. forces and Korean troops or civilians. The U.S. Embassy officials primarily communicated with effective authorities, supported the process of constitutional change, and sustained economic stability.²⁷ The Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington declared DEFCON 3 for U.S. Forces in Korea. This changed the alertness posture because of the assassination and the tensions that could lead to further unrest. The State Department emphasize this change was "a purely precautionary measure in view of the unusual political developments in Korea."²⁸ The military and ambassadorial staff together worked to encourage military and political stability for overall peace and stability on the peninsula. After the assassination, knowledge of local contexts and immediate notification allowed the officials in Seoul to make more independent decisions of people in Washington, who soon after were embroiled in the Iranian hostage crisis.

U.S. officials also supported the interim President Choi Kyu-ha instead of challenging the military organization and inviting possible North Korean aggression and intervention. President Choi was a relatively cautious man who made tentative plans for liberalization in South Korea

²⁶ Gleysteen, 59.

²⁷ Ibid, 63.

²⁸ Telegram, Department of State to Embassy Posts, "Change in Alertness Posture of U.S. Forces," "President Park Assassination" Folder, Brzezinski Material Box 41.

beginning in 1980. President Park organized the South Korean government in a way that made him the sole executor, making the prime minister largely a figurehead in the National Assembly. As president, Choi, described as a “veteran diplomat”²⁹ in a short biography prepared for President Carter’s visit in June, had to adjust quickly to a new role and to new expectations. While President Park was deceased, there was not a major change in the government. His cohort retained control of the government and major agencies, but existed in a state of uncertainty.

Gleysteen wrote to Washington October 27 to show his concerns that the political opposition would “surely seek more reform than they are likely to achieve, and if they push too hard too soon, we may see a rapid return to political polarization”, possibly triggering a coup.³⁰ Additionally, Gleysteen telegraphed Washington on October 27, indicating a sense of cooperation among the opposition and ruling parties and that many in South Korea began suggesting “now is the time to move towards democracy” and said “either implicitly or explicitly, that we play a role.”³¹ This sense that the United States was so involved in the South Korean government and its democratic transition also fueled rumors that the United States was involved in his assassination.

Everyone in the government was in a state of shock at the assassination of President Park. American contacts with opposition leaders “indicated that they are no less upset by the news than the general population.” Kim Young-sam, president of the opposition recently expelled from the National Assembly, issued a statement regretting the national misfortune. The Korean government instituted a moratorium on political activity after the assassination and until the

²⁹ Ch’oe Kyu-ha, “Japan and Korea June-July 1979, Background Papers” Folder, Donated Japan and Korea, June-July 1979 [1] through Baltimore, Maryland August 7, 1979. Box 41. Jimmy Carter Library.

³⁰ Gleysteen, 66.

³¹ Telegram, U.S. Embassy Seoul to Department of State, 10/28/1979, Initial Reflections on Post-Park Chung Hee Situation in Korea, “Republic of Korea: President Park Assassination, 5/79-10/27/79” Folder, Brzezinski Material Country Files Box 45, Jimmy Carter Library

situation was calmer. Ambassador Gleysteen thought that the Koreans would accept a moderately liberal version of the Yushin Constitution but did not believe full liberalization would occur, given the ongoing political uncertainty. He did not want the United States to offer “architectural designs to the Koreans in favor of providing reassurance against the threat in the North, urging the observance of ‘constitutional processes’, and gently working through all channels towards political liberalization.”³² The United States could no longer coerce President Park into making constitutional reforms like it could in the 1960s, Gleysteen argued. If American officials pressured South Korean officials too much, they might face “an extremely unhealthy anti-American reaction.”³³

Not only did American officials have an entirely new domestic situation in South Korea, they also had to face persisting conspiracy theories that the United States was involved in the assassination. At the very least, dissident groups, including students and church leaders, viewed the United States’ harsh criticism of Park prior to the summit in June as a signal for dramatic political change. Given the lack of information about the assassination or the investigation, Korean “authorities provided nothing except sketchy and sometimes contradictory descriptions.”³⁴ The Defense Security Command did not release a comprehensive report until after Park’s funeral, feeding speculation in Seoul, “which often dovetailed with communist propaganda and gained credence from foreign reporting.”³⁵

President Park’s funeral was November 3. Secretary Vance, National Security Advisor Brzezinski, and other foreign dignitaries attended the funeral with the goal of “broadening the base” of the South Korean government, incorporating opposition members into the new

³² Telegram, 10/28/1979.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Gleysteen, 58.

³⁵ Ibid.

government and assisting in the peaceful transition of power. Brzezinski met with South Korean Ambassador to the U.S. Yong Shik Kim, who expressed “strong thanks for [the U.S. Government’s] prompt response in support of South Korea upon hearing the news of Park’s assassination.”³⁶ They also discussed other Asian ambassadors and “how pleased they were with the rapid American statements and actions of support.”³⁷ The American response to the tragedy in Korea gave other Asian nations reassurance of the country’s commitments, but the United States “had no idea how to proceed,” “unlike the Korean government [that] had prepared contingency plans and immediately declared martial law.”³⁸

In meetings with Acting President Choi and Foreign Minister Park Tong Jin, Vance encouraged the government to introduce liberal reforms and reassured him that the U.S. would try to keep political opposition’s demands relatively moderate.³⁹ Vance encouraged Choi “to consult various elements of the political spectrum as [they] decide what changes are needed, including amendment of the constitution.”⁴⁰ For the American officials, the principal challenges facing the government were constitutional reform, cancellation of EM-9, political prisoners, reconvening the National Assembly, and ending martial law.⁴¹ According to Gleysteen, “this American advice was offered politely and discreetly on both sides of the political fence,” presenting Americans as possible moderators in the changing political system.⁴² While Ambassador Gleysteen was officially the U.S. Government’s representative in South Korea, “South Koreans confronted us periodically with the dilemma of who represented the United

³⁶ David Aaron to the President, President’s Daily Report, October 31, 1979, “10/21-10/31/79” Folder, Brzezinski Material Box 12, Jimmy Carter Library.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Young, 58.

³⁹ Gleysteen, 67.

⁴⁰ Korea Focus--Secretary's Discussion with Acting President Choi Kyu-ha, November 3, 1979 United States Embassy. Korea (South). Secret, Cable. November 08, 1979: 7 pp. DNSA collection: Korea, 1969-2000

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Gleysteen, 68.

States,” focusing on the U.S. Army’s presence and close relationship with the South Korean Army.⁴³ South Korea did not have a civilian-controlled government and looked to its American counterpart for solidarity, which the U.S. Army could not give. Despite Carter’s “stronger public words on human rights,” Secretary Vance discussed the “overlapping interests in stability and security as well as democratic process of the long-term Asian ally.”⁴⁴ This struggle for who represented the United States became more difficult as the security situation on the peninsula became less certain.

General Wickham and Ambassador Gleysteen had a close personal relationship, with weekly private breakfasts and regular phone calls, but they still had to combat the perception that the U.S. Army would intervene and support a military takeover. Secretary Vance and other officials could dedicate time and focus to South Korean issues immediately after the assassination, but the focus in Washington quickly shifted when the Iranian Hostage Crisis began on November 4, 1979.

