

# Debacle in Kwangju

TIM SHORROCK

Few incidents have revealed so starkly the contradiction between U.S. security interests and human rights as the decision to release South Korean troops under U.S. command to suppress the Kwangju uprising of 1980. The move was taken with full knowledge that the rebellion was triggered by the massacre of hundreds of protesters by black beret Special Forces dispatched by military strongman Chun Doo Hwan after he ended a brief democratic spring by declaring martial law. That U.S. decision was made by President Jimmy Carter on the counsel of Warren Christopher, now the departing Secretary of State but then Deputy Secretary, and the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia, Richard Holbrooke, who is being touted as a possible replacement for Christopher in Bill Clinton's new Cabinet.

In Seoul, where Kwangju has come to symbolize the birth of South Korea's modern liberation movement and the nadir of its militaristic past, the incident has been put to rest. On August 5, a Korean court convicted Chun of treason and murder for his takeover and role in the Kwangju massacre, and later sentenced him to death. But there has been no such accounting here, where Christopher and Holbrooke, who was President Clinton's chief negotiator on Bosnia, refuse to accept any U.S. responsibility for what happened in Kwangju.

"This is an obvious tragedy for the individuals involved, and it's obviously an internal matter for the people of the Republic of Korea," said Nicholas Burns, Christopher's chief spokesman, after the verdicts from Seoul's "trial of the century" were announced this summer. "Kwangju was an explosively dangerous situation, the outcome was tragic, but the long-term results for Korea are democracy and economic stability," said Holbrooke when I questioned him recently about his policies in Korea.

*Tim Shorrock, an investigative reporter who covers trade and labor issues for The Journal of Commerce, grew up in Japan and South Korea and has been writing about Korean affairs for many years. A longer version of this story that includes full quotations from the declassified documents on Kwangju can be found on the Internet at Korea Web Weekly (<http://www.kimssoft.com/korea/kwangju3.htm>).*



STEVEN BRONER

"The idea that we would actively conspire with the Korean generals in a massacre of students is, frankly, bizarre; it's obscene and counter to every political value we articulated." When the Carter Administration heard Chun was sending Special Forces to Kwangju, "we made every effort to stop what was happening," Holbrooke said.

But documents I recently obtained under the Freedom of Information Act show that the Carter Administration's complicity with Chun ran much deeper than simply approving a military operation to retake Kwangju: According to the newly declassified documents, which include hundreds of top-secret State Department and Defense Intelligence Agency cables, on May 9, 1980, the Administration gave prior approval to Chun to use military force to crack down on student and labor unrest; Chun declared martial law on May 17. The cables also show that U.S. officials knew as far back as February 1980 that Chun was mobilizing Special Warfare Command troops, trained to fight behind the lines in a war against North Korea, in his repression of dissent in Kwangju.

The documents (which I have also described in *The Journal of Commerce* and the Korean press) directly contradict a 1989 White Paper on Kwangju prepared by the Bush Administration. It concluded that "U.S. officials were alarmed by reports of plans to use military units to back up the police in dealing with student demonstrations" and "had neither authority over nor prior knowledge of the movement of the Special Warfare Command units to Kwangju."

The most important F.O.I.A. documents describe secret communications between William Gleysteen, the U.S. Ambassador to South Korea from 1978 to 1981, and the team assembled in November 1979 by Secretary of State Cyrus Vance to monitor the crisis that erupted in South Korea after President Park Chung Hee was shot to death by the head of the Korean C.I.A. In Washington, Vance's team was headed by Holbrooke, whom Gleysteen called the "chief apparatchik" of Carter's Korea policy. Other key players were Christopher and Donald Gregg, the former C.I.A. station chief in Seoul who was head of Asian intelligence under Zbigniew Brzezinski's National Security Council.

On May 9, 1980, the cables show, Gleysteen met with Chun



at the request of Holbrooke and Christopher to discuss how to handle nationwide student demonstrations. The protests were organized after Chun, who shot his way to control of the military on December 12, 1979, appointed himself head of the K.C.I.A. in April 1980. Although Chun and Gleysteen had clashed frequently over human rights, this time they agreed on a common policy.

"In none of our discussions will we in any way suggest that the [U.S. government] opposes [Republic of Korea government] contingency plans to maintain law and order, if absolutely necessary, by reinforcing the police with the army," Gleysteen cabled Washington. "If I were to suggest any complaint on this score I believe we would lose all our friends within the civilian and military leadership." Within twenty-four hours, a cable signed by Christopher went out to Gleysteen, saying, "We agree that we should not oppose R.O.K. [government] contingency plans" but urging him to remind the Koreans "of the danger of escalation if law enforcement responsibilities are not carried out with care and restraint."

