

# The lasting significance of Kwangju

Journalist uncovers new evidence that U.S. actions exacerbated the bloody people's uprising of 1980 | BY TIM SHORROCK

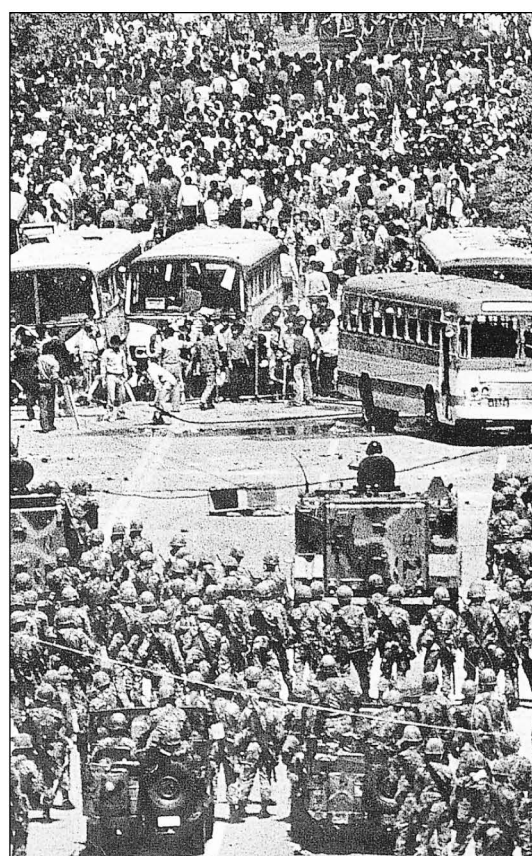
Last May marked the 30th anniversary of the Kwangju Citizens' Uprising in South Korea, a pivotal event that inspired the Korean democratic movement through its ultimate victory in the late 1980s. In Kwangju, where hundreds (perhaps thousands) died in the uprising, the event was marked by solemn remembrances and the presence of political leaders from both left and right, including representatives of the Myung-bak Lee administration, South Korea's most conservative leader in over a decade. But the event drew hardly a passing glance in the U.S., which is South Korea's closest ally.



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The silence is understandable, because Kwangju represents U.S. foreign policy at its worst. The uprising created the most severe crisis in U.S.-Korean relations since the Korean War ended in 1953 and was the largest challenge ever to the U.S.-backed South Korean military, which had effectively controlled the country since 1961 and had fought alongside U.S. forces in Vietnam. Yet the U.S. administration of President Jimmy Carter, despite its public commitment to human rights and its vocal criticism of Korea's authoritarian government, chose the wrong side and supported that government's decision to put the rebellion down with lethal force.

As a journalist, I've been intimately involved with Kwangju since the first days of the uprising. In May 1980, as a student activist at the University of Oregon, I helped distribute some of the first on-scene reports of the military atrocities in Kwangju, which were smuggled out of South Korea by Christian human rights groups and American missionaries. Later that decade, I was one of the only journalists to visit Kwangju and document what had happened there. And over the course of the 1990s, I obtained nearly 4,000 declassified documents that repudiated the official U.S. story that American officials and generals had no involvement in the events that led up to the rebellion.



(top row, left to right - bottom row, left to right) May 15, 1980 professors and students with the national flag march for "the Meeting for National Democratization." The violence of martial law forces made Kwangju citizens protest more vehemently on the streets, those that were caught were beaten or killed. May 21, 1980 paratroopers and citizens confront each other. May 27, 1980 tanks mobilized for suppression operations enter downtown Kwangju. Photos by: Kyung-taek Na (*Yon Hap* News reporter), Chong-keun Hwang (*Dong-a Ilbo*, photo editor), Nyung-man Kim (*Dong-a Ilbo*, assistant photo editor)

## New evidence

To mark the 30th anniversary, I am releasing another batch of documents obtained under my initial Freedom of Information Act

requests. These include nine key State Department cables that I first obtained in 1996 but were further declassified in recent years, and a collection of secret CIA reports on

South Korea that took me over 10 years to obtain (they are heavily redacted, as readers will see).