Iranian Hostage Crisis

The United States had been involved with in Iran since World War II, pressing the Soviet Union out of the northern half of the country in 1946, reinstated the shah after helping to overthrow Premier Mohammed Mossadegh, and in January 1979 when they encouraged the shah to step down. The United States hoped to stop more political unrest and instability by encouraging a more democratic government in Iran. The American relationship with the shah continued after he stepped down. President Carter allowed the shah to come to the United States on October 20th for medical treatment. He wanted to inform the embassy in Tehran that this

⁴³ Stern, 68.

⁴⁴ Oberdorfer, Don. “Vance Is Visiting Seoul to Discuss New Government: Vance to Korea, Carries Views on Park Succession.” *The Washington Post*. November 1, 1979.

would occur, preferably with permission from the Bazargan government.⁴⁵ On November 4, 1979, student militants took over the American Embassy in Tehran and seized over 90 hostages. This unprecedented crisis presented policymakers and leaders in the United States “with an enormous psychological, intellectual, and strategic problem.”⁴⁶

The overall strategy for the Carter administration, according to the President was

“first, to protect the present and long-range interests of the United States; secondly, to preserve the lives of the American hostages and to secure as quickly as possible their safe release; if possible, to avoid bloodshed which might further endanger the lives of our fellow citizens; to enlist the help of other nations in condemning this act of violence which is shocking and violates the moral and legal standards of a civilized world; to convince and to persuade the Iranian leaders that the real danger to their nation lies in the north in the Soviet Union and from the Soviet troops now in Afghanistan.”⁴⁷

It was difficult to execute this strategy. American officials did not know which groups they could negotiate with day to day or if their negotiations would be put into effect afterwards.

Similar to South Korea, American officials had to operate outside of a Western context. The two countries met each other with very different assumptions, the United States as a pragmatic and rational negotiator and Iran as a fundamentalist Islamic nation. Unlike the situation in South Korea, the Iranian hostage crisis became a central part of American news and deeply affect public psyche. The foreign media also reacted negatively to the situation. The South Korean paper Joongang Ilbo argued on November 8, “the Carter Administration should not succumb to Khomeini’s challenge to international law in demanding the return of the Shah to Iran.” Another paper in Korea, Hankook Ilbo said, “even American editorials agree with the U.S. Government that the Shah ought not to be turned over under outside pressure. Western allies also supported

⁴⁵ White House Diaries, 364.

⁴⁶ “Jimmy Carter: The State of the Union Address Delivered Before a Joint Session of the Congress. - January 23, 1980.” The American Presidency Project. Accessed March 25, 2017. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=33079>

⁴⁷ Larson, David L. "The American Response to the Iranian Hostage Crisis: 444 Days of Decision." *International Social Science Review* 57, no. 4 (Autumn 1982): 201.

the United States' position on November 8 and commended President Carter's "restraint" and "measured" response to the crisis.⁴⁸

Despite his optimism about the prospects for stability and possible liberalization, the beginning of the Iranian hostage crisis marks a turning point in the Carter administration. South Korea, originally defined as one of the key concerns of the administration, was neglected by the executive branch during a time of intense political turmoil because of this extended and well-publicized crisis in Iran. The United States could have used this time to focus on the opportunity to liberalize the government in South Korea after the removal of the military dictator, but President Carter and his administration needed to focus on the domestic pressures that arose from the Iranian hostage crisis.

"Veteran Diplomat" in the Lead

After President Park's death, the government did not make major changes. The same factions held control over the government, the same dissident leaders pushed for constitutional reforms, and the military remained a large influence but was not overtly involved. The Yushin Constitution allowed the president to appoint one third of the seats in the National Assembly, ensuring a majority in the legislative branch to simplify legislation. Park relied on the American presence in South Korea but also did not encourage strong ties because of the possible threat it represented to his regime. In contrast, Choi seemed to embrace the Americans and their presence. In his November 3rd meeting with Vance, Choi articulated the South Korean desire to determine its government "in accordance with the present legal order."⁴⁹ Choi continually

⁴⁸ Morning Digest, Foreign Media Reaction, 11/8/79, "Weekly Reports to the President, 102-120" Folder, Subject File Box 42, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁴⁹ Transcript.

discussed the next president and the decisions that he would face, highlighting the transitory nature of Korean politics at this time.

General Wickham wrote to Acting President Choi to “reaffirm the ROK/US Combined Forces Command’s total dedication to the Nation’s security . . . in accordance with directions from the national command and military authorities”.⁵⁰ American officials thought he would do a credible job as the interim president, but that he lacked the assertiveness needed to reform the Yushin Constitution. Through the Yushin constitution, he became president by the “National Conference for Unification,” which was a small system mirroring the Electoral College and without popular direct vote. Park Chung Hee led the government and “ran South Korea, down to the last detail.” While Gleysteen believed that the civilian government in Korea could be effective, the *Washington Post* described Choi Kyu Hah as a “ceremonial leader”⁵¹ and a “blind, obedient follower of the late president.”⁵² Choi’s policies were similar to Park’s and he feared that “if [they] hurry too much, [they] might make a serious mistake.”⁵³ Without significant leadership from Choi, the civilian government had no chance of filling the political vacuum left by Park’s death. Because the country continued operating under martial law, the Korean army began to reassert itself. The *Washington Post* claimed that the Army was the most prestigious domestic institution and was “relatively untainted by divisive personal politics.”⁵⁴ Despite Vance’s claims about his support of the civilian government, Lieutenant Colonel Young said, “it was obvious to even the most unsophisticated observer that the focus of power in South Korea

⁵⁰ Wickham, 35.

⁵¹ Chapman, William. “South Korean Military Filling Power Vacuum Left by Park: S. Korean Military Filling Political Power Vacuum.” *The Washington Post*. October 31, 1979.

⁵² “Choi Kyu Hah: Caretaker President.” *The Washington Post*. October 28, 1979: A21.

⁵³ Korea Focus--Secretary's Discussion with Acting President Choi Kyu-ha, November 3, 1979 United States Embassy. Korea (South). Secret, Cable. November 08, 1979: 7 pp. DNSA collection: Korea, 1969-2000. ProQuest.

⁵⁴ South Korean Military Filling Power Vacuum Left by Park: S. Korean Military Filling Political Power Vacuum October 31, 1979.

remained with the military.”⁵⁵ He also criticized the American diplomats for “[using] every opportunity to convince the Choi government to make sweeping changes even though it had no real power to do so.”⁵⁶

Choi was elected president under the constitution on December 6th. The opposition parties wanted to reform the constitution as soon as possible, but there was very little agreement on how and when to institute reforms. Additionally, the parties wanted to end the martial law that was declared in October before Park’s death and revoke Emergency Measure 9, which allowed the government to imprison people for speaking out against the regime. There were several rallies held by opposition parties. Authorities arrested 96 people in Seoul on November 24th and several in Gwangju on the 28th, allegedly “subjecting many of the arrested to grueling tortures.”⁵⁷

This tension abated significantly after the elections held December 6th, when Choi Kyuha was elected president unanimously by the National Council for Reunification, the electoral college. Ambassador Gleysteen believed “that large numbers of urban Koreans, particularly the growing middle class, appeared ready to support Choi if he moved to ease control.”⁵⁸ On December 9th, President Choi revoked Emergency Measure 9 and released prominent political prisoners, including Kim Dae Jung. President Carter wrote a letter to congratulate Choi on his electoral win saying, “the United States remains a reliable friend and ally of the Republic of Korea.”⁵⁹ At the same time, a committee of 26 people, including 12 opposition members, was meeting to draft a new constitution for review.⁶⁰ But before they could propose any lasting

⁵⁵ Young, 60.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Lee, Chong-sik. "South Korea 1979: Confrontation, Assassination, and Transition." *Asian Survey* 20, no. 1 (January 1980): 71. Accessed October 20, 2016. JSTOR.