United States military cables add another crucial piece of evidence. On May 8, the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency reported to the Joint Chiefs of Staff that Korean Special Forces were on nationwide alert and noted that the 7th Special Forces Brigade—which was responsible for the worst brutalities in Kwangju—“was probably targeted against unrest” at Kwangju universities. The cable noted that the Special Forces “had been receiving extensive training in riot control” (including the use of CS gas, considered by some military specialists to be a form of chemical warfare) and had been “ready and willing to break heads” in the riots that shook the port city of Pusan a week before Park was killed.

Holbrooke was scornful when I asked about those documents. “I’ve read them and they’re being completely taken out of context by people who don’t know what was said on the telephone,” he said. “If you think you have a smoking gun, go out and have fun with it.” A senior State Department official had a similar reaction. “When all the dust settles, Koreans killed Koreans, and the Americans didn’t know what was going on and certainly didn’t approve it,” he said. Although a U.S. general had—and still has—operational control over 80 percent of the Korean military, the United States “has no moral responsibility” for what happened in Kwangju, he added. In a narrow sense, the claim is partly true: There is no evidence that the United States approved, or

had control over, the vicious attack on Kwangju by the Korean Special Forces. But as Holbrooke has tried to prove in Bosnia, you don’t have to pull the trigger to be responsible for a crime.

The events of 1980 were the logical result of a covert U.S. policy, hatched in the days after Park’s assassination, to preserve the remnants of Park’s military-industrial security state and pressure Korean opposition groups to moderate what U.S. officials believed were “extremist” demands for a complete break with Korea’s dictatorial past. In classic cold war fashion, the Carter Administration tried to create a third force of Park holdovers, friendly generals and malleable politicians as an alternative to the military hard-liners around Chun and opposition leaders like Kim Dae Jung, who was deeply hated by the Korean military and (as Gleysteen noted in his cables) would be blocked from taking power even if he was elected president.

Park, a key U.S. military ally, was assassinated at a critical point in Carter’s presidency. Just weeks before, Iranian radicals had seized the U.S. Embassy in Teheran, a traumatic event that was followed in December by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. At the first word of Park’s assassination, Carter sent an aircraft carrier to Korean waters and bluntly warned North Korea it would face attack if it intervened in the south (Pyongyang never made a move). But tensions quickly erupted between the Korean military and the opposition, which continued to push for the complete dismantling of Park’s hated dictatorial system, known as Yushin. The continuing unrest caused panic within the Carter Administration.

In the late fall of 1979, the documents show, Holbrooke proposed a “delicate operation” in Seoul “designed to use American influence to reduce the chances of confrontation, and to make clear to the generals” that the Carter Administration was “in fact trying to be helpful to them provided they in turn carry out their commitments to liberalization.” The overriding concern in Washington, Holbrooke explained, was to keep South Korea from turning into “another Iran,” meaning any “action which would in any way appear to unravel a situation and lead to chaos or instability in a key American ally.”

Holbrooke’s “delicate operation” was partly successful; under pressure from Gleysteen and his allies in the Korean military, the weak interim President, Choi Kyu Ha, lifted some of Park’s emergency decrees and released Kim Dae Jung from house arrest. But by late November, there were ominous signs that a group of Park loyalists gathered around Chun were maneuvering for power. Chun, who headed a branch of military intelligence known as the Defense Security Command, was deeply suspicious that the United States might have been involved in Park’s death (Kim Jae Kyu, Park’s assassin, was the primary contact between Park and the U.S. government).

In late November, Holbrooke began hearing reports that Christian dissidents were continuing to defy the martial law command, leading to mass arrests by Chun’s security forces. In one of his most significant cables, Holbrooke lashed out not at the military but at the “potential polarization that exists as a result of the actions of what appear to be a relative handful of Christian extremist dissidents.” He instructed Gleysteen to tell the Christians that they could not count on U.S. support forever and warned them not to disobey martial law edicts against po-

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litical meetings. "Even when these [meetings] are in fact not demonstrations, but rather just meetings in defiance of martial law, the U.S. government views them as unhelpful while martial law is still in effect," he wrote. (Holbrooke defended the cable, saying it "also says we will press the generals very hard on the constitutional procedures and liberties, and we will urge restraint on the students because otherwise it's going to be really ugly and bloody." Gleysteen told me he refused to transmit such an "arm-chair suggestion from Washington.")