Together, these documents aug-



ment my initial findings about the U.S. role in South Korea in 1980, which I first reported in 1996. The Carter administration, concerned that the crisis in South Korea could destabilize U.S. security interests and possibly trigger "another Iran," (i.e., catalyze a revolution which would overthrow a U.S. ally), gave tacit approval to the Korean military to use force to put down student and worker protests, while warning generals not to use excessive force. Then, when the Kwangju citizens fought back against military atrocities, the same officials approved the dispatch of Korean troops under U.S. command to put down the rebellion. Carter's actions helped pave the way for nearly eight more years of repressive military rule in South Korea and triggered a wave of anti-American feeling throughout South Korea that persists to this day.

The new documents shed considerably more light on why Carter made his decisions. U.S. intelligence, despite a massive presence in East Asia at the time, completely missed the signs that South Korea was heading toward political warfare in the fall of 1979. By that time, 18 years of intense industrialization coupled with massive repression against labor organizers and student dissidents had produced a combustible mix that climaxed on October 26, 1979, with the assassination of dictator Chung Hee Park. His killer was the CIA chief who feared that Park was driving South Korea toward revolution.

But months before, in an analysis entitled *The Outlook for President Park and South Korea's Dissidents*, the CIA dismissed the worker and student resistance, as well as the political opposition, as unorganized and ineffectual. The thinking was that the movement would be unable to muster public sympathy for its demands for greater democracy and worker rights. According to this report, Park "seems fully capable of retaining his firm grip on power into the 1980s." But it warned that an economic downturn or political over-reaction could drive the opposition to "coalesce, and [Park] might not have a sufficiently deep reservoir of support to maintain his political position."

Still, chances for that were small, the agency said, because South Korea's "active dissenters" numbered from "the hundreds to perhaps a few thousand" in a country of 37 million. Moreover, "the average Korean wage earner" saw student protest as a "reflection of immaturity and lack of 'real responsibilities,'" and was unlikely to participate in dissident politics.

This analysis turned out to be a colossal mistake. In October 1979, tens of thousands of students and workers joined in anti-Park demonstrations in the industrial city of Pusan. The next year in Seoul and other cities, thousands more workers organized wildcat strikes and joined students in daily demonstrations against Park's successors. And in Kwangju in May 1980, nearly half a million people, from students to factory workers to cab drivers, took part in the armed rebellion.

The CIA's failure to anticipate the unrest ranks, alongside its inability to predict the collapse of the Soviet Union, as one of the top intelligence blunders in its history. The State Department cables show a similar disconnect; they underscore how, despite 35 years of close ties, U.S. officials had very little contact with everyday Koreans and virtually no understanding of the political dynamics of a society reeling from 18 years of military rule and labor repression. That was underscored in March 1980, two months before Chun's coup precipitated the Kwangju uprising, when U.S. Ambassador William Gleysteen sent a top secret assessment to Washington.

"The odds of a dangerous disruption, such as a military coup or massive student/worker uprising, do not seem high," he wrote, adding that "the threat of military intervention will remain a Damocles sword over Korea's political development for some time." But, he added, the "workers and others who created trouble" during the Pusan demonstrations "seem prepared to accommodate to Korea's very difficult economic circumstances by taking some reduction in real income rather than taking to the streets." Once again, a colossal misjudgment resulted in a catastrophe.

For American progressives, Kwangju is not just an abstract event in the Cold War. It's also an object lesson in the hard-line foreign policies possible in the Democratic Party. The key players in the Korea decision-making



Protestors and riot police still confront each other at the 20th anniversary commemoration of the Kwangju uprising and massacre May, 2000. Photo by Stephen Wunrow



May, 2002 Kwangju commemoration, two years later with Dae Jung Kim in power, the protests turn into celebrations of democracy and street theater, which bring 22-year-old memories flooding back for the onlookers old enough to have lived through martial law. Photo by Stephen Wunrow

in 1979 and 1980 were Richard Holbrooke and Zbigniew Brzezinski. Holbrooke, a perennial favorite in Democratic circles for the coveted job of secretary of state, is currently a high-ranking official in Hillary Clinton's State Department. Brzezinski, Carter's national security adviser, has won a certain claim to fame in fashionable Washington think tanks (such as the New America Foundation) for his opposition to the war in Iraq and his biting critique of the Bush/neoconservative school of foreign policy.