⁵⁸ Gleysteen, 69.

⁵⁹ Letter to Choi from Carter, December 12, 1979, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁶⁰ Lee, Chong-sik.

change, the government of South Korea experienced another major transition, the military coup the Americans feared from the beginning.

Chapter 3: Chun in Charge

After Park Chung Hee's death, officials in Washington let the ambassador and other American officials make decisions for South Korea because of the fluidity of the situation on the ground. This became especially pronounced after the Iranian hostage crisis began. The 12/12 Incident is not mentioned in Carter's White House Diary, Secretary Vance's memoir, or in Brzezinski's memoir. The Iranian Hostage Crisis was the most pressing international concern for the Carter administration, and there was little direction from Washington after General Chun Doo Hwan took over the government in December 1979.

According to Ambassador Gleysteen, South Korea was "in much better shape than many Koreans and outsiders would have assumed"¹ by the end of November 1979. Media sources actually began to liberalize during Choi's brief time as president, "enjoy[ing] a brief respite after Park Chung Hee's assassination."² From President Park's assassination and the uncertainty in the Korean government, the Americans strove to provide a sense of security, "economic as well as military,"³ and a continuing relationship based on trust. President Choi maintained the existing Blue House system, keeping staffers and a few trusted advisors with the majority of administrative and political power. Because of this break in American influence, advice was offered tentatively and to both sides, including the liberal opposition. The American officials believed they still held a large level of influence in South Korea because of the close ties of the military and the good relations between the American officials in Seoul. President Carter wrote to Choi Kyu-ha shortly after his election, saying that the "United States remains a reliable friend

¹ Gleysteen, 73.

² Parker, Chang Sup. "Korean Media Often Allied with Ruling Political Parties." *Newspaper Research Journal* 36, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 355.

³ Gleysteen, 76.

and ally of the Republic of Korea.”⁴ President Carter seemed confident in the efficacy of the new administration in bringing about peaceful, democratic change with “the support of all friends of [Choi’s] great nation.”⁵ This confidence lasted less than a week within the government of South Korea, due to unforeseen circumstances.

Chun’s Coup

The night of December 12, General Chun called a meeting of general officers in the South Korea army to discuss the political unrest in the country since the assassination. After discussing the possible opposition from Ambassador Gleysteen and General Wickham, they tried to enlist support from other American officers but “knew the United States would take a very dim view of this kind of military action.”⁶ Once in agreement, General Chun ordered the arrest of General Chung, who was still under investigation from the assassination. After Chung’s arrest, Chun telephoned the other troops that supported him and mobilized the coup around six in the evening. An hour and a half later, General Wickham and Ambassador Gleysteen were in the bunker. They could not reach President Choi or General Chun, who Gleysteen had previously warned that in-fighting between South Korean troops could provoke North Korean action. One of the battalions under Chun’s command was the 9th Division of the Combined Forces Command. These troops were under General Wickham’s command and their movement “surprised and incensed [him], particularly those assigned to sensitive DMZ duty.”⁷ The conspirators coerced the Minister of National Defense and President-elect Choi to accept their demands, which included the arrest of General Chung after the assassination of President Park.

⁴ Letter, President Carter to President Choi, 12/79, “Republic of Korea: President Choi Kyu Hah, 12/79-8/80” Folder, Brzezinski Materials Box 12, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Wickham, 55.

⁷ Young, 70.

After midnight, General Wickham wrote to Washington officials about the events of the 12th, saying “a coup is in progress by a group of middle level officers, plus several senior officers who seek to restore tougher domestic controls.”⁸ Wickham relayed his interpretation of events to the Department of Defense in Washington that night saying, “coup officers are committed, and the evidence of their action suggests that a struggle of potentially serious dimensions will continue in the ROK army.”⁹ American officials had to placate the opposition, which continued to push for liberal reforms, and the remnants of President Park’s conservative factions. They struggled to figure out “how to liberalize the structure fast enough . . . but steadily enough to avoid the danger of over-reaching themselves or scaring military elements into a military takeover.”¹⁰

The American media initially saw the coup as a sign of the strength of South Korea’s democracy. Americans believed the generals “would insist on retaining the authoritarian system left by the late president Park Chung Hee” but there were signs that “political reform will continue and the new generals now holding power do not intend to meddle.”¹¹ Similarly, American officials were encouraged by the maintenance of the civilian government and “did not completely rule out the possibility of achieving some democratic progress.”¹² Because of the lack of information, Chun Doo Hwan was not identified as the leader of the coup until December 24. The Washington Post described Chun as an “obscure officer.” Because of press censorship, Chun’s name was not published, “but when something important happens, the first question certain to be asked is: ‘Did Chun do that?’”¹³

⁸ Wickham, 63.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Wickham, 73.

¹¹ “S. Korea's Fledgling Democracy Survives Upheaval by Military” *The Washington Post*. December 23, 1979.

¹² Gleysteen, 90.

¹³ Chapman, William. “General Becomes Key Seoul Figure: Obscure Officer Emerges As Leader After Dec. 12 Military Action.” *The Washington Post*. December 24, 1979: A7.

The American media characterized Chun Doo Hwan as a “shadowy figure.”¹⁴ The American officials “claimed to have no knowledge or biographical information, who they referred to as a ‘previously unknown officer.’”¹⁵ Chun participated in Park’s coup in 1961 and stayed close to the president until his death. President Park appointed him the Defense Security Commander. Acting President Choi appointed Chun was the chief of the investigation into Park’s death. A 1978 report from South Korea identified General Chun as a future leader of the South Korean army. Chun was also associates with embassy officers for years before the coup occurred.¹⁶ President Choi appointed General Chun as the leader of the investigation into Park’s death as the Director of the Defense Security Command, which was a powerful government institution.

The “new military,” led by Chun Doo Hwan, were “the main beneficiary of Park’s patronage and did not want democratization or any abrupt departure from the Yushin system.”¹⁷ As an army general, President Park rewarded his military colleagues and without him, this group of people lost their patron. Park was partial to his classmate from the Korean Military Academy, modeled after the United States’ West Point. Later classes developed similar bonds, which created “a recognizable division between the older Korean generals and the younger officers.”¹⁸ According to Lieutenant Colonel Young, these divisions “were probably well known [to most Koreans] but they were not to Americans.”¹⁹ With the United States encouraging even more liberal reforms, and President Choi’s appeasing behavior toward the Americans, he mobilized his own forces, much to the surprise of the Americans and other Koreans in government. Concerned

¹⁴ Wickham, 19.

¹⁵ Young, 53.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Seongyi Yun, “Democratization in South Korea: Social Movements and Their Political Opportunity Structure,” *Asian Perspective* 21, no. 3 (Winter 1997): 152.

¹⁸ Young, 52.