However, the generals understood, rightly, that they were free to do almost anything. On the night of December 12, 1979, Chun pulled the Ninth Army Division from the D.M.Z. separating North and South Korea and seized control of the Korean military (the Ninth Division was led by Roh Tae Woo, a close military ally who succeeded Chun as President and was sentenced this summer to twenty-two-and-a-half years for his role in the takeover). At first, Chun's blatant violation of the U.S.-Korean joint command structure stunned the Carter Administration. "We went ballistic, because it seriously endangered Americans on the line," Holbrooke told me.

But thanks largely to Holbrooke, the damage to U.S.-Korean relations was quickly papered over. Within a week of the coup, he instructed Gleysteen to extract a promise from President Choi for constitutional reform. If Choi demurred, Holbrooke suggested, "You could even point out, if you were a very cynical person, that setting a date now does not necessarily mean that this date will be kept." After the Korean government agreed on a vague timetable for reform, Holbrooke promised that the U.S. government "would not publicly contest the R.O.K.G. [government] version of recent events" and casually mentioned that it was "not necessarily a disaster that some of the generals [overthrown by Chun] are no longer running it." Carter later promised Choi to "work with you to try to minimize the political damage."

In the months following, the Carter Administration carried on with its effort to build a moderate, pro-U.S. center. Yet it refused to use its enormous economic and military leverage against Chun for fear that would be misinterpreted by North Korea and threaten billions of dollars in U.S. loans and investments in the South. Moreover, as labor unrest flared up and student opposition to Chun intensified, U.S. officials became convinced that Chun's desire for order was a safer alternative to the chaos his foes represented. Ten days after receiving Gleysteen's assurances that the United States would not oppose his military crackdown, Chun extended martial law throughout the nation, dissolved Choi's Cabinet and the National Assembly and ordered the arrests of key opposition leaders. When students in Kwangju defied Chun's edicts by demonstrating in the streets, the Special Forces launched the reign of terror that sparked the subsequent uprising. Soldiers burst into houses searching for anyone under the age of 30 and dragged them out to face clubs, bayonets and machine guns. The death toll, estimated by city residents at 2,000, may never be known.

Both Christopher and Holbrooke were caught off-guard by the severity of Chun's coup and expressed deep reservations about his crackdown. But the cables show that the Carter Administration never seriously considered a nonmilitary solution to the rebellion, which it feared was about to turn into a general uprising against military rule. On May 22, according to a key memo obtained from



the National Security Council, Secretary of State Edmund Muskie convened a high-level meeting at the White House where Holbrooke, Christopher and Brzezinski joined with the C.I.A. and the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the decision to release Korean Army troops to crush the rebellion. The Pentagon was also instructed to prepare for "worst case scenarios" in case the fighting spread beyond Kwangju or endangered the joint command's mission to "counter North Korea"—probably the closest we have come to direct military intervention in Korea since 1953.

With that, the die was cast. In early June, Holbrooke approved a visit to Seoul by the president of the U.S. Export-Import Bank, who promised Seoul \$600 million in export credits to purchase U.S. nuclear power technology. At the time, Holbrooke, now a vice president with CS-First Boston, told a skeptical House committee that blocking the Eximbank guarantees would have had "an almost certain multiplier effect on private lending institutions in New York and elsewhere." Chun went on to seize the presidency in September 1980 and was honored at the White House by President Reagan five months later. Holbrooke went on to become an adviser to the Hyundai Group, one of South Korea's largest conglomerates, in the 1980s.

"We managed between 1977 and the 1980s a policy that

kept strategic stability and encouraged democracy without losing economic growth," Holbrooke told me. "It was an astonishing achievement. And that was both parties—that was Carter, Reagan and Bush." Holbrooke's parting comment was, "You ought to talk about the overall policy. Otherwise, it's simply unfair."

The episode reminds me of Graham Greene's devastating portrait in *The Quiet American* of Alden Pyle, the eager C.I.A. agent sent to colonial Vietnam to subvert the Communist-led Vietminh. At the end of the book, Pyle, who has been secretly providing plastic explosives to a "Third Force" private army opposed to both the French colonialists and the Vietminh, turns his "wide campus gaze" on a Saigon street where a bomb planted by his allies to disrupt a French military parade has exploded prematurely, killing women and children and blowing the legs off a pedicab driver. "There was to have been a parade," Pyle mumbles as he wonders aloud whether he should clean the blood off his shoes before talking to the police; "I didn't know." Thomas Fowler, the cynical English journalist who narrates the story, walks away in disgust. "He was impregnably armoured by his good intentions and his ignorance," Fowler concludes. I can't think of a better description for the tortured liberals who presided over the debacle in Kwangju, and who still direct our foreign policy. ■