

The United States and South Korean Democratization

JAMES FOWLER

During 1979 and 1980, South Korea experienced a failed transition to democracy. The "Seoul Spring," which took place after the assassination of authoritarian leader Park Chung Hee in late 1979, was brought to a brutal halt when martial law was declared and at least 200 demonstrators were killed at Kwangju in May 1980. Not until June 1987 would South Korea's new leader, Chun Doo Hwan, agree to step down and allow direct elections of the president. Many critics of U.S. foreign policy have studied this period, and the current literature follows two basic schools of thought. One school asserts that the United States had little impact on events in Korea, because it was strategically bound to support the South Korean government regardless of its level of commitment to democratization. This school advances several domestic reasons for the delayed transition, including the lack of labor and middle class support for the opposition and the weakness of the interim civilian government in 1979–1980. The other school focuses on the presence of U.S. troops in Korea and the U.S. "approval" of the use of Combined Forces Command (CFC) units in their bloody crackdown of the Kwangju uprising. These writers claim that the United States could have denied such approval and prevented the crackdown, which led to seven years of rule under the authoritarian Chun regime.

Acknowledging that there are probably many factors that determined the timing of democratic transition, this article will focus on an issue that has yet to be given appropriate attention in the literature: the use of U.S. public pressure. The recent declassification of thousands of pages of telegrams between the U.S. State Department and its embassy in Seoul has especially illuminated the choices that decision makers faced during the period. This evidence indicates that contrary to the opinions expressed throughout the literature, U.S. actions did have an impact on events, though the approval of CFC forces was

JAMES FOWLER is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Government at Harvard University.

only incidentally important. Instead, the essential policy tool was the use of public criticism. Ironically, this tool was abandoned under a Carter administration oriented towards human rights and then used by a Reagan administration oriented towards security.¹ The counterintuitive result can be explained by the impact of the Iranian crisis on policy makers in 1979–1980 and the effect of Philippine democratization on policy makers in 1986–1987. Thus this article seeks to illuminate the process whereby conflicts in other countries that had no direct bearing on South Korea ultimately affected the outcome of its own domestic political process.

TWO CYCLES OF SOUTH KOREAN LIBERALIZATION

To better analyze the initial failure and subsequent success of South Korea's transition to democracy, it will be useful to discuss two distinct cycles of liberalization. The first cycle began in 1979, when the government responded to opposition demands by relaxing the application of laws against dissent and securing the release of over 1,000 political prisoners.² In spite of these actions, opposition to the Park regime grew. Demonstrations increased in frequency, and even members of the government openly criticized the Park administration.³ Hardliners began to clamp down in August, arresting key officials of the main opposition party (NDP), confiscating NDP newspapers, and raiding NDP headquarters during the Y. H. Trading Company workers' sit-in.

These actions radicalized the opposition. Kim Young Sam, the leader of the NDP, said in a speech on 10 September that he would start a movement to "overthrow the Park regime."⁴ Not surprisingly, the government replied that it would return to strict enforcement of restrictions on dissent.⁵ On 4 October, Kim Young Sam was expelled from the National Assembly. Radicals responded in kind on 17 October, when 12,000 students took a demonstration to

¹ At President Jimmy Carter's first transition meeting with President Ronald Reagan in 1980, Carter noted that Reagan "expressed with some enthusiasm his envy of the authority that Korean President Park Chung Hee had exercised during a time of campus unrest, when he had closed the universities and drafted the demonstrators." Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 578.

² Telegrams from U.S. Ambassador to South Korea William Gleysteen to Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, "Reaction to Prisoner Release," 19 July 1979, and "Prisoners Released as Expected on ROK Independence Day," 16 August 1979. These and all telegrams cited were released by the Department of State in response to a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request originally filed by Tim Shorrock and can be found in the *Kwangju Documents Collection*, Government Documents and Information Center, Mudd Library, Yale University.

³ Telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, "National Assembly Finishes Fourth Day of Interpellations," 26 July 1979.

⁴ Telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, "Kim Young Sam's September 10 Press Conference," 10 September 1979.

⁵ Telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, "ROKG Limits Dissent," 14 September 1979.

downtown Pusan where as many as five students were killed and 500 arrested.⁶ Though the Park government was very used to dealing with student protests, these demonstrations were much larger in scope and received widespread support from citizens other than students.⁷ In response to continuing demonstrations in Pusan and Masan, the Park government declared martial law for the region including and immediately surrounding the two cities.

