

BACKGROUND TO THE KOREAN WAR

GRADE LEVEL: High School

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SUBJECT: U.S. History, Global Studies, World History

TIME REQUIRED: Two to four class periods

OBJECTIVES:

As a result of this lesson, students will:

1. Understand how Korea's sovereignty has been historically violated.
2. Appreciate the significance of historical context in explaining the Korean War.
3. See the relationship between ideology and traditional power politics.
4. Understand how Koreans suffered due to Cold War politics.

APPLICABLE NCSS STANDARDS:

1. Time, Continuity, and Change
2. Power, Authority, and Governance
3. Global Connections

MATERIALS REQUIRED:

- Standard history textbooks
- Map of Asia
- Computers and Internet hook-ups
- Library

RATIONALE:

The Korean War is little understood by most Americans. When it is taught in most classrooms, it is viewed from a totally American perspective with little regard for the suffering of the Korean people. Furthermore, the overall Asian context of the war is slighted. Americans do not know that Korea was a Japanese colony from 1910 to 1945 or that its strategic location vis-à-vis China, Japan, and Russia (the Soviet Union) has always put limits on Korea's sovereignty. Finally, students need to view the Korean War in the context of the bi-polar world of the 1950s and the Cold War. Although the Cold War is usually studied as the conflict between Communism and Capitalism, in reality the traditional geopolitical demands of Russia (the Soviet Union) and China are as important to the Korean War as ideology. In fact, it can be argued that both Russia and China used Marxist ideology to mask power politics which were centuries old.

Although the United States had little traditional geopolitical interest in Korea, by 1950 President Truman had committed the country to a foreign policy of containment, which required worldwide vigilance toward any possible expansion of Communism. Furthermore, the United States perceived any form of Communism anywhere in the world as part of a monolithic plot being coordinated in Moscow. The invasion of South Korea by North Korea in 1950 occurred in the context of the history which is sketched above. As we approach the fiftieth anniversary, in 2003, of the end of the Korean War, we need to ensure that students understand this history.

PROCEDURE:

Divide the class into five groups. Take the class to the library and/or the computer lab and have each group research the following:

Group A – Japanese occupation of Korea between 1910 and 1945

Group B – Japan's surrender in 1945 and the subsequent decision to divide Korea at the 38th parallel

Group C – Political evolution of North and South Korea from 1945 to 1950

Group D – the deterioration of relations between the U.S.S.R. and the U.S. from 1945 to 1950, containment

Group E – the United Nations decision to launch military action against North Korea in 1950

ASSIGNMENT:

1. Each group should construct a visual aid which will highlight the major points of the topic covered.
2. With the visual aid, each group should present its findings to the class. Either on the visual aid or on the chalkboard each group should include a pertinent timeline.
3. At the conclusion of the oral reports, the teacher should lead a discussion on how the Korean War might have been avoided by divorcing the issues which divided Korea from the cauldron of Cold War politics. In other words, could the division of Korea have been averted if both the U.S.S.R. and the U.S. had made an effort to let the Koreans work out their own issues instead of seeing Korea as a focal point of bi-polar competition?

ENRICHMENT:

If extra time permits, assemble a panel of Korean War veterans who would be willing to come into the class and discuss their experiences, but try to get them to focus on the sufferings of the Korean people rather than on details of strategy and weaponry. Better yet, if a Korean American community exists in the vicinity of the school, invite Korean veterans into the class. Look for a Korean church which might be able to provide speakers.

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