¹⁹ Ibid.

with the large influence of the military in South Korean government, the Carter administration had attempted to limit their influence and push for liberal reforms. General Chun's coup was a "complete reversal of everything President Carter had tried to accomplish."²⁰ With closer attention to local intelligence and army culture, American officials could have used their Korean networks more effectively and brought about change in South Korea during this transformative time.

General Wickham, Ambassador Gleysteen, and CIA Representative Bill Brewster were all shocked at the news of Chun's coup. Gleysteen remembers that they were "caught by complete surprise that night, victims of a painful intelligence failure."²¹ However, General Wickham was approached by General Lew about dissatisfaction among some elite military members a few weeks prior. Despite this early warning, the American officials were unprepared for the coup and angry "over the breach of the chain of command and the unauthorized diversion of troops away from their defense mission north of Seoul."²² North Korea, like the Americans, was surprised after President Park's assassination. The U.S. Army was concerned that the North Korean government would be more prepared to challenge the security of South Korea if a coup occurred. The American "role must continue to be that of urging moderation, full recognition of the risks inherent in the coup, and preparedness against the enemy threat."²³ Ambassador Gleysteen did not believe that "the United States could effectively stop Chun . . . in the absence of major resistance within the Korean army, civilian government, or Korean public."²⁴ The United States government struggled to relay its policy preferences to the Korean people, who were largely ignorant of American action, because of military censors in place under martial law.

²⁰ Wickham, 64.

²¹ Gleysteen, 78.

²² Wickham, 60.

²³ Ibid, 63.

²⁴ Gleysteen, 89.

Chun and his coconspirators believed that “growing political unrest in the country [would get] quickly out of hand unless strong actions were taken.”²⁵ South Korean Generals surrounding General Wickham “expressed the hope that the officers involved in the coup would continue to support the president-elect and the constitution.”²⁶ General Wickham’s advisors knew that the American government did not approve of this kind of military action and had emphasized liberalization and democratization in South Korea. Ambassador Gleysteen concluded that Chun’s action did not constitute a coup because the military coup was not violent, no deaths occurred, and that the government was still in place with President Choi at its head. General Lee, the new South Korea army Chief of Staff, tried to convince General Wickham that President-elect Choi “had been in firm control of the military’s activities and that it was Choi issuing the orders.”²⁷ General Wickham questioned General Lee’s statements and disagreed with Ambassador Gleysteen’s analysis saying that he was “convinced that Chun and his partners fully intended to seize absolute power but had simply lacked a comprehensive plan for how to go about it.” It is true that Chun kept the government’s structure as it stood, but he put his men in powerful positions. Lieutenant General Lee Heui Seung was the Army Chief of Staff and Martial Law Commander, and he appointed the Minister of Defense, Minister of Home Affairs, and Minister of Justice. With these positions essentially under his control, “Chun became the number one man in Korea and state affairs were decided by his own will, rather than by the acting president, Choi Kyu Ha.”²⁸

Two days after the coup, Ambassador Gleysteen met with Chun Doo Hwan and “emphasized our great concern over the developments of December 12 in terms of the danger of

²⁵ Wickham, 54.

²⁶ Ibid, 64.

²⁷ Wickham, 83.

²⁸ Yun, 152.

continued disunity within the ROK Armed Forces and its impact on possible North Korean reactions and the progress of constitutional liberalization and political and economic stability”²⁹ Gleysteen worried that Chun would seek to use the meeting with representative of the U.S. Government as implicit support and an acceptance of the legitimacy of his group’s seizure of power.³⁰ Furthermore, the Korean government could not afford to lose the support of the U.S. military and government. He explained the U.S. “interest to insure development of a broadly based constitutional government under civilian leadership.” Gleysteen also met with President Choi soon after Chun’s coup, and believed “that Choi and his administration were too weak to reassert control over the military . . . Thus, the shift in power was a ‘done deal.’”³¹

The Carter administration reviewed U.S. policy toward South Korea yet again to show their displeasure with the military action taken by Chun and his followers. They seriously considered economic sanctions and postponing the annual security meeting, which was a symbol of the U.S. commitment to South Korea.³² Washington decided against sanctions, as they feared it would worsen the already unstable economy. While American officials did not make any overt stance against Chun, they hoped that he would become more moderate. Ambassador Gleysteen and other embassy officers tried to educate Korean leaders about American policy through political parties, businesses, churches, and universities.³³ However, this effort was not effective, as many Koreans still question American culpability in relation to Chun’s coup. The South Korean military conveyed the relative ignorance of the Korean people of U.S. policy to General Wickham.³⁴

²⁹ Telegram, Ambassador Gleysteen to Secretary Vance, 12/15/1979, “Republic of Korea: 7-12/79” Folder, Brzezinski Material Country File Box 44, Jimmy Carter Library.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Wickham, 70.

³² Gleysteen, 91.

³³ Ibid, 92.

³⁴ Wickham, 75.

On the military side, General Lee, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, encouraged General Wickham “to become actively involved in the domestic scene in order to assure that the internal situation does not turn sour and invite intervention by the north.”³⁵ Despite the close relationship between the two armies, General Lee reminded General Wickham that “Koreans have never informed the Americans of insurgent activity[, not] before the coup in 1961, not in December 1979, and we will not in the future.”³⁶ General Wickham wanted Korean leadership to recognize the severity of the American response, which could have led to a reassessment of American security agreements in South Korea. The American military provided basic security on the peninsula, which was needed because of the political instability.

Ambassador Gleysteen met with Chun to discuss the coup and the American response. General Wickham did not meet with General Chun initially after the coup at Ambassador Gleysteen’s request.³⁷ Gleysteen, as a presidential appointee, was the official voice of the United States in South Korea and had primacy over General Wickham. At that point, as the ambassador later recalled, “it was becoming evident that Chun held the real political power in Korea and the embassy wanted to take the lead in dealing with him.”³⁸ In the past there were instances where Korean officials deferred to the American military leadership in South Korea instead of the ambassadorial staff that represented the president. Gleysteen’s request meant to simplify the process and deal with Chun directly through executive channels, but many Koreans did not see the Ambassador as the representative of American power in the country. Gleysteen’s insistence on meeting with Chun also contradicts his own assessment of Chun’s political aspirations and

³⁵ Wickham, 75.

³⁶ Ibid, 76.

³⁷ Young, 84.

³⁸ Ibid, 83.

power. If Gleysteen recognized Chun's political power and ambitions, he did not relay them to Secretary Vance through the unclassified telegrams.

A week after the 12/12 Incident, a Korean army officer approached General Wickham, saying he "spoke for an important faction within the military that was very upset with events and what they might portend for the future."³⁹ The officer, who was not named in Wickham's memoir, wanted American support in a possible counter-coup. While the United States did not support the coup in December, rejecting the counter-coup forced General Wickham and Ambassador Gleysteen to "tacitly support Chun and his group."⁴⁰ Chun Doo Hwan was anxious about further infighting within the Korean army but "asserted that unity would be restored within a month."⁴¹ Stability was clearly the prime motivation for the American officials after December 12, as "continued disunity with the ROK armed forces and . . . possible North Korean reactions [could affect] the progress of constitutional liberalization" as Gleysteen cabled Vance on December 14.⁴² Both General Wickham and Ambassador Gleysteen agreed that they could not support the military faction because it was "madness" to encourage a struggle within the Korean Army. In a telegram to Secretary Vance, Gleysteen suggested that the American government publish a strong statement that "would strongly oppose efforts by the military leaders who took over power in the army on December 12 to further aggrandize their position or to seize control of the civilian government."⁴³

The Reemerging Cold War and American Foreign Policy

Not only did the United States focus on the ongoing Iranian Hostage crisis, the Carter

³⁹ Young, 77.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 78.

