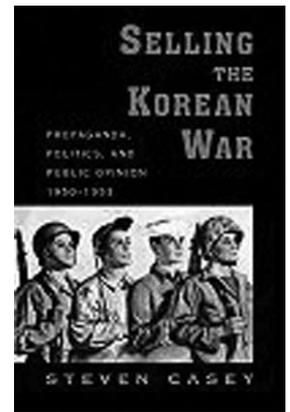


Selling the Korean War: Propaganda, Politics, and Public Opinion in the United States, 1950-1953

Steven Casey

Reviewed by Professor Peter Edwards



The current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have provoked frequent comparisons with that in Vietnam, not least in the importance of 'the home front'. That term has taken on quite different meanings from those that applied in the two world wars, when it meant tangible contributions to the war effort – such as the manufacture of munitions – as much as the maintenance of morale in the face of blockades and the bombing of cities. In more recent wars, smaller in scale and mostly at some distance from Australia and its major allies, the focus has been far more on the need to maintain public support for the conflict, as the cost in blood and treasure continues for year after year and challenges are mounted to the war's necessity, strategic wisdom and morality.

For many Australians and Americans, especially those of the present writer's generation, the classic case of the importance of public opinion in a post-1945 war was Vietnam, and especially the media coverage of the Tet offensive of early 1968. For years afterwards, many argued that the war had been lost by the media, especially by the television reports broadcast to the living-rooms of middle America. This view was summarily dismissed as neither useful nor factually accurate by the current Chief of Army, Lieutenant General Ken Gillespie, when he opened this year's Army History Conference. It is a sign of the importance of the topic that the conference was devoted to the historical lessons and current operational relationship between the military and the media.

The value of *Selling the Korean War* is that it takes the story back before the Vietnam War to the first of the major limited wars of the post-1945 era, Korea. The sobriquet 'the forgotten war' carries a little less weight these days, but on the question of the relationship between political leaders, the military and the news media, it has indeed been overlooked too often. The central contention of this book is that the Korean War was when the American political and military leaderships first had to manage public opinion in a limited war. Just after the largest war the world had ever seen, President Harry Truman and his political and military subordinates had to cope with a new set of challenges. They had to stir the public sufficiently to ensure continued support from Congress and the electorate, while not arousing the public to the extent that it was calling for a wider, perhaps global, war against the Soviet Union.

Steven Casey, the author of *Selling the Korean War*, is a senior lecturer in the Department of International History at the London School of Economics. (What a pity it is, incidentally, that no Australian university has seen fit to create such a department. In most history departments in this country, other than at the Australian Defence Force Academy, it is rare to get more than one historian interested in international relations, in peace and war, generating the stimulus that comes from collegial contact.)

Casey's book is not military history as that term is usually understood, but a substantial, scholarly and nuanced account of the Truman administration's handling of the media and public opinion throughout the Korean War. All the familiar episodes are there – the advances and retreats, the Inchon landing, most importantly Truman's sacking of General MacArthur – but seen through the prism of the administration's media management and the associated political controversies.

For a reader today, perhaps one of the most interesting themes is the tension within the Republican Party between the ideologues of the Right and the moderates with more experience of international affairs in both peace and war. This is the time not only of the egregious Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee, but also of the rise and electoral victory of that most politically skilled general, Dwight D. Eisenhower. While Casey is careful not to write history as an exercise in current political polemics, I suspect that this account will reinforce the regret felt by many Americans that General Colin Powell did not become the Republican President of the United States in 2000.

Selling the Korean War is written primarily for an academic readership. It is large and thorough, but clearly written, with a judicious balance of narrative and analysis. It should also be read by anyone with a serious interest in the Korean War, by those interested in American politics and foreign policy in the mid-twentieth century, and especially by anyone with a serious interest in the relationship between political leaders, the military and the media, as they shape public opinion in a limited war. ♦

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