The Pusan and Masan riots had a substantial impact on the mood of the nation. However, no one was prepared for the events that would follow.⁸ On 26 October 1979, the director of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA), Kim Chae Kyu, shot and killed Park Chung Hee at a dinner party. Kim had been embroiled in an argument with Cha Chi Chol, the head of the Presidential Protective Force, over how to respond to the riots in Pusan and Masan. Kim believed that the government should pursue a policy of conciliation, while Cha argued that it was time to crack down.⁹ Kim apparently feared an impending purge of reformers in the government (including himself), so he readied his men on the night of 26 October. When it was clear that Park would accept Cha's advice instead of his own, Kim shot both Cha and Park.¹⁰ Believing that he had the support of many reformers in the military, Kim tried to convince the moderate Army Chief of Staff and Martial Law Commander General Chung Song-Hwa to execute a coup that evening, but Chung refused in the name of law and order.¹¹ Kim was promptly arrested.

Hardliners clamped down, declaring martial law for the whole mainland. The month of November was very confusing. Prime Minister Choi Kyu Hah was the de facto head of state, but he gave no clear signals of whether he was a reformer or a hardliner. The opposition demanded democratic reform and cautiously began to organize. Meanwhile, General Chung tried to soothe hardliner fears of disorder by announcing that "if the North were to attack, ten million South Korean lives would be sacrificed and he would prefer to crack down

⁶ Telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, "Situation in Pusan Following Declaration of Martial Law," 18 October 1979.

⁷ Telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, "More on Pusan Demonstration; Demonstration at Ewha University in Seoul," 17 October 1979.

⁸ Ironically, Gleysteen writes: "None of our contacts, including the dissidents, see the current situation in Pusan as an indication that the Park Government faces real problems in staying afloat." Telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, "Update on Martial Law Situation October 22," 22 October 1979.

⁹ Kihl Young Whan, *Politics and Policies in Divided Korea: Regimes in Contrast* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1984), 76. In private conversations with Ambassador Gleysteen, Kim said that he thought EM-9 should be repealed and that he was concerned about "the accumulation of grievances against the Park government and the relatively depressed economic climate in which such grievances can grow." See telegrams from Gleysteen to Vance, "Meeting with Kim," 17 March 1979, and "Charges of U.S. Complicity in President Park's Death," 19 November 1979.

¹⁰ Telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, "ROK Announce Partial Investigative Results on President's Death," 28 October 1979.

¹¹ Kihl, *Politics and Policies*, 78.

now on a thousand demonstrators who were inviting such an attack.”¹² On 6 December, Choi was elected interim president by the electoral college, and the following day he gave hope to the opposition that he was a reformer by lifting the much-hated Emergency Measure 9 (EM-9) and releasing Kim Dae Jung, a key opposition leader, from house arrest.¹³

On 12 December, Major General Chun Doo Hwan, the commander of the Defense Security Command, and “a group of men very close to President Park,”¹⁴ arrested sixteen military generals, including martial law commander General Chung, and initiated a purge of reformers at all levels of the military.¹⁵ Their primary motivations were a fear that social unrest would break out very soon and a concern that the older, more moderate officers were mishandling the prosecution of Kim Chae Kyu.¹⁶ Chun would later consolidate the purge of reformers by maneuvering into the job of acting director of the KCIA while retaining his post as director of the Defense Security Command.¹⁷

In spite of these movements by hardliners against reformers in the military, the civilian government continued to pursue liberalization. 1,722 political prisoners were released or had their sentences reduced in December 1979, and in February 1980 the government relaxed press censorship and restored political rights to Kim Dae Jung and hundreds of EM-9 violators.¹⁸ The move briefly appeased radicals,¹⁹ but the probably intentional effect on the moderate opposition was to start up an age-old internecine rivalry between Kim Dae Jung and Kim Young Sam that would hamper their ability to focus on their real opponents.²⁰

In April 1980, students participated in massive, but peaceful demonstrations on the twentieth anniversary of the student revolution that toppled Syngman Rhee, Korea’s first president. But even as student pressure remained contained, labor pressure was on the rise. A miners’ strike at Sabuk turned violent,

¹² Telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, “Martial Law Administrator General Chong Song-Hwa Briefs the Press,” 29 November 1979.

¹³ Kihl, *Politics and Policies*, 77; and telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, “ROKG Announces the Lifting of Emergency Measure 9,” 7 December 1979.