⁴¹ Gleysteen, 93.

⁴² Telegram, Gleysteen to Vance, December 14, 1979, Jimmy Carter Library

⁴³ Telegram, Gleysteen to Vance, February 2, 1980, Jimmy Carter Library

administration operated in a reemerging Cold War environment. SALT II was signed earlier in the summer 1979, but tensions with the Soviet Union heightened again after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The Carter administration assisted “moderate government in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf [as] a major element of foreign policy.”⁴⁴ With involvement with the shah in Iran, arms deals with Saudi Arabia, and Soviet influence in Afghanistan, the U.S. Government needed to closely watch events in the Middle East. The invasion occurred on December 25, 1979, less than two weeks after the 12/12 Incident. President Carter wrote to Brezhnev on December 28, saying the invasion of Afghanistan was “a clear threat to that peace” that “could mark a fundamental and long-lasting turning point in [American-Soviet] relations.”⁴⁵

The State of the Union Address took place on January 23rd, 1980, where the president articulated the “Carter doctrine” and the repulsion of any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region.⁴⁶ This policy diverged from President Carter’s campaign promises and practices over his administration. He pressured South Korea on human rights, which to some signaled the support for the removal of President Park. The Cold War tensions, which President Carter wished to alleviate, were stronger than ever. The invasion of Afghanistan marks the beginning of the “second” Cold War. This is shown in the main concern on the Korean peninsula about North Korean military aggression and less on the actual practice of the South Korean government. The Soviet invasion caused the National Security Council, Department of Defense, and the State Department to reevaluate their relationship with the Soviet Union and American foreign policy overall. This “downward spiral” of relations with the Soviet Union motivated them to act more aggressively in the Middle East. U.S. allies in Europe were especially

⁴⁴Vance, Cyrus R. *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983, 386.

⁴⁵ Brzezinski, 429.

⁴⁶ Jimmy Carter: The State of the Union Address Delivered Before a Joint Session of the Congress. - January 23, 1980

concerned with the American reaction, believing it was too strong.⁴⁷

The ideological disagreements between the National Security Advisor and the Secretary of State became more substantive as the president pursued more aggressive policies. This came to a head while the administration was planning a military rescue of American hostages in Iran. The problem of the Iranian Hostage Crisis just became a larger foreign policy failure for the Carter administration and showed how President Carter's policies could lead to political instability. Secretary Vance negotiated with European and Asian allies to also pressure Iran and received little support. Carter wanted to exhaust every peaceful opportunity to get the hostages back but was open to using force to accomplish their rescue. Vance was opposed to this policy "as long as the hostages were unharmed and in no imminent danger,"⁴⁸ believing that they would be safely released when Khomeini had successfully set up an Islamic republic.

While Secretary Vance took leave on April 10th, 1980, the National Security Council met on April 11th to decide if a rescue mission was necessary. Vance's representative in the meeting, spoke out against the rescue mission but was the only person present to do so. When Vance arrived back in Washington after the meeting, the president "reaffirmed his April 11 decision" to continue with a military rescue mission, prompting Vance's resignation as Secretary of State. With Vance's resignation, President Carter appointed Senator Edmund Muskie to replace him. While Vance believed Senator Muskie to be capable, many of his own staff wanted to leave the administration. This exodus of knowledgeable staff further complicated a delicate foreign policy situation in many areas. Secretary Vance struggled to make President Carter understand his concerns about international issues, and it was unlikely that Secretary Muskie would be able to communicate Ambassador Gleysteen's concerns any better than his predecessor. In the ongoing,

⁴⁷ Brzezinski, 436.

⁴⁸ Vance, 408.

Vance-Brzezinski feud, Carter began to take more forceful action in foreign policy. President Carter did not Vance's counsel into account when creating policy, particularly on the rescue mission in Iran, which "[created] an institutionalized schizophrenia in policymaking, especially on Cold War issues."⁴⁹ The President and his staff in Washington were generally concerned about the reemergence of Cold War threats and providing security, and less about democratization efforts at this time. Secretary Vance continued his push for liberalization and human rights throughout Carter's presidency. His absence after the failed rescue mission would push Carter closer to Brzezinski and his security concerns.

President Choi wrote a letter to President Carter about the failed rescue mission, sending condolences for the loss of "precious lives and injuries of American personnel involved."⁵⁰ He also assured the President that South Korea supported an early solution to the hostage problem. When President Carter replied, he said that he could "continue to count on [Choi's] assistance and support as [he pursued] this imperative task."⁵¹ President Carter wrote this letter on April 30, 1980, unaware of the unrest brewing in South Korea. Less than three weeks later, General Chun Doo Hwan brutally suppressed a popular uprising in Gwangju.

The Road to Gwangju

Ambassador Gleysteen, and thus the State Department, saw President Choi as the head of the government for some time after the coup. Chun had seized control of the ROK Army but kept the existing government in place. They were wary because of the intelligence failure from the

⁴⁹ Herring, George C. *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 822.

⁵⁰ Letter, President Choi to President Carter, "Republic of Korea: President Choi Kyu Hah, 12/79-8/80" Folder, Brzezinski Materials Box 12, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁵¹ Letter, President Carter to President Choi, 4/30/1980, "Republic of Korea: President Choi Kyu Hah, 12/79-8/80" Folder, Brzezinski Materials Box 12, Jimmy Carter Library.

coup itself meant that they were susceptible to planted information. In a meeting with General Wickham, Chun said “the public is already alarmed about actions taken on the night of December 12 and the role of the military. If Americans continue to say that the military needs to be watched, then the public will continue to be alarmed, and worse the North Koreans may sense opportunities to exploit unrest.”⁵² Chun Doo Hwan attacked American intervention in South Korea in the past and Ambassador Gleysteen for “conduct allegedly reminiscent of a ‘colonial governor general.’”⁵³ Distancing the South Koreans from the American government, Chun continued Park’s policy of favoring those with little interactions with the Americans, unlike General Lew and General Chung.

In February 1980, Ambassador Gleysteen wrote to Secretary Vance about a possible promotion for General Chun. Currently a Major General, there was a movement within the army to have General Chun Doo Hwan promoted to a Lieutenant General, but President Choi decided against it because “it may well happen a few months from now.”⁵⁴ While demonstrating the lack of power that President Choi held, Chun’s promotion also points to larger instability within the Korean Army. JCS Chairman Lew Byong Hyun, General Rhee, and General Wickham believed that the promotion of Chun to Lieutenant General showed “there may be further trouble brewing within the army.”⁵⁵ While there was a meeting among general officers to move against Chun, they did not take any action on the matter. Ambassador Gleysteen wanted to make clear that the “USG believes it would be potentially disastrous for the ROK if one army group were to try to undo the events of December 12 or if elements on the other side were aggrandize their position

⁵² Wickham, 114

⁵³ Gleysteen, 98.

