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Hodge Podge: American Occupation Policy in Korea, 1945-1948

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Abstract

Lieutenant General John Reed Hodge was one of the most important people in recent Korean history. He served as the commander of the U.S. military occupation of southern Korea from September 1945 to August 1948, although he was far from being a prominent U.S. Army officer during World War II. His personal and professional background had a direct and negative impact on his implementation of instructions and his dealings with the Korean people and their political leaders. This article provides evidence that President Harry S. Truman's decision to appoint Hodge as occupation commander was a serious mistake. His narrow experience and lesser command responsibilities caused him to make decisions that greatly increased political polarization in the divided country, creating the circumstances that would result in the outbreak of the Korean War.

Hodge Podge: American Occupation Policy in Korea, 1945–1948

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Lieutenant General John Reed Hodge was one of the most important people in recent Korean history. He served as the commander of the U.S. military occupation of southern Korea from September 1945 to August 1948, although he was far from being a prominent U.S. Army officer during World War II. His personal and professional background had a direct and negative impact on his implementation of instructions and his dealings with the Korean people and their political leaders. This article provides evidence that President Harry S. Truman's decision to appoint Hodge as occupation commander was a serious mistake. His narrow experience and lesser command responsibilities caused him to make decisions that greatly increased political polarization in the divided country, creating the circumstances that would result in the outbreak of the Korean War.

Korea has endured great suffering during the twentieth century. Japan bears most of the responsibility for the unhappy recent history of this country. Former Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910 resulted not only in oppression and exploitation, but set the stage for political division and a destructive war. Japan also was responsible for Korea's emergence as a prize in the postwar contest for global supremacy between the United States and the Soviet Union. Had there been no Japanese troops in Korea at the close of World War II, Soviet American military occupation of this peninsula would not have been necessary. This does not, however, absolve the United States of blame for following policies regarding Korea's postwar reconstruction that were either selfish or unwise. Indeed, President Harry S. Truman, despite rhetorical claims to the contrary, rarely assigned much importance to satisfying the hopes and dreams of the Korean people for the future of their country. His first mistake was appointing Lieutenant General John Reed Hodge as the commander of the U.S. occupation in August 1945.



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