¹⁴ Telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, “Younger ROK Officers Grab Power Positions,” 13 December 1979.

¹⁵ Yang Sung Chul, *The North and South Korean Political Systems* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1994), 429; and telegram from Christopher to Vance, “Military Power Play in South Korea,” 12 December 1979.

¹⁶ Donald Stone MacDonald, *The Koreans: Contemporary Politics and Society* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1990), 58; and telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, “Younger ROK Officers Grab Power Positions,” 13 December 1979.

¹⁷ Kihl, *Politics and Policies*, 78.

¹⁸ Telegrams from Gleysteen to Vance, “Release of Prisoners on Occasion of Inauguration,” 21 December 1979, and “Political Rights Restored,” 29 February 1980.

¹⁹ Telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, “ROK Universities: Off to a Calm Start,” 14 March 1980.

²⁰ Kihl, *Politics and Policies*, 78.

and a Pusan steel mill riot left one dead and several injured.²¹ Moreover, the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) threatened to sue the government if it did not eliminate the Special Measures law that denied rights to labor.²² This rise in radical pressure on the government did not go unnoticed. By 1 May, the Martial Law Command (MLC) was issuing warnings that labor and campus disturbances would no longer be tolerated.²³ Hardliners were in position.

The first student-MLC clashes took place on 2 May, as students at Seoul National University tried to take a demonstration off campus.²⁴ The result of the clashes was to reorient student demands to a call for the end of martial law by 15 May.²⁵ Their patience exhausted, moderates agreed to ally with radicals: Kim Dae Jung joined in the demand on 8 May, and Kim Young Sam and the Catholic Church joined on 9 May.²⁶ The result on 15 and 16 May was 40–50,000 students in the streets of Seoul alone.²⁷ In an effort to bolster students' demands, Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung displayed unprecedented unity by jointly calling for the lifting of martial law.²⁸ For hardliners, this final coalition between radicals and unified moderates was the final provocation. On 17 May 1980, the military arrested several student leaders and pressured President Choi and the Cabinet to extend martial law to the whole country, giving the military direct control.²⁹ Kim Dae Jung and Kim Young Sam were promptly arrested. That morning newspapers printed the official text of the martial law order, citing "current North Korean movements and the certainty of incidents of unrest all across the ROK" as reasons for the return to military rule.³⁰

²¹ Ibid.; and telegram from Gleysteen to SecState, "More Violence on Labor Scene," 1 May 1980. NB: "SecState" was used in the interim period after Secretary Vance resigned and before Edwin Muskie became secretary of State.

²² Telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, "Organized Labor Calls for Suspension of Special Measures Law," 29 April 1980.

²³ Telegram from Gleysteen to SecState, "Martial Law Command Threatens Action Against Future Disturbances," 1 May 1980.

²⁴ Telegram from Gleysteen to SecState, "Student-Police Clashes Occur for First Time This Year," 2 May 1980.

²⁵ Telegram from Gleysteen to SecState, "Student Activism Turns to National Political Issues," 5 May 1980.

²⁶ Telegram from Gleysteen to SecState, "National Alliance Calls for Resignation of Prime Minister and Acting Chief of KCIA," 8 May 1980; and telegrams from Gleysteen to Secretary of State Edwin Muskie, "Kim Young Sam May 9 Press Conference," 9 May 1980, and "Catholic Church Calls for Lifting of Martial Law," 9 May 1980.

²⁷ Telegram from Gleysteen to Muskie, "Seoul Sitrep, 2000 May 15: Demonstrations Out in Force but Police Lines Holding," 15 May 1980.

²⁸ Telegram from Gleysteen to Muskie, "Kim Dae Jung and Kim Young Sam Join in Call for Lifting of Martial Law and Resignation of Prime Minister and Acting KCIA Chief," 16 May 1980.

²⁹ Telegram from Gleysteen to Muskie, "Crackdown in Seoul," 17 May 1980.

³⁰ See Kihl, *Politics and Policies*, 79; and telegram from Gleysteen to Muskie, "ROK Sitrep as of 0900 18 May," 18 May 1980.