⁵⁴ Telegram, Ambassador Gleysteen to Secretary Vance, 2/19/80, “Republic of Korea: 1-5/80” Folder. Brzezinski Materials Country File Box 44, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

further.”⁵⁶ In addition, Gleysteen believed that there would be more divisions within the Korean Army and Korean government in the next few months, as President Choi struggled to maintain the façade of his administration against Chun’s inner workings and plots.

After December 12, Chun Doo Hwan consolidated more and more power, but American officials were still confident in the possibility of a liberalized South Korea. Writing to Secretary Vance in March 1980, Gleysteen stated, “The prospects for stability and democratic-mindedness in the ROK during 1980 are fair.”⁵⁷ Additionally, he believed the likelihood of a military coup “seem to have receded – in part because military officers are coming to understand the complexity of Korea’s economy and the delicacy of Korea’s foreign relationships,”⁵⁸ including their relationship with the United States. The relationship with the United States was fraught under Park Chung Hee, and the Carter administration still wanted to further human rights under Choi. However, Chun Doo Hwan as the DCS was promoted to Lieutenant General in March and held more influence within the military by “extend[ing] his intelligence security net throughout the armed services by means of a commissar system.”⁵⁹ At this time, Gleysteen predicted that politicians, including President Choi would be more influential as the “country heads toward more decisive stages of constitutional amendment and elections.”⁶⁰ This interpretation was complicated by the fact that the South Koreans were trying to draw away from the Americans. In a telegram from March 27, General Wickham relays his concerns about the changes in the ROK defense establishment to Secretary of Defense Brown, saying “the increased security procedures . . . apparently are an attempt by the ROK military leadership to stop leaks of politically sensitive

⁵⁶ Telegram, 2/19/80.

⁵⁷ Telegram, Ambassador Gleysteen to Secretary Vance, 3/27/80, “Republic of Korea: 1-5/80,” Brzezinski Material Country File Box 44, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

information to U.S. government officials.”⁶¹ While Wickham was confident that was “no degradation in intelligence,” the restructuring illustrates the widening gap between the two military forces.

Ambassador Gleysteen’s analysis of the situation differed from his military counterpart in several ways. While the ambassador recognized the intentions of the conspirators to “play a powerful back ground to a weak civilian government,” General Wickham believed “Chun and his partners would seize absolute power but had simply lacked a comprehensive plan.”⁶² However, both officials concluded it was not the role of the United States to choose the leader in South Korea. President Choi was not the central character that South Koreans needed to unite the government after the death of Park Chung Hee and the subsequent factionalism within the government and the military. While Park was charismatic and cunning, Choi allowed himself to be seen as a “flabby, hyper cautious leader content with formal role playing.”⁶³ To discontented military and some unhappy politicians, Chun Doo Hwan looked like he could invigorate the South Korean government, which “lost efficiency, discipline, and momentum”⁶⁴ since Park Chung Hee’s death. The South Korean military disagreed on several issues but they all were in agreement in their general distrust of Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung, two major opposition leaders in the Democratic Republican Party (DRP). If either Kim came to power, they “would move to prevent it in advance of an election or by coup after the election.”⁶⁵ The military thrived under the Yushin system instituted by President Park and resisted liberalization. Gleysteen saw

⁶¹ Telegram, General Wickham to Secretary Brown, 3/27/1980, “Republic of Korea: 1-5/80” Folder, Brzezinski Material Country File Box 44, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁶² Wickham, 68.

⁶³ Telegram, Gleysteen, 3/27/80

⁶⁴ Telegram, Ambassador Gleysteen to Secretary Vance, 3/80, “Republic of Korea: 1-5/80,” Brzezinski Material Country File Box 44, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Chun Doo Hwan as one of several Korean decision makers as power was widely diffused.⁶⁶

General Chun widely feared within the army because of his position as DSC commander but still had to placate his coconspirators from December 12th.

In April 1980, the South Korean ambassador to the United States, Kim Young-shik, visited Seoul and met with relevant political actors, military officers, and businessmen. His thoughts on the political climate, relayed through Secretary Vance, give perspective along with the reports of the American officials stationed in Seoul. According to Ambassador Kim, Chun Doo Hwan seemed to be “relatively uninformed on the wider contest of world issues within which ROK-US relations existed.”⁶⁷ He also met with editors, publishers, academics, and businessmen, concluding that any military interference with the next presidential election would cause a dangerous reaction in the public. The public protests that ousted Syngman Rhee in 1960 were prompted by irregularities in the presidential election of that year. However, according to a report to Secretary Brown, the South Korean military increased security procedures in February and March to stop leaks of politically sensitive information to U.S. Government officials. These regulations would ensure that only authorized forms of contact between South Korean military officials and foreign officials occurred, and that when they did, they only discussed approved topics. These were put in place as a reaction to the American response to Chun Doo Hwan’s coup and actions as Defense Security Command.

Like Park Chung Hee’s regime, Chun Doo Hwan also opposed excessive American influence within the government. General Chun “issued blanket instructions that all high-level contacts with American officials were to be cleared with the DSC,”⁶⁸ which Chun still commanded. The military and officials in Park’s government believed President Choi was weak

⁶⁶ Telegram, Gleysteen to Vance, 3/80.

⁶⁷ Vance telegram, April 1980

⁶⁸ Wickham, 80.

because he appealed the Americans. Chun's followers wanted a return to Park-era politics with a strong military leader. By inhibiting traditional relationships between U.S. Army officials and the South Korean officials, the conspirators could control the image of the Choi government and Chun's role within it. Despite the maintenance of normal intelligence exchange between the two countries, the regulations tried to degrade U.S.-South Korean relations. The popularity of General Wickham and Ambassador Gleysteen among Korean officials allowed these relationships to function "satisfactorily,"⁶⁹ but suggested a larger information gap. The American officials in South Korea could only react to the transformational events in 1979 because of a lack of operable intelligence. After the death of President Park and the uncertain political situation, the networks Americans used in South Korea for information changed as the people in power did changed also.

In April 1980, after being promoted to three-star general, President Choi announced that he would appoint Chun as the new KCIA Director. During Park's presidency, the KCIA was used as a wide network to ensure that EM-9 was upheld and to suppress opposition groups. The KCIA was the most influential agency on South Korean domestic politics. Instead of a set limit for his directorship, Chun's appointment by President Choi was "indefinite."⁷⁰ The director position, an open seat since Kim Jae-kyu's assassination of President Park in October, was "too important to be left without an effective leader, especially at a time of considerable political unrest."⁷¹ President Choi stated that he thought Chun Doo Hwan was the best qualified for the job and hoped that the U.S. Government would understand his decision. With Chun as KCIA director and the DSC and remaining on active military duty, he went against his repeated

⁶⁹ Telegram, General Wickham to Defense Intelligence Agency and Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Republic of Korea: 1-5/80" Folder, Brzezinski Material Country File Box 44.

⁷⁰ Telegram, Ambassador Gleysteen to Secretary Vance, 4/28/80, "Republic of Korea: 1-5/80" Folder, Brzezinski Materials Country File Box 44, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁷¹ Ibid.

promises to the United States to not get involved in politics. Up until this point, Gleysteen called the activity on December 12th, a “coup in all but name.” After Chun Doo Hwan’s appointment, Korean citizens would perceive Chun as the most powerful man in South Korea. After consolidating his power base through the KCIA’s large network, many believed that Chun Doo Hwan would want to move to great things, particularly with the upcoming presidential election. While the opposition parties spoke out against this appointment, many military members and businessmen were pleased with this outcome as it was seen that it would impose “order” on the Korean peninsula. Ambassador Gleysteen communicated American displeasure at this development, but there was nothing to be done.

