More than 5 million died in the Korean War including 54,000 U.S. Soldiers, but few Americans remember this chapter in U.S. history.

In 1953, Lieutenant Colonel Robert Black, an army ranger, returned home after three years of fighting in one of the bloodiest chapters in history: the Korean War. The brutal conflict between American-backed South Korea and Chinese and Soviet-backed North Korea was over. And Black was looking forward to getting back to civilian life.

His hometown of Carlisle, Pennsylvania was populated by small town patriots, people who flew flags in their front yards and decorated their living rooms with framed pictures of General Dwight D. Eisenhower, a hero from World War II. During Black’s nearly month long boat trip back to the U.S. he thought often about the downtown cavalcades and festivities that celebrated Carlisle’s citizens who served in World War II.

But as Black soon discovered, there would be no parades or banners for him or most of the 500,000 American men and women who served in Korea. “I had been away for three years, had been decorated in the war,” says Black, now a retired colonel who works as a travel writer. “And it was like I didn’t exist. I walked into a clothing store where my family had shopped since I was a child, and the clerk looked up at me and said, “Hey Bob, I haven’t seen you in a while, you been out of town?”

Indeed, three generations since it ended, the Korean War is best known as the war that America has forgotten. Though 54,000 Americans lost their lives in Korea, there is still no national monument honoring those who died. [Since this article was written a Korean War Memorial has been built. At a cost of $18 million in donated funds, this powerful memorial to the Veterans of the Korean War is located on a 2.2-acre site adjacent to the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool. It features a sculptured column of 19 foot soldiers arrayed for combat, with the American flag as their symbolic objective. A 164-foot mural wall is inscribed with the words, "Freedom Is Not Free" and is etched with 2,500 photographic images of nurses, chaplains, crew chiefs, mechanics and other support personnel to symbolize the vast effort that sustained the military operation. It is in Washington, D.C. located next to the Lincoln Memorial.] Few colleges offer history courses in about the war; most high school history books give it only glancing mention. Hollywood has all but ignored it, except for the movie and television series M*A*S*H, a dramatic comedy about a colorful crew of doctors and nurses working at an army field hospital during the Korean War. If it weren’t for M*A*S*H, in fact, it’s safe to say that few Americans would even know that there was a Korean War.

But as an increasingly vocal group of historians are pointing out, the Korean War was a turning point in modern U.S. history. It was the first conflict of the Cold War era, the first chapter in America’s “crusade” against Communism. And it laid the groundwork for nearly 40 years of American foreign policy.

The war began on June 25, 1950 with a barrage of artillery over the 38th Parallel, the border between North and South Korea. But trouble in Korea had been brewing for years, since the end of World War II.

From 1910 until World War II ended in 1945, Korea was a Japanese colony. The crushing defeat of World War II shattered Japan, leaving its network of Asian colonies to be divvied up among the victorious allies.

The U.S. and the Soviet Union partners in World War II, both moved in on Korea; the U.S. took control of the South and the Soviets took the North. Originally, the United Nations (UN) had hoped for a united Korea under a democratically elected government. But the rivalry between the U.S. and the Soviet Union was intensifying, and the superpowers could not agree on what the government should be. The Soviets wanted a Communist government; the U.S. wanted a democracy. The Koreans, much to their anger, didn’t have any say in the matter.

In 1946, the Soviets went ahead and created a provisional Communist government in the North. To lead the new government, the Soviets installed 33-year-old Kim II Sung, a charismatic Communist who had cut his teeth organizing resistance to the Japanese occupation. The U.S., hoping to encourage a democracy in the South, installed as president Syngman Rhee, a 73-year-old Korean with a Princeton education, an Austrian wife and a blustery personality.

By 1948, the division of Korea was official; the North was now known as the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea; the South called itself the Republic of Korea.

In 1949, both the Soviets and the Americans withdrew their occupation forces (though not their influence) from their respective halves of Korea. Each left behind a team of military advisers, but otherwise, the two new countries stood on their own. Korea, said most American military leaders, was of little strategic importance to the U.S. Most were far more worried about China, which was still smoking from a 1949 revolution that had transformed it from a U.S. ally into a hardcore Communist state.

Angry and Fragile

From the start, relations between the two Koreas were angry and fragile; both leaders bragged that they would ultimately lead a reunited Korea. Small clusters of armed troops frequently bickered over the border.
The question of exactly who fired the shots that led to all-out war is of some debate among historians today. Most accounts depict a well-planned Soviet-backed attack by the North Koreans. But some historians believe the South provoked the North with artillery attacks over the border.

In any case, it was the North Koreans who made the first big push over the border. And their well-trained soldiers and state-of-the-art Soviet weapons quickly overwhelmed the South Koreans. Within one week, North Korea had captured a huge swath of the South including the capital, Seoul.

News of the war alarmed the U.S.: many Americans believed that Communism was a grave threat to the world, and would be “contained.” But the first shots of the Korean War came just five years after the end of World War II, an ordeal that had drained Americans and shattered the lives of millions. By 1950, life had finally returned to normal; dead husbands, fathers, and brothers were buried, people were no longer straining their eyes searching the sky for invading German or Japanese bombers. The economy was prospering. “The last thing this country wanted was another war,” says Black.