On 18 May, thousands of students from Chosun University initiated a demonstration in Kwangju that drew massive support.³¹ Demonstrators called for the release of Kim Dae Jung (who was from Kwangju) and an immediate end to military rule. Army Special Forces were sent to stop the demonstration and in the ensuing struggle used fixed bayonets on demonstrators, causing several deaths. By midafternoon a full scale riot had broken out, attracting thousands of townspeople and ordinary citizens.³² Rioting continued on 19 May, as crowds swelled to 100,000.³³ On 20 May, the Korean Army was forced to withdraw. After seven days of siege, the regular Korean Army entered the city in the early morning hours and took control in a “relatively bloodless maneuver.”³⁴ By mid-day the army had arrested 1,740 civilians, 730 of whom, mostly students, were detained for investigations.³⁵ The final death toll for the uprising was officially put at 230, although unofficial estimates ranged from 600 to 2,000.³⁶ This first cycle of liberalization ended in bloodshed without democracy. Chun would rule with a tight grip for the next six years.

The second cycle of liberalization would not begin in earnest until February 1986, when the opposition launched a petition campaign for a constitution with direct elections. Under the aegis of the new campaign, the opposition successfully united under a new party (NKDP) and pushed hard for liberalization. Reformers in the government party (DJP) relented, initiating a dialogue on constitutional reform. But subsequent demonstrations, especially the Incheon demonstration on 3 May, indicated the growing radicalization of certain groups within the opposition.³⁷ The growing power of these radicals fueled a reformer faction in the military that feared that if they did not negotiate with the moderate opposition soon, radicals would become too powerful and attempt to violently overthrow the Chun regime.³⁸

Hardliners quickly grew impatient with bickering between and within the DJP and NKDP. On 13 April 1987, Chun suspended debate on constitutional reform, and on 10 June he nominated retired General Roh Tae Woo to succeed

³¹ For an excellent account of the Kwangju uprising, see Nam Koon Woo, *South Korean Politics: The Search for Political Consensus and Stability* (New York: University Press of America, 1989), 221–224.

³² See MacDonald, *The Koreans*, 58–59; and telegram from Gleysteen to Muskie, “Korea Sitrep—5 M. May 19,” 19 May 1980.

³³ Telegram from Gleysteen to Muskie, “Seoul Sitrep, 1430 May 21,” 21 May 1980.

³⁴ MacDonald, *The Koreans*, 58–59.

³⁵ Nam, *South Korean Politics*, 223.

³⁶ Yang, *The North and South*, 429–431. For example, the human rights group AsiaWatch maintains that 2,000 civilians were killed.

³⁷ James Cotton, “From Authoritarianism to Democracy in South Korea” in James Cotton, ed., *Korea Under Roh Tae-woo: Democratization, Northern Policy and Inter-Korean Relations* (Canberra: Allen & Unwin, 1993), 33.

³⁸ Cotton, “From Authoritarianism,” 33; Robert E. Bedeski, “State Reform and Democracy in South Korea” in Cotton, *Korea Under Roh*, 65; and Edward A. Olsen, “The Challenge of Political Change Overseas,” *Washington Quarterly* 10 (Spring 1987): 177.

him under the unchanged constitution. The opposition exploded as thousands of demonstrators took to the streets in Seoul and elsewhere.³⁹ Over the course of the next two weeks, reformers began to convince hardliners that they had no choice this time, that repression could not succeed. General Roh sensed this shift away from hardliners in the military and began to “pull away from Chun.”⁴⁰ Finally, on 26 June, General Roh announced that the demands of the opposition would be met, including for the first time direct and open presidential elections. Thus was democracy born in the second cycle of liberalization.

A MODEL OF LIBERALIZATION

In both cycles, initial liberalization by the government engendered increasing demands by the opposition for further liberalization. The spiraling conflict eventually led to a reversal of liberalization that provoked significant demonstrations (Pusan and Masan in 1979, Seoul and Kwangju in 1980, and the June demonstrations in 1987). However, the outcomes of these cycles were very different (crackdown in 1980 and democracy in 1987). What factors could explain the different outcomes?

