

The Korean War 'brainwashing' myth led to U.S. countertechniques against Communist indoctrination.

By George L. Keckeisen



Treason or brainwashing? A group of U.S. Army prisoners of war who refused repatriation during the Korean War poses for a propaganda photograph in the Chinese capital of Beijing on August 2, 1954.

The Korean War was really two conflicts in one. One was the highly publicized battlefield struggle between the forces of the United Nations and those of North Korea and China, whose goal was the Communist unification of Korea. The other war was fought behind the barbed wire of the prisoner of war cages, with slogans and lectures on political theory. The prize was the hearts and minds of the U.N. POWs, for many of whom the hardest fight began after being taken captive.

The conduct of POWs in Korea has assumed a dark and even sinister image due to stories of collaboration, disloyalty and even the murder of fellow prisoners. That image was further soiled by the 21 Americans who refused repatriation on January 23, 1954. Even worse, those men denounced their country and chose to remain with an enemy whose invading forces had killed more than 33,500 U.S. servicemen and women.

What caused that behavior? Was it a flaw in the American character? Did the Communist Chinese have a psychological secret weapon, or was this just an isolated event?

From June 25, 1950, when the North Koreans crossed the 38th parallel, to November 25, 1950, when the Chinese launched their main offensive south of the Yalu River, the plight of anyone falling into North Korean hands was precarious at best. The North Koreans were neither equipped nor trained to accept prisoners. Therefore, those who were unfortunate enough to be captured were usually shot on the spot. United Nations forces came to expect that, and therefore expected the same treatment from the Communist Chinese as their intervention in Korea began in earnest.

It was between November 1950 and January 1951 that the bulk of American prisoners were captured, including 14 of the 21 who would later choose to remain with the Communists. That was a critical period for U.S. forces. The South Koreans were incapable of stopping the North Koreans, and

the only U.S. troops readily available were those garrisoned in Japan. They were not trained or equipped for combat of the intensity that they would soon experience, nor were they taught the geopolitical implications of the conflict. The soldiers of World War II did not need an explanation for the struggle against Germany or Japan. Why, the Army high command reasoned, should their successors require political education to fight the North Koreans?

The initial performance of U.S. Army troops in Korea was disastrous. These soldiers were different from those who stormed the beaches of Normandy six years before. The interwar period, 1945-1950, had not been kind to the Army. Without a conflict, the Army attracted many people who would not normally enlist. For those enlistees, the Army offered a better standard of living than the slums and tenements of the big cities or the small farms of rural America. The education level was well below that of the average soldier during World War II. Many recruits saw overseas duty as the chance of a lifetime. They volunteered and found themselves in soft garrison duty in Japan. Ill-trained and ill-equipped, those soldiers could be expected to sustain a high casualty and POW rate. Those expectations were met.

Their trauma and confusion upon capture were intensified when their Chinese captors greeted them with a cigarette, a

smile and a friendly "hello." It was at this point that the Chinese began their indoctrination process. But how had American soldiers been turned against each other? The key came with the capture of Wang Tsun-ming in 1951.

Wang had been a counter-intelligence officer with the Nationalist Chinese army during the Third Chinese Civil War of 1946-49. At the end of that conflict, he fell into the hands of Mao Tse-tung's Peoples Liberation Army (PLA). Like all who fell into Communist hands at that time, he was given a new education until he convinced his captors that

he had "seen the light" and had embraced the Communist doctrine and way of life. He then became one of the first 100,000 "volunteers" who were sent to fight in Korea. Wang, however, was made of sterner stuff. At the first opportunity, he crossed no man's land and surrendered to U.N. forces.

As an intelligence officer, Wang was familiar with the Communist Chinese methods of indoctrination. He provided the U.N. forces with a chilling description of those methods. The re-education of a village, once in Communist hands, would take eight or more months and could be divided into four phases. During the first phase, which lasted about four months, the PLA and Communist officials would behave like brothers to the people. Everything was handled in a simple manner, with no unpleasant actions taken. They would use simple slogans for doing things in a different way. The soldiers would sometimes even help the farmers in the field. During that time, the peasants would begin to feel that communism was truly a better way of life. At the same time, however, the Communists were studying the population, making a file on each individual and keeping a record of his likes and dislikes, friends and enemies, to be capitalized on later.

When the Communists felt they had enough information, phase two would begin. The first group to be organized was the

able and riffraff of the village. The Communists called them "progressives" and told them that they were to be the new ruling class. But to take their rightful place as rulers, they must purge the traditional wealthy class. A town meeting would be called, and the progressives would be strategically located. The rich people would be called upon to confess to their crimes against their fellow townspeople. Whatever the upper class said, the progressives would denounce and then beat them while accusing others.

Then it was time for phase three—the organization of the poor peasant farmer against the rich farmer, and the purge of the riffraff or progressives for their crimes, known by everyone before the Communists had arrived. In that way, they began a class struggle that would create an atmosphere of uncertainty and suspicion. The Communists organized women's groups to break family ties, for in China the family had been the basic unit that held the people together. Children were singled out for special praise if they informed on their parents. When the chaos was at its height, the last phase was put into effect: Executions were ordered. It did not matter who was disposed of. What mattered was the manner in which it was done. All the people of the village would take part, even the children.