During the Korean "crisis" of 1980, both men displayed an arrogant and almost breathtaking disdain toward their South Korean allies. Holbrooke and Brzezinski were

instrumental in persuading Carter — who was deeply suspicious of the Korean military — that his only alternative in South Korea was to support Chun over the democratic aspirations of the Korean people.

In a sense, Kwangju marks the end of U.S. Cold War hegemony in East Asia and a turning point in the American relationship with Asia. Carter's decision to back the generals marked, to many South Koreans and others in Asia, a tragic and incomprehensible betrayal. Chalmers Johnson made this point in his prescient 2001 masterpiece *Blowback*, which quoted extensively from my documents.

Just like the Soviet suppression of Hungarian independence in the

summer of 1956 exposed the thuggish face of Soviet military power to the world, Johnson argued, American backing of the military strongman Doo Hwan Chun and his supporters ripped the face off America's supposed commitment to human rights and the rule of law. We are still paying the price for that. And even as tensions on the Korean peninsula deepen over South Korean allegations that the North is responsible for the recent attack on a naval destroyer, it's important to remember why so many South Koreans remain wary of the U.S. and its tremendous military clout in East Asia.

### The Uprising

The Kwangju Uprising began in mid-May 1980, when thousands of South Korean students flooded the streets of Seoul and other major cities to denounce military intervention in Korean politics. The demonstrations had started in the aftermath of the shocking assassination of President Chung Hee Park. Within six weeks, a group of army commanders led by Lt. General Doo Hwan Chun, the chief of military intelligence, had taken control of the military and were clearly intent on seizing total power. But, to the surprise and consternation of the CIA and the State Department, students, workers and opposition politicians sought to block the South Korean military through street demonstrations and direct appeals to the United States.

On May 17, after receiving notice that Washington would not stand in the way of using troops to quell the protests, Chun put a stop to the

growing movement for democracy by declaring martial law over the entire country, sending army forces to sweep through the cities and campuses to arrest movement leaders. The crackdown was effective in Seoul and other cities. But in Kwangju, a city in Korea's southwestern Cholla Province well-known for its resistance to centralized, authoritarian rule, students continued to defy the martial law edicts. On May 18, apparently warned by their commanders that a communist revolution backed by North Korea was unfolding, Chun's troops began a two-day rampage through the city.

These troops were no ordinary army soldiers. They were Special Forces, trained to kill North Koreans during a counterinsurgency war that would follow any armed conflict between North and South. In broad daylight, the paratroopers began beating, bayoneting and shooting anyone who dared to stand up to martial law. The troops attacked bystanders as well, chasing them into their homes and killing them. Horrified and angered by the actions of the storm troopers, the people of Kwangju — the men skilled in firearms because of mandatory stints in the army — formed a citizens' militia and started shooting back. After two days of combat and hand-to-hand fighting, in which dozens of people were killed and wounded, Chun's Special Forces turned tail and pulled out of the city.

In Kwangju and other nearby towns in the Cholla region, the rebellion ushered in a week of collective sharing and citizen solidarity that some activists and historians later compared to the Paris Commune of 1871. The Kwangju citizens hoped and expected that the Carter administration, which was publicly committed to making human rights a centerpiece of U.S. foreign policy, would side with them rather than Chun's hated military *junta* (rumors even flew that a U.S. aircraft carrier was one its way, with orders to help the city).

Back in Washington, however, these events were viewed with fear and loathing. The U.S. had nearly 40,000 combat troops in South Korea, and these forward-based, nuclear-armed troops were key to the U.S. Cold War strategy of encircling the Soviet Union and China with military bases. Just a few months before, Carter had agreed to reverse his 1976 cam-



paign promise to withdraw U.S. troops from Korea, after enormous pressure from conservative lawmakers and the Pentagon concerned about upsetting the U.S. military posture towards North Korea and East Asia.

At the peak of the uprising — at a White House meeting on May 22, 1980 — the Carter administration made its fateful decision. It would allow Chun to deploy regular army troops under the U.S.-Korean military command to put down the rebellion, and gingerly push Chun toward “moderation.” Once the situation was resolved, Carter’s national security team agreed, normal economic ties could move forward — including an important \$600 million Export-Import Bank loan to South Korea to buy American nuclear power equipment and engineering services.