The transitions to democracy literature describes the liberalization process generally as a two-stage interaction in which the opposition pushes for reform and the government either reforms or cracks down on the opposition. Following a distinction originating with Guillermo O'Donnell, these reforms can either be described as liberalization (prisoner releases, relaxation of restriction on dissent) or democratization (free and fair elections).⁴¹ The distinction is important because, as Samuel Huntington notes, liberalization without democratization is inherently unstable.⁴² Instead of reducing pressure on the government, liberalization gives the opposition more leeway and a greater incentive to increase pressure for democratization. Hence, the interaction between the government and the opposition is repeated through successive stages of partial liberalization until the government either democratizes, cracks down on the opposition, or is overthrown. Adam Przeworski concludes: “These indeed are the alternatives: either to incorporate the few groups that can be incorporated and to repress everyone else, returning to authoritarian stasis, or to open the political agenda to the problem of institutions, that is, democracy.”⁴³

³⁹ Don Oberdorder, “U.S. Policy in the 1987 Crisis Compared With Other Allies” in Robert A. Scalapino and Lee Hongkoo, eds., *Korea–U.S. Relations: The Politics of Trade and Security* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 180; and Okonogi Masao, “South Korea’s Experiment in Democracy” in Cotton, *Korea Under Roh*, 11.

⁴⁰ Author’s interview with U.S. Ambassador to South Korea James Lilley, 28 February 1997.

⁴¹ See Guillermo O'Donnell, “Notas para el estudio de procesos de democratización a partir del estado burocrático-autoritario,” *Estudios CEDES* (Buenos Aires: Centro de Estudios de Estado y Sociedad, 1979).

⁴² Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 136–137.

⁴³ Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University, 1991), 60.

While this explanation illuminates the choices facing the government and the opposition in transitions to democracy, treating these groups as unitary actors obscures the competition to influence strategy that takes place within each group. To enrich the model, we can use the typology introduced by O'Donnell and further elaborated by Przeworski, in which the government is divided into two factions—hardliners and reformers—and the opposition is divided into moderates and radicals.⁴⁴ Though these writers use the typology to refer to actors with strictly different preferences, it may be more useful to think of them as existing along spectra from radical to moderate and from reformer to hardliner. For example, some hardliners might be more inclined to support reform than others, while some radicals might be more inclined to support moderate opposition strategies.

Each faction exercises power in two ways—by provoking a response or by changing preferences. For example, if moderates participate in large radical demonstrations, this might cause hardliners to crack down. However, it might also cause some hardliners to be more receptive to reform if the demonstration changes their belief about the probability that a crackdown will have hugely negative consequences. Thus the predictive power of this model may be hampered by an inability to assess the relative weight of cross-cutting effects. This should not, however, discourage the use of the typology as an analytical tool to clarify the interests of each faction and to discover whether explanatory hypotheses can be eliminated because they fall too far outside the realm of the possible.

The most important result of the typology is that the reformer faction is critically important to successful transitions to democracy. To maximize their own benefit in a potential transition, reformers must marginalize radicals by making concessions to moderates. Otherwise, opposition strategies will become more extreme as radicals lose patience with the process, increasing the risk of civil disorder. However, the natural tendency of the opposition to demand greater and greater concessions may increase the probability that hardliners will respond by cracking down to avoid a loss of power. Caught in a high-risk balancing act, reformers must be able to face down or change the hardliners if they are to continue making concessions and complete the process of transition.⁴⁵ Thus, a weak reformer faction is a recipe for failure, while a strong reformer faction can dramatically improve the probability of democratization.

The importance of the strength of reformers is empirically verified in South Korea. In the first cycle of liberalization, Kim Chae Kyu tried to initiate a coup in the name of democratization, but the coup failed when reformers failed to support him. Moreover, Chun Doo Hwan was able to purge reformers in the military and in the KCIA, meaning that there were no reformers left to oppose

⁴⁴ Ibid., 67.

⁴⁵ Courtney Jung and Ian Shapiro, "South Africa's Negotiated Transition: Democracy, Opposition, and the New Constitutional Order," *Politics and Society* 23 (September 1995): 278–280.

garrison decree and the crackdown at Kwangju. However, in the second cycle, Roh Tae Woo led a group of reformers that convinced Chun to step down. In both of these cycles, the relative strength of reformers correlated directly to the likelihood of a transition. When reformers were weakest, hundreds died at Kwangju. When reformers were strongest, democracy bloomed. Any explanation of the timing of the transition must thus be tested for its effect on reformers.

