



# MERSHON CENTER

## for International Security Studies



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## THE LEGACY OF THE KOREAN WAR



**Principal Investigators:** Mitchell Lerner, Associate Professor of History

On July 27, 1953, North Korean Gen. Nam Il and U.S. Lt. Gen. William Harrison signed an armistice to end the military conflict that had been raging for three years in Korea. Within hours, guns across the 38th parallel fell silent and troops began to withdraw. Soldiers and civilians around the world cheered the end to a war that had cost over a million lives.

Yet the armistice was only the beginning of the end of the Korean War. For the next four decades the Korean peninsula remained the hottest spot in the Cold War, where two hostile worlds continued to collide in an atmosphere of tension and animosity.

To mark the 60th anniversary of the Korean armistice, Mitch Lerner organized a special series of speakers to examine the war's impact beyond its immediate aftermath.

The speaker series drew from two frameworks. First, over the past decade new materials about the Korean War have emerged from the former communist archives, providing critical perspective from the other side of the international struggle. Integrating these materials into the ongoing debate, scholars are coming to understand questions such as:

- Why did North Korea launch the 1950 invasion?
- Why did Chinese forces intervene in late 1950?
- What role did the death of Josef Stalin in 1953 play?

Beyond the conflict itself, however, speakers also examined its long-term legacy. This legacy has been most obvious on the Korean peninsula, which has experienced a series of dangerous military incidents including the 1968 Blue House attack that almost assassinated South Korean President Park Chung Hee; the seizure of the U.S. spy ship Pueblo, which put 82 American servicemen in North Korean prison camps for a year; the 1980 bombing of South Korean leaders visiting Rangoon; the 1987 bombing of Korean Air flight 858 that killed over 100 people; and the recent sinking of the South Korean ship Cheonan.

The Korean War also reverberated for decades in Washington and around the world. It was the first conflict in which the United Nations Command participated, establishing the organization's legitimacy and setting a precedent for subsequent interventions. It militarized American foreign policy-making, replacing the diplomatic efforts of the late 1940s with a new emphasis on intervention capabilities as a key measure of international power.

The Korean War also led to the concept of "limited war," setting the stage for U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and created a vision of "naked aggression" and "liberation" warfare that would dominate American thinking about international conflict thereafter.

The Korean War speaker series at the Mershon Center included:

November 29, 2012

T.X. Hammes

National Defense University

"The 1st Provisional Marine Brigade, the Corps Ethos, and the Korean War"



March 8, 2013

Jeremi Suri

University of Texas-Austin

“Why the Korean War was the Most Important and Enduring Cold War Conflict”

April 17, 2013

Monica Kim

State University of New York–Albany

“Making a Prisoner for War: Examining the Korean War Armistice from Behind and Beyond the Barbed-wire Fence”

October 24, 2013

Sheila Myoshi Jager

Oberlin College

“Brothers at War: The Unending Conflict in Korea”

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1501 Neil Ave., Columbus, OH 43201

Phone: 614-292-1681 | Fax: 614-292-2407

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