Within hours, Chun’s troops began moving on Kwangju. A tight military cordon had already cut off the city and its surrounding towns from all communications. Military helicopters began flying over the city urging the Kwangju urban army — which had taken up positions in the provincial capital building in the middle of the city — to surrender. At one point, a Kwangju citizens’-council asked the U.S. ambassador, William Gleysteen, to intervene and seek a negotiated truce. But his office coldly rejected the request.

In the early morning of May 27, the Korean troops from the Joint Command shot their way into the provincial capital and quickly put an end to the resistance. The soldiers shut down the Kwangju Commune and arrested hundreds of people who had participated. In early June, Carter’s team approved the Eximbank loan, and South Korea went ahead with its plan to buy U.S. nuclear technology — money that went right into the pockets of the giant U.S. corporations Westinghouse and Bechtel. By September 1980, Chun was president, and in January 1981 incoming President Ronald Reagan chose Chun as the first foreign head of state to visit the White House. U.S.-Korean ties were restored, and a crisis averted.

But not for the people of South Korea. Chun’s takeover began eight more years of military rule. It also sparked a movement for democracy that lasted throughout the 1980s, culminating in 1987 with huge demonstrations in Seoul and other cities that drew millions of people into the streets for weeks on end. In

1997, the movement reached an apex when Dae Jung Kim, a long-time dissident leader (and Kwangju native) was elected president of South Korea. One of the demands of the movement was to seek justice for the military’s actions in Kwangju. In 1996, the administration of former opposition party leader Young Sam Kim tried and convicted Chun and his co-conspirators for their crimes in Kwangju. Dae Jung Kim commuted their sentences upon taking office.

### U.S. assistance

I first reported about my declassified cables in *The Journal of Commerce*, timing my article to coincide with the first day of Chun’s trial. The documents, mostly from the State Department, showed that, contrary to official statements that the U.S. sought to restrain the Korean military, Carter’s top officials assured the Korean generals that they would not oppose his plans to use military troops against pro-democracy demonstrations in the days before his May 17 coup.

Documents I obtained from the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) demolished the official U.S. story on the deployment of the Special Forces. For years, the U.S. government had held that it had no knowledge of Chun’s decisions to use these forces. But the DIA cables showed otherwise: U.S. officials were aware long before Kwangju that the Korean military was planning to use Special Forces against unarmed student and worker protests. Those findings were crucial because two brigades of those Special Forces were later held responsible for the killing in Kwangju.

My stories were a sensation in South Korea. The day after they were published in February 1996, student demonstrations took place in front of the U.S. Embassy in Seoul and in many other cities; for days they were front page news. But *The New York Times*, whose bureau chief in Tokyo at the time was Nicholas Kristof (who later won a Pulitzer for his coverage of China’s Tiananmen Square massacre) completely ignored the cables, as did *The Los Angeles Times*.

I was later told by reporters from both papers that U.S. embassy officials in Tokyo and Seoul informed their editors that there was “nothing new” in the cables; they dutifully followed that self-serving (and absolutely false) advice and never once mentioned

the new information. As a result, the U.S. media and U.S. policy-makers never absorbed the lessons from the unclassified documents (to its credit, *The Washington Post* ran a story about them, but it appeared days after mine and didn’t advance the story at all).

Over the years, I gradually obtained more documentation. But until now, I had never written about the new documents. A few years ago, with the help of the National Security Archives, I obtained 10 State Department documents that had previously been released but heavily redacted. Then, after an 11-year appeals process, the CIA released to me several Top Secret reports — “finished intelligence,” it calls them — written in 1979, just as the crisis began unfolding. The documents are posted on the Foreign Policy in Focus website in PDF form so they can be read by historians, journalists, and U.S. and Korean citizens interested in the truth about this incident. A brief review of the documents follows.

### Supporting dictators

Two of the State Department documents describe the first meetings between the Carter administration, led by then-Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, and the Korean government following Park’s assassination.