AD HOC EXPLANATIONS

Scholars and other observers have advanced many ad hoc explanations that identify one factor or another as being important to the timing of Korean liberalization. Five of the most common arguments will be addressed here. First, there is widespread agreement that nationwide demonstrations held in June 1987, especially those held on the 18th and 19th, were very important in contributing to Chun's decision to allow direct elections.⁴⁶ The most common argument in the literature is that these demonstrations were unique because they drew the support of the middle-class or ordinary citizens.⁴⁷ More and more Koreans identified themselves as middle class over the period, and Soo Young Auh hypothesizes that middle-class Koreans as "postmaterialists" were better educated, more physically secure, and thus more likely to place a "high priority on self-expression" and participate in demonstrations.⁴⁸ This effect primarily increased civilian support for the opposition, but it also increased the strength of reformers in the lower ranks of the military as they too became middle class.⁴⁹ Thus authors like Robert E. Bedeski assert that a critical threshold of support from a "broader cross-section of society" was reached in 1987, which finally led to a "popular reaction" against the government.⁵⁰

However, the middle class also participated to a lesser degree in the first cycle. The Pusan demonstration in October 1979 was the first major demonstra-

⁴⁶ For samples, see Okonogi, "South Korea's Experiment," 11; Bedeski, "State Reform," 65; and Sam Jameson, "U.S. Reportedly Had Little Influence in South Korean Policy Turnabout," *Los Angeles Times*, 3 July 1987.

⁴⁷ See Daniel A. Bell, *Towards Illiberal Democracy in Pacific Asia* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995), 87; Bedeski, "State Reform," 65; Jameson, "U.S. Reportedly," 12; Oberdorfer, "U.S. Policy," 180; and Russell Watson, "Crisis in Korea," *Newsweek*, 29 June 1987, 8. This view was also expressed in the author's interviews with Ambassador William Gleysteen, 27 February 1997 and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Michael Armacost, 28 February 1997.

⁴⁸ Soo, "The Impact of Value Change on Democratization in Korea," (<http://www.kois.go.kr/Explore/Studies/15.html>), 1 January 1997. See also Tat Yan Kong, "From Relative Autonomy to Consensual Development: The Case of South Korea," *Political Studies* 43 (December 1995): 641. For a description of the theory of postmaterialist values, see Ronald Inglehart, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

⁴⁹ Author's interview with Gleysteen, 27 February 1997.

⁵⁰ Bedeski, "State Reform," 69.

tion that was widely supported by townspeople;⁵¹ and the Kwangju incident in May 1980 brought thousands of ordinary citizens onto the streets. That this behavior was first observed in 1979 is no surprise; a public opinion poll in early 1980 showed that for the first time, Koreans viewed a greater share in political decision making and a larger measure of personal freedom as more important than economic priorities.⁵² Even though the middle class did participate somewhat more in 1987, some observers doubt that they played a significant role in the demonstrations.⁵³ The weakness of the middle class did not pose a barrier to transitions in countries like the Philippines, for example.

Second, labor is another group that has been cited in the literature as critical to the 1987 demonstrations.⁵⁴ With productivity rising twice as fast as wages, workers resented the fact that they had not shared in the fruits of the Korean economic miracle. Moreover, though workers' rights of free association and collective bargaining were included in the constitutions under both Park and Chun, in practice these rights were not protected.⁵⁵ The result, it is argued, was that labor increased its support for the radical opposition by joining in student demonstrations or organizing protests of their own during the second cycle of liberalization.

However, labor activity was even more pronounced in the first cycle of liberalization because of the dramatic economic problems experienced in 1979 and 1980. The international oil shock and a disastrous rice harvest because of a severe winter fueled inflation and caused the Korean economy to shrink in 1980 for the first time since the 1950s.⁵⁶ If anything, the economic crisis should have made a transition to democracy more likely.⁵⁷ Responding to the crisis, students tried to stimulate support for demonstrations by including specific economic demands such as punishment for businesses that lay off workers.⁵⁸ As a result, workers began striking for better wages and working conditions.⁵⁹ The Y. H. Trading Company sit-in at the NDP in August 1979 and labor support for the demonstrations in Pusan and Masan in October 1979 contributed to the

⁵¹ Telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, "More on Pusan Demonstration; Demonstration at Ewha University in Seoul," 17 October 1979.

⁵² MacDonald, *The Koreans*, 127.

⁵³ See, for instance, Chalmers Johnson, "South Korean Democratization: The Role of Economic Development" in Cotton, *Korea Under Roh*, 105.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Bedeski, "State Reform," 64.

⁵⁵ Robert E. Bedeski, *The Transformation of South Korea: Reform and Reconstitution in the Sixth Republic Under Roe Tae Woo, 1987–1992* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 115.

⁵⁶ Sakong Il, *Korea in the World Economy* (Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics, 1993), 54; and MacDonald, *The