

# Korean War Coverage in High School History Textbooks

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## Abstract

This content analysis investigated coverage of the Korean War in recent high school U.S. history textbooks. Open coding techniques applied to six textbooks yielded data for the following categories: background of the war, the outbreak of the war, the sequence of the war, the conclusion of the war, the devastation of war, the effects of the war, U.N. and U.S. politics, the Chinese intervention, General Douglas MacArthur, and African Americans in the military. Data from these categories were compared and scrutinized against historians' knowledge using axial coding techniques. This study's findings support past research on Korean War coverage in high school textbooks regarding casualties (Fleming & Kaufman, 1990; Herz, 1978; Lin et al., 2009; Y. Suh et al., 2008). Textbooks offer an unnuanced account of the Korean War which overutilizes American perspectives, minimizes the interwar period, avoids violence, omits racial issues, and ignores Korean history vital to understanding the conflict's origins. The Korean War is a topic of great potential through which topics like democracy and state-building may be explored in rich detail. Despite the Korean War's potential in social studies classrooms, textbooks do little to correct its reputation as the Forgotten War.

## Objectives

Although it was an exceptionally hot three-year period at the dawn of the Cold War, the Korean War often receives a fraction of the space dedicated to other conflicts such as the Vietnam War (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS] & World History Digital Education Foundation, 2018). Beyond the scope of the Cold War, the Korean War offers a unique opportunity to examine the development of two nations with a common history and culture, but incompatible political and economic ideologies (NCSS & World History Digital Education Foundation, 2018).

Nearly seven decades have passed since the armistice was signed between north and south. North Korea's mysterious regime and enigmatic supreme leader, Kim Jong-un, have become staples of national news outlets. South Korea has achieved global prominence as both a global economy and a country whose media has attained a sizeable international following. To neglect the Korean War in social studies classrooms is indefensible considering how important Korea has become in international dialogue. American students deserve to understand how America's hand shaped the state of the Korean peninsula and therefore the world.

## Methods

This study used only high school textbooks because they present the Korean War at a higher level of detail since the topic is usually just being introduced at the middle level (Lin et al., 2009). This study excluded world history textbooks because narratives within them are more likely to take an international perspective on conflicts over an American perspective. The data sample consists of the publishers' most recent textbooks to ensure the most modern and current coverages of the Korean War are included. The data pool consists of six American history textbooks (Appleby et al., 2018a; Appleby et al., 2018b; Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018a; Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018b; Lapsansky-Werner et al., 2016a; Lapsansky-Werner et al., 2016b). Although districts around the country may choose different textbooks, there are a limited number of major publishers, therefore the small number of textbooks is representative of most districts in the nation (Suh et al., 2008).

This inquiry was based upon historical research and followed content analysis methods. The first step in this research was to identify and read sections dedicated to the Korean War in the textbooks. This inductive analysis is known as open coding (Krippendorff, 2013). I found that each author's survey edition contained the same text as their reconstruction to the present or modern times edition. To avoid redundancy, I only took data from the reconstruction to the present and modern times editions (Appleby et al, 2018b; Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018b, Lapsansky-Werner et al., 2016b).

After a close reading of those sections dedicated to the Korean War, I read them again and coded for the following: background of the war, the outbreak of war, sequence of war, the conclusion of the war, the devastation of war, the effects of war, UN/US politics, the Chinese intervention, General Douglas MacArthur, and African Americans in the military. Once the data collected from open coding had been reviewed, I began the axial coding stage. This form of deductive analysis began by analyzing how the Korean War was presented by examining the results and making connections between categories (Krippendorff, 2013). As results emerged, I thoroughly compared them to historians' interpretations thus allowing me to scrutinize textbook authors' narratives against outside experts' understandings (Cummings, 1997; Stueck, 2002).

## Results

### • Background of the War and State-Building

Textbooks present Korea as a place with little self-determination. The fate of its governance and people are determined by foreign occupiers. When textbooks discuss the creation of the two Korean states the Korean people are not the ones doing the action. From the year 1910, the Korean people are shown as a dominated people passed from one foreign master to another. The political will of the Korean people is omitted entirely.

### • Ideology in Korea

The Korean War is framed as a war against communism rather than a war in support of any ideology, concept, or people. North Korea is always labeled Communist while South Korea is ideologically ambiguous. Two publishers vaguely label South Korea's type of government as "noncommunist" (Lapsansky-Werner et al, 2016b, p. 407) and "American-backed" (Appleby et al., 2018b, p. 406) while only one text claims that South Korea was "democratic" (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018b, p. 583).

### • The Devastation of War

Textbooks do very little to inform students of the horrendously violent nature of the Korean War. When textbooks in this study offer statistics, they usually provide outdated or misleading figures for American fatalities only while omitting non-American casualties entirely. The textbooks which use the outdated figure do little to inform students as to the war's monumental cost to human life and wellbeing. Most textbooks exclude figures for American non-mortally wounded soldiers nor the casualties of any other nation. Furthermore, all textbooks included in this study offer casualty figures for the war which fall far short of expert estimates (Cummings, 2010; Institute for Military History, 2005a, 2005b).

### • Communist Chinese in the Korean War

The Chinese are treated as a faceless entity whose motives for acting are questionable. Only one publisher offers a reason for China joining the war: ensuring the survival of North Korea to maintain it as a buffer state between China and South Korea (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018a, 2018b). Chinese successes in the war are attributed to numerical advantages alone, while American success are attributed to military leadership.

### • The Conclusion of the War

Textbooks do not attribute one single event to ending the Korean War. One publisher claims Dwight D. Eisenhower threatening to use nuclear weapons brought the war to an end (Appleby et al., 2018a, 2018b). Another publisher cites this threat in combination with the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953 as the deciding factor in ending the war (Lapsansky-Werner et al., 2016a, 2016b). Another frames the war as concluding when the Soviet Union, who is not named as a war participant, inexplicably suggested a ceasefire in 1951 which was followed by two years' worth of negotiations (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018a, 2018b).

Korean War Casualties								
Text	Casualties							
	U.S. (Fatalities)	U.S. (Wounded)	Other U.N.	South Korean	North Korean	Chinese	Civilian	Total
(Lapsansky-Werner et al., 2016a, 2016b)	37,000	103,000	-	217,000	406,000	600,000	1,600,000	2,963,000
(Appleby et al., 2018a, 2018b)	54,200	-	-	-	-	-	-	54,200
(Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018a, 2018b)	54,000	-	-	-	-	-	-	54,000
(Defense Casualty Analysis System, 2020)	36,574	103,284	-	-	-	-	-	139,858
(Institute for Military History, 2005a, 2005b)	36,940	100,310	17,631	621,479	607,396	972,000	2,490,968	4,848,724

Note. A casualty is any person killed or injured as a result of the Korean War. U.S. casualties are separated into fatalities and injured for the sake of providing nuance. Civilian refers to citizen non-combatants of both Korean states.

## Conclusions

- The Korean War continues to be overlooked in high school U.S. history textbooks
- Where there could be rich discussions of nation-building and explorations of American motives in Korea textbooks offer short narratives devoid of any nuance.
- Textbooks omit controversial acts of violence committed by American soldiers which could be a result of textbook publisher's common practice of self-censorship through which they avoid controversy so as not to offend (Matusevich, 2006).
- Textbooks are over reliant on the American perspective of the Korean War
- Textbook publishers completely missed an opportunity to explore civil rights movements of the interwar and Korean War years

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