They show the extent of the disarray within the Korean government at the time, which was not surprising since Park was a dictator who had absolute power over the country. And they underscore how the Korean authorities, from the beginning of the crisis, tried to preserve the status quo (“no political reprisals against those who have worked for President Park”) while recognizing the deep public dissatisfaction with Park’s rule. They also starkly illustrate South Korea’s complete dependence on U.S. military support, goodwill, and economic assistance (it’s stunning to read the foreign minister of a sovereign country admit openly that one of five key sectors “in our political system” is “the influence of the United States”).

These meetings established what would become U.S. and Korean policy over the next six months. As I wrote in my original articles, Holbrooke and Gleysteen led an effort to help Korean authorities maintain political stability while counseling the opposition — who, Gleysteen admits in one cable, would “win decisively” an open, fair election — to “moderate” their demands for an end to military rule

and open presidential elections. As Secretary Vance reiterated to the Korean foreign minister, “In any contacts that we have with the opposition, we will be careful to counsel moderation.” He added: “We will be careful not to engage in public criticism” of the government.

It’s also significant that Vance, even in his meetings with South Korea’s acting president, mentioned the pending \$600 million U.S. Export Import Bank deal. This loan, which allowed the Korean government to buy U.S. nuclear technology, was approved just one week after Kwangju. It’s sickening to see commercial business deals figuring into a meeting between a U.S. Secretary of State and a Korean president. The nuclear deal, Vance told the president, “would have a calming effect.”

### Two other documents discuss the U.S. response to the “12/12 affair” in 1979.

In December 1979, Doo Hwan Chun breached the U.S.-Korea joint command structure by unilaterally ordering Korean troops guarding the DMZ to arrest the martial law commanders in Seoul. The declassified cables about this event convey the deep U.S. unhappiness about Chun’s actions, with blunt statements from Holbrooke to the Korean ambassador in Washington (“mutual trust has been seriously damaged”). But despite the serious U.S. concerns about the breach of the command structure, Holbrooke and the rest of the administration agreed to remain silent on the subject as long as Chun maintained his promise not to seize total power — which of course he did.

In one document, Gleysteen is remarkably frank about how Chun was trying to grab power. The general, he says, “may try to extend his string-pulling role from the military to the entire government and society.” Yet in May, only weeks later, Gleysteen agreed with Chun on the necessity of using military force to quell peaceful anti-government demonstrations where the primary demand was that Chun get out of the government. Gleysteen also said in this cable that not only would the opposition party win an election — but that if that possibility were to unfold, the military “would move to prevent it in advance or an election or by coup after the election.” Essentially, that’s what Chun did in May when he arrested Dae Jung Kim and other dissidents, and shut down parliament.

Two more documents provide the

full summaries of two crucial meetings Gleysteen held with Chun and the Blue House (the Korean version of the White House) a week before Chun’s crackdown in May 1980. They are significant because they show that Gleysteen (and therefore the rest of the Carter government) knew the extent of the coming crackdown — “more than 12,000 combat police had been distributed throughout Seoul.” But it also conveys far more than previous cables how concerned Gleysteen and company were about potential violence and arrests. Despite those concerns, however, U.S. leaders were still characterizing opposition leaders as “unhelpful,” and Gleysteen promised to “talk sense” to Dae Jung Kim and his fellow dissident Young Sam Kim, both of whom got swept up in the crackdown.

The final cable, written by Gleysteen in June 1980 after another talk at the Blue House, provides the first official recognition of the rising anti-Americanism in South Korea. Significantly, however, Gleysteen’s primary concern was not students but “anti-American maneuvering within the regime.” In his meeting, Gleysteen was told in advance of the massive purges (in business, labor and academia) carried out by Chun during the summer of 1980. “The military authorities were not yet satisfied that they had cleansed the political scene adequately,” he says in one chilling statement, but the Blue House “was confident the surgery would not be carried to extremes.”

Despite this knowledge, the Carter administration remained silent about these actions — just as it was about Kwangju. There can be no stronger proof of the U.S. complicity in this sorry chapter in American diplomacy. And unfortunately, the lessons not learned in Kwangju have been repeated in too many places where the U.S. has concluded that its strategic economic and military interests outweigh the importance of human rights — from Baghdad to Kabul to Jakarta. ●

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