



Fearing the Worst: How Korea Transformed the Cold War, by Samuel F. Wells Jr., New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. ISBN 978-0-231-19274-3. Illustrations. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index Pp. xiv, 586. \$45.00 (hardback).

Although the Korean Conflict may now be the “Forgotten War,” at the time many in Washington feared it would lead to the third world war and therefore it was crucial in the development of the Cold War. This is the argument of *Fearing the Worst*, a book that is interesting and persuasive at times. Even so it is a problematic work of history that demonstrates the risks of making sweeping claims and believing a single event led to long term effects.

Wells divides *Fearing the Worst: How Korea Transformed the Cold War* into two sections: “The War” and “The Transformation.” The division allows for a more focused study of the Korean War and the transformation in the Cold War that followed, but it also leads to causality and correlation being merged. The Cold War focus of *Fearing the Worst* explains the work opening with a detailed discussion of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin despite being the section of the book focused on “The War.” This approach leads to a diminishing of the agency of Koreans, both North and South who fought and died for their countries, in the outbreak of the Korean Conflict. Much is made of Soviet willingness to support North Korea after the American Atomic monopoly was broken, but little attention is paid to the low-level conflict that had been brewing on the Korean peninsula for several years prior to the June 1950 North Korean attack. A reader not well

versed in post-World War II Korea will be left with many questions about the division of Korea, which is hardly touched on.

Fearing the Worst is also marred by some inaccuracies. The claim that South Korea was informally part of the Marshall Plan (p 29) is incorrect and somewhat puzzling. Atlee's presence at the Potsdam Conference is omitted leaving one to think Churchill alone represented the United Kingdom at the conference. The Czech coup in 1948 was in February, not March, and the Berlin Blockade began in June 1948 not May. Wells also claims Truman traveled to Potsdam wanting to continue American-Soviet cooperation. Yet, Truman refused to discuss the proposed trusteeship for Korea with Stalin, which is well known. *Fearing the Worst* is also overly detailed, which does serve to hook the reader, but one wonders about the selection of some anecdotes, as the discussion of Mao's sex life serves only prurient interests rather than argumentative ones. The selection of a picture of Senator McCarthy at a 1954 hearing is also questionable given the time frame of *Fearing the Worst* and the abundant pictures of McCarthy that exist. These may seem trivial errors and inclusions but encountering them so early in such a massive book creates the impression of sloppy research and/or poor editing.

These flaws do not mean *Fearing the Worst* is without merit, only that it is a book best consulted by those already well grounded in the Korean War and early Cold War history. The discussion of the Korean War is itself interesting and engaging and clearly demonstrates how the USSR, USA, and People's Republic of China all gained from the Korean War, usually at the expense of their erstwhile Korean allies. There is nothing earthshaking in the interpretation of the Korean War Wells presents, but there does not have to be for *Fearing the Worst* to make a persuasive argument. "The War" is to set the stage for "Transformation" which is to demonstrate and explain how the Korean War transformed the Cold War which is Wells' core argument. There is no question that the Cold War was transformed by the Korean War, but the lack of linkages between chapters becomes increasingly problematic. Instead of a well-structured and sweeping argument, "The Transformation" is a study of disparate Cold War events in the United States and Soviet Union.

"The Transformation" begins on sound ground by discussing the role of Dean Acheson in creating a strong and democratic Western Europe that would stand as a bulwark against further Soviet expansion in Europe and clearly links this to the Korean War. He misses the opportunity to discuss how European allies as diverse as Luxembourg and Turkey used the Korean War to demonstrate their commitment to the US camp. The next chapter on Curtis LeMay and the Strategic Air Command presents the clearest example of how the Korean War

changed a fundamental element of the US Cold War military. Had Wells consulted Conrad Crane's numerous publications on Strategic Air Command and the Korean War the chapter would have been even more persuasive and informative.

Wells is on much weaker ground when he argues that the Korean War led to the development of a Soviet Strategic Air Force, indeed the Korean War appears only once in the chapter "Andrei Tupolev Creates a Strategic Bomber Force" and what evidence Wells presents demonstrates that the USSR had decided to build a strategic bomber force during the closing days of the Second World War and continued developing one prior to the Korean War. Likewise, the discussion of the development of Soviet nuclear weapons seldom mentions the Korean War and it is difficult to believe that having developed the atomic bomb and been aware that the United States was working on a hydrogen bomb, the Soviets would not have developed a hydrogen bomb as a natural follow on.

Wells conducted extensive research in archives and has mastered an impressive amount of secondary literature on the Korean War and the early Cold War. *Fearing the Worst* is an engaging and thought-provoking book whose charts on defense spending and other elements of the American military are extremely helpful. Yet it is unclear that the Korean War ignited a "huge escalation of the strategic arms competition between the United States and the Soviet Union" (p. 234). Instead, it seems that the Korean War simply sped up the escalation that had begun well before the Korean War and indeed the arms competition may have contributed to the outbreak of the Korean War.

Fearing the Worst is a work that few will read in its entirety. The individual chapters are however extremely informative and can serve as a jumping off point for further research into various aspects of the early Cold War. 📖

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