The individuals were either beaten or stoned to death, so that everybody had a hand in the execution. The only things the townspeople now had in common were shame and guilt, and they readily turned to the Communist officials for assurance. This method was much the same as the one used in the permanent POW camps on the Yalu River to turn Americans against each other. The main difference, however, was that in the POW camps, psychological pressures replaced physical ones.

Brainwashing began as soon as POWs entered the camps. To obtain each soldier's background information, the prisoners were asked to fill out detailed questionnaires, falsely carrying the heading of the International Red Cross. Those questionnaires asked such questions as father's occupation, family's annual income and personal educational background. Another source of intelligence was the autobiographies written by the POWs. Because that information was of no apparent military importance, most POWs wrote without being pressured, but such accounts were powerful tools. If they were not detailed enough, the Communists encouraged the prisoners to rewrite them until they were satisfied that they had the material to suit their needs.

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Following the pattern used in China, the Communist indoctrination officers started by separating the officers from the enlisted men. Destroying military unity created a leadership vacuum that the Communists readily filled. They would be the ones to feed and clothe and keep the POWs alive. This strongly contributed to developing a psychological dependency of the POWs upon their Communist captors.

The confusion of the POWs was heightened when they discovered that most of the Chinese officers spoke English and knew a great deal about the United States. The interrogators had a good background in American history and geography, and understood the U.S. political and economic system. They had access to the latest newspapers and magazines, and even listened to American radio programs. They used American slang and knew regional customs and issues. Most important, they understood the value of racial and social differences as tools to disunite the POWs.

With the information gained from the initial interviews, the Chinese began the POWs' re-education. That included daily lectures and group participation in debates, on topics such as economics and political theory. Marxist literature was handed out

and group confessions and criticism sessions were mandatory. POWs who displayed any sympathy for the Communist line were singled out for special treatment. The stick and carrot concept was liberally applied. Those who began to lean toward their captors' ideas were treated well and encouraged to make others see the benefits of accepting the Communist way of life.

Physical torture was rarely applied in the Chinese-run camps. Peer pressure and reasoning were the preferred tactics for use with the uneducated and bewildered. Once a prisoner cooperated, even in the smallest way, there was no turning back. The indoctrination continued, day in and day out. Even mail was used as a tool. Mail containing depressing information always seemed to get through; the lack of consistent mail delivery was blamed on the U.S. bombing effort.

Most of the POWs were completely vulnerable to this new campaign. The reasons for the degree of collaboration can be traced to a lack of education and military training, compounded by a tremendous sense of despair. Military discipline eroded, and there was no hope of escape from the camps on the Yalu River. Prisoners were at the mercy of the Communists for survival, providing the latter with the perfect circumstances for their indoctrination campaign.

How successful was this second war in Korea? Of the 7,190 American POWs, 2,730 died in captivity. Many of the remaining 4,460 spent three years as prisoners. Charges of misconduct by other POWs were deemed sufficient to require an investigation of 565 persons upon their release. Of those, 426 were Army personnel. Only 47 cases were found to be serious enough to require courts-martial. All other charges were dismissed. As a result of the 47 courts-martial, reasonable doubt was found in 35 cases and they were dismissed.

The other record of the Korean War POWs is not as well known. Resistance groups with names like "The Show" and "The Free Hearts of America" were established in many camps to resist the enemy's indoctrination efforts and limit the activities of the progressives who had accepted the Communist line. Those organizations seem to have been so effective that the Chinese had abandoned much of the compulsory indoctrination in many of the camps by 1952.

Fifty-five POWs were decorated for their performance in the camps. A typical citation reads: "... Though severely mistreated and subjected to inhuman tortures, he refused to participate in the Communist indoctrination program, resisted all attempts at coercion and organized fellow prisoners in efforts to disrupt Communist techniques...."

In contrast to the individual acts of resistance and acquiescence among the U.S. Army troops, other U.N. POWs displayed more consistent discipline, most dramatically in the case of the Turks. Not one Turk died in captivity, nor did a single Turkish POW accept Communist doctrine.

The U.S. armed forces have learned much from the bitter experiences of the Korean War POWs and their battles in the camps. It did not take long to discover and understand the methods employed by the Chinese. Threats, propaganda, group pressure and manipulation, disease, malnutrition, fatigue and isolation were the enemy's weapons. New training and educational techniques were introduced to counter those threats.

The Code of Conduct, established in 1955, set the standards of conduct for all U.S. service personnel taken prisoner during armed conflict. U.S. pilots, imprisoned for years in North Vietnam, have testified that their survival was directly related to their belief in the Code of Conduct. Never again would captured U.S. service personnel be at a comparable disadvantage if they were to be subjected to a program of ideological indoctrination. □

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