Gwangju Uprising

Like the assassination of President Park, the Gwangju Uprising still resides in Korean public consciousness today. Many Koreans suspect American complicity in the military mobilization and suppression of the protestors, which was mainly made up of students and intellectuals. As Gleysteen and other American officials had feared, Chun’s appointment to KCIA director incited nationwide student protests. On May 15th, riot police “battled more than 50,000 students” in the “largest anti-Government demonstrations [in South Korea] in 15 years.”⁷² The protests in Gwangju were particularly violent, with students reporting beatings from the riot police.⁷³

Gleysteen met with General Chun and Korean opposition leaders in an attempt to reduce tensions. In a telegram to Secretary Muskie about the meeting, Gleysteen stated that “in none of

⁷² “50,000 Battle Police in Seoul Protests: 200 Students Reported Injured and 400 Held in Demonstrations Asking Martial Law’s End Armed Troops Guard Key Districts Early Elections Demanded President on a Visit to Mideast Premier Meets With Top Aides.” *The New York Times*. May 15, 1980.

⁷³ Ibid.

our discussions will we in any way suggest that the USG opposed ROKG contingency plans to maintain law and order, if absolutely necessary be reinforcing the police with the army.”⁷⁴ In another example of misunderstanding, General Chun came out of this meeting with the understanding that the United States government would not oppose him when it came to suppressing civilian dissident with military force when the ambassador communicated support for domestic sovereignty. Gleysteen suggested that the opposition movement was too liberal and radicalized and could not support an independent civilian government. Wickham agreed with Gleysteen’s assessment of the opposition movement, saying the major opposition leaders, including Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung, were all “weak, self-serving, or corrupt.”⁷⁵ From the documents available at the Jimmy Carter Library and the memoirs, there was not a large level of communication between the opposition and the American government. Ten days after his meeting with Gleysteen, General Chun began issuing orders to the military to crackdown on the protests, which had grown to eighty thousand people in Seoul and had become more violent.⁷⁶

With the continuing protests, Chun declared full martial law on May 17th, 1980. Military authorities forced universities to close, suspended the National Assembly, and arrested major opposition leaders including the leaders of the Democratic Republican Party. These actions stalled the protests in the majority of the country, excluding protests in the city of Gwangju where they continued. After these arrests, communication with opposition parties became almost impossible. On May 18th 1980, Chun ordered special military units to enter the city, which only made the protests bigger. Meetings in Washington between NSA Brzezinski, Secretary Muskie, and CIA Director Turner on the Gwangju Uprising would have been influenced by other “democratic” uprisings in Nicaragua and Iran that caused the rise of anti-American governments.

⁷⁴ Brazinsky 235.

⁷⁵ Wickham, 54.

⁷⁶ Brazinsky, 235.

While the United States still formally upheld the goal of political liberalization in South Korea, it was an increasingly empty promise. The protests were put down after General Wickham authorized the release of Korean soldiers at the DMZ to be deployed against the protests. The citizens of Gwangju estimate that two thousand Koreans were killed during the uprising, although the official estimate is approximately two hundred.⁷⁷ In the United States, the Washington Post declared that the Gwangju Uprising marked the moment when “South Korean Try at Liberalization Comes to a Halt” and the “Military Now Dominates the South Korean Government.”⁷⁸ Chun’s martial law banned the National Assembly from holding session and put his followers in control of the country’s armed forces. The United States, it concluded, was unable to use a “large measure of clout effectively since the assassination of President Park Chung Hee.”⁷⁹ .

The Gwangju Uprising represents a complete policy change for the United States in its relationship to South Korea. While President Carter emphasized human rights in his foreign policy, the international upheavals of 1979 diverted attention away from the domestic actions of South Korea and made administration officials more cautious during an uprising in South Korea. The summit showed Carter’s initial policies in East Asia. Those policies were put to the test after Park Chung Hee’s assassination and failed with the 12/12 Incident and the Chun Doo Hwan’s violent rise to power. The local officials, with more knowledge and context, hindered the execution of Carter’s policies when the politics of South Korea became unstable. Without political stability, the basic security of the peninsula became less definite and the main focus.

⁷⁷ Han, Chong-suk. “Kwangju Uprising.” Encyclopaedia Britannica. August 27, 2014.
<https://www.britannica.com/event/Kwangju-Uprising>

⁷⁸ Chapman, William. “S. Korean Try At Liberalization Comes to a Halt: Military Now Dominates S. Korean Government.” May 19, 1980.

⁷⁹ Oberdorfer, Don. “Pessimism Deepening on Seoul Stability: U.S. Pessimism Is Deepening On Stability of South Korea.” *The Washington Post*. May 27, 1980.

The Gwangju Uprising ended South Korea's short-term goals for political liberalization. The United States, while not directly involved in the physical and political repression, seemed to endorse General Chun and his directives through their inaction in May 1980. For average citizens, life under Chun Doo Hwan was similar to life under Park Chung Hee, only with more obvious suppression of political opposition. General Chun became president of South Korea in August 1980. President Choi wrote to President Carter about his resignation. Describing the protests in Gwangju as "illegal student demonstrations" and "riots," Choi thanked Carter for "immediately taking appropriate diplomatic and military steps as well as clearly reconfirming the commitment to the security of the Republic of Korea."⁸⁰ Additionally, Choi wrote about Carter's great "leadership [which] significantly contributed to maintaining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula."⁸¹ President Choi did not mention his previous plans for political liberalization, only his purpose "to establish the precedent of peaceful transfer of power in our constitutional history, and provide a historic turning point for the building of a new democratic society on the basis of national consensus and unity." President Carter responded to Choi, commending him on "spirit and dedication with which [he] approached that enormous task and sincerely hope that [his] efforts will bear fruit in the development of democratic political institutions in Korea."⁸² Carter's first message to President-elect Chun was less cordial saying, "recent events in Korea have troubled us greatly." While "remain[ing] firm in our determination to honor our security commitment to the Republic of Korea."⁸³

⁸⁰ Letter, President Choi to President Carter, 8/16/80, "Republic of Korea: President Choi Kyu Hah, 12/79-8/80" Folder, Brzezinski Materials Box 12, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁸¹ Letter, President Choi to President Carter, 8/16/80, "Republic of Korea: President Choi Kyu Hah, 12/79-8/80" Folder, Brzezinski Materials Box 12, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁸² Letter, President Carter to President Choi, 8/28/1980, "Republic of Korea: President Choi Kyu Hah, 12/79-8/80" Folder, Brzezinski Material Box 12, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁸³ Letter, President Carter to President-elect Chun, 8/27/1980, "Republic of Korea: President Choi Kyu Hah, 12/79-8-80" Folder, Brzezinski Material Box 12, Jimmy Carter Library.

Conclusion

Jimmy Carter's presidency began with great hopes for international human rights and the continuation of détente with the Soviet Union. The Carter administration dealt with a plethora of international crises: the fall of the shah in Iran, the Panama Canal crisis, the energy crisis, and the Iranian Hostage Crisis. Confronted with a deteriorating geopolitical environment, the opportunity to bring about liberalization in South Korea was overlooked by the American government. The uneasy balance between American concerns for military security and its ideals of democracy and human rights, continued to persist during the Carter administration without a successful transition. Idealism and morality in foreign policy is rarely implemented effectively, as security concerns come first.