But President Harry S Truman and Secretary of State Dean Acheson felt they had little choice but to send U.S. troops to push back the advancing North Koreans. The day after the war started, they took their case to the UN whose members condemned the invasion and ordered the North Koreans to turn back. When North Korea ignored the order, Truman dispatched air and naval forces to South Korea, and the UN asked members to participate in a multinational military effort that was soon led by U.S. General Douglas MacArthur. Fourteen countries sent small contingents of troops.

Acutely aware of America’s war-weary mood, Truman never formally declared war on North Korea. He called the Korean campaign a “police action.”

Most American troops were unprepared for the reality of war in Korea. The U.S. armed forces had been cut back to skeletal levels following World War II. Well-trained troops were in short supply. And few had the kind of training that would have prepared them for Korea’s mountainous terrain and freezing winters. On Korea’s battlefields, the wind came shooting down from Siberia and the snows gained strength over the icy Sea of Japan. “Hard enough was fighting a war,” says columnist James Brady, who has written extensively about his Korean combat experience. “In Korea, the cold could kill you.” Thousands of men lost fingers and toes to frostbite.

But after some embarrassing losses in the first weeks of fighting, the Americans rebounded. MacArthur personally directed a series of cunning surprise attacks, pushing North Koreans back over the 38th parallel. The general promised that American soldiers would be home for Christmas.

A few weeks later, though, 300,000 Chinese troops swarmed over the rugged mountains separating China from North Korea. They had come to aid the North Koreans. And with their seemingly endless supplies of troops, Truman’s hopes for a quick victory were shattered.

Indeed, China’s entry into the war was a crisis not only for the surprised American troops. It was a colossal political crisis for President Truman, who suddenly found himself in a head-to-head battle with MacArthur over how the war should proceed.

Truman was still haunted by his decision to drop two atomic bombs on Japan at the end of World War II. Although he stood by that decision, he was determined to keep nuclear weapons far away from this war. Korea, he insisted, would remain a “limited” war with conventional weapons.

Grander Plans

But MacArthur had grander plans. He wanted to take American troops, bombers, and if necessary, nuclear weapons, into China. “If we lose the war to Communism in Asia,” he wrote to a colleague, “the fall of Europe is inevitable…we must win. There is no substitute for victory.”

The conflict between the modest “plucky” President and the brilliant and flamboyant general quickly overshadowed the war. Despite Truman’s warnings, MacArthur broke military protocol and took his argument directly to the public. Members of Truman’s administration, he said, were “soft on Communism.” Truman repeatedly warned MacArthur to keep quiet. And when he refused, Truman fired him for insubordination.

Most Americans ultimately came to support Truman. American foreign policy, after all, is to be determined by democratically elected officials, not a military commander. But MacArthur was a beloved hero of World War II. And at the time, his dismissal, as historian Walter Karp writes, “led to what was probably the most convulsive public outburst in American history.”

The White House was barraged with telegrams—20,000 a day, many of them obscene—condemning Truman. Americans posted signs in their yards: “To Hell with the Reds and Harry Truman.” On
the floor of Congress, Republican foes of the President lined up to denounce the "political assassination" of one of America’s greatest war heroes.

Meanwhile, few Americans had a clear image of the carnage that was sweeping through Korea. The Korean War never made it to television and only a few magazines published combat photos. When most Americans visualized the Korean War, all they saw was a newspaper map adorned with dotted lines representing troop retreats and advances. But to those who were there, the images remain vivid even 40 years later: wounded American Marines strapped to truck fenders during the retreat from the initial Chinese invasion; Korean villages -- North and South -- leveled by U.S. air attacks; Korean peasants (many still alive today) maimed by napalm, a gel dropped from American planes that ignited anything it touched; Chinese soldiers fighting in 30 degree below zero cold wearing canvas shoes without socks. “Any war is vicious,” says Black, the veteran from Pennsylvania… “But there’s nothing worse than fighting in the winter in mountainous terrain. You live in a hole like an animal.”

Peace talks began in July 1951. But it took more than two years for the two sides to hammer out an acceptable truce. One day, representatives from the two sides sat staring at each other for more than two hours without uttering a word. And while the peace delegations squabbled over terms, tens of thousands of people were dying every month.

**Millions Dead**

When the war finally did end, on July 27, 1953, more than 5 million people had died, including an estimated 3.5 million civilians from the South and North (the government of North Korea has never released its casualty figures). Virtually every Korean village had been destroyed, mainly by U.S. Aerial bombing. Millions of civilians were left homeless.

There was no clear winner in the Korean War. Korea was once again divided near the 38th Parallel, although South Korea had gained roughly 1,500 miles of territory. And both the North and South were destroyed, with millions dead and homeless. For the U.S., the Korean War marked the first time it did not achieve a victory.

But oddly, both sides declared themselves winners. The North Koreans and the Chinese bragged that they had held back their “imperialist wolves” of the U.S. And the Americans boasted that they had prevented Communism from overtaking Korea. The policy of containing Communism became enshrined in American foreign policy, and ultimately led to U.S. involvement in Vietnam, Central America, Cuba, Angola, and the continuing presence of 40,000 U.S. troops in South Korea. It also fueled the massive military buildup that is just leveling off today.

“No one really knows where to place it, in the victory or loss column,” Korea expert Bruce Cumings recently told The New York Times. “It ended on a sad note for the Americans, and the war and its memories drifted off into a void.”

-- Lauren Tarshis

*Scholastic Update, 1992*