President Carter enjoyed several foreign policy successes early in his administration. However, Secretary Vance thought that President Carter was too ambitious with his foreign policy program trying to “simultaneously negotiate with, reform, deter, and ignore the Soviet Union.”¹ In addition to his lofty goals with the Soviet Union, President Carter wanted to promote human rights in other places. When crisis came in places like South Korea, the administration was overburdened and could not properly support democratization. In his memoir, Secretary Vance states every administration in the past generation has had a “Korea problem.” The administration was not prepared to handle its “Korean problem.” The global perspective, used by many foreign policymakers, saw the fragility of the environment after the fall of dictators in Iran and Nicaragua and the invasion of Afghanistan and the Carter doctrine. Looking at instability within South Korea at the same time, the administration saw a threat to American security and interests. Without the president and executive leadership creating specific policies, the American

¹ Vance, 138

staff in South Korea supported the status quo, leading to Chun Doo Hwan's ascension to the presidency.

Lack of executive leadership, incomplete information and misunderstanding Korean culture, and the many international crises since Carter's inauguration in 1977 contributed to the significant change in American policy towards South Korea. This misunderstanding led to a lack of focus on the issues in East Asia and affected the actual relations within South Korea. Several American officials made unfair judgments on Korean officials; some historians now call these reactions "racist." Joel Berstein, the director of USAID was amazed by the organizational skills of government officials, which showed "a sort of problem-solving approach which is not in its traditional culture."² The American officials working in South Korea were generally not fluent in Korean or familiar with social and historical issues in South Korea. While Koreans in the government respected Ambassador Gleysteen and General Wickham, their interactions could lead to miscommunication and confusion. The main actors communicating with South Koreans were unaware of their long-reaching actions, which led to the rise of another authoritarian leader in 1980. General Wickham, in particular, overestimated the closeness of the relationship between the U.S. Army and the South Korean Army. This period shows that miscommunication can occur, even between close allies.

Because of events in Iran, officials in Washington were afraid of "democratic" uprisings, which they saw as inherently destabilizing. Ironically, the Carter administration was very familiar with the opposition groups within South Korea, meeting with them during the summit in June and communicating throughout his presidency.³ The local American officials were

² Brazinsky, 124.

³ In fact, during 1980, the Carter administration worked diligently to protect Kim Dae-jung who was on trial. The actors pushing for change were not unknown, their desires were not uncertain. The first civilian president of South Korea was elected in 1992 and was Kim Young Sam, the opposition leader whose ejection from the National

frightened by the international climate and supported an authoritarian leader who was just as oppressive as Park Chung Hee. The American officials in Korea had the opportunity to encourage this democratic transition during Carter's presidency, but because of other international crises, the American officials within Korea had a more decisive voice in shaping U.S. policy. General Wickham and Ambassador Gleysteen were familiar with the American relationship with South Korea and opposed many of the President's policies. With local context and historical background, these American officials chose to keep the peninsula secure and not to further the democratization movement in South Korea. This illustrates a larger problem within American foreign policy. The American tendency to link international issues and think about global trends can cause the U.S. Government to overlook local circumstances. South Korea at the end of 1979 prepared for a liberal transition but was not supported by the United States because of a larger international trend. Looking at the specifics within the country, namely the existing network between the administration and the opposition, the Carter administration could have supported the fledgling democratic government more explicitly after the 12/12 Incident.

Despite President Carter's foreign policy goals, the administration witnessed the reemergence of the Cold War in 1979-1980. These tensions affected the administration's approach to South Korea. Carter's concern for human rights was apparent in the summit with Park, who was more concerned about security against possible North Korean attack. The American reaction after Park's assassination did not further Carter's goals either, beginning a larger transition within the government to concentrate on security concerns. Intelligence failure and lack of communication with the new Korean government and the degradation of traditional Korean networks prevented action by the American government, which was preoccupied with

Assembly precipitated Park's assassination. His successor was Kim Dae-jung in 1997. The people leading the democratic movement in 1979 and 1980 were the same people pushing for change post-democratization, which occurred in 1987.

other crises. While Carter began his presidency with a desire to step away from Cold War rhetoric, the tensions and larger concerns in South Korea are a legacy of the Cold War. Liberalization did not take place ultimately because of these overarching security concerns and heightened tensions with the Soviet Union.

In contrast, the successful democratization of South Korea occurred in 1987. Large-scale protests occurred in reaction to Chun Doo Hwan's attempt to appoint the next president without instituting a popular election. The same political actors from the attempted liberalization in 1979 led the June Democratic Uprising in 1987. Again, the United States Government needed to decide how to react. While the Reagan administration's support could be a reflection of the larger protests that included the middle class more broadly and not just liberal students and activists, it also shows the significance of the international environment. Jimmy Carter wanted to step away from traditional Cold War rhetoric but witnessed a rise in tensions with the Soviet Union during his presidency. Ronald Reagan dealt with the modernizing force of Mikhail Gorbachev and was not confronted with a myriad of international crises like his predecessor. While it is difficult to determine what could have happened, it is more likely that South Korea would have achieved democratization after the assassination of Park Chung Hee in 1979 if the Carter administration did not face the challenges in Iran and Afghanistan.

The American relationship with South Korea is based on historic political involvement. Its relationship with South Korea also speaks to its relationships with other East Asian powers and the Soviet Union because of its close proximity. Korean officials, like Park Chung Hee, observing American behavior in Vietnam, worried about American commitment to its security agreement. After the events of 1980, Asian countries and dissidents within those countries could look at what happened in South Korea and decide to wait to push for liberalization. Because of

the United States' involvement with the rise of Chun Doo Hwan and its perceived involvement with the assassination of Park Chung Hee and the Gwangju Uprising, political opposition groups elsewhere would learn American policy priorities and emphasis on security. If the United States had supported liberalization after Park Chung Hee's death and countered Chun's coup, South Korea might have achieved democratization sooner than 1987. Whether the United States had the appropriate leverage to enact large-scale change in South Korea, the American officials were consistently surprised by events that their networks in the country predicted or forewarned against. While this thesis does not seek to name American officials as complicit, their passivity supported the rise of another authoritarian leader in South Korea.

When democratization came to South Korea 1987, the U.S. Government was more involved than it was in 1979. The June Democratic Uprising resulted in open presidential elections and the full democratization of South Korea. The Reagan administration was more aggressive in its policies against Chun, with some encouragement from a Democratic Congress, and helped confirm South Korea's democracy. The opportunity to democratize South Korea occurred in 1979. This hope was not realized because of the Carter administration's overall fears after the fall of the shah and heightened tensions with the Soviet Union after the invasion of Afghanistan. This episode of U.S.- South Korean relations is significant because it shows that an overarching foreign policy strategy and miscommunications with various actors can have a huge impact on a country's future. American distraction with other world events and inaction in South Korea through 1979 and 1980 reflected overarching fears about the world order during the Cold War. President Carter and his cabinet neglected South Korea because they were distracted by other world events, leaving the security-minded American officials on the peninsula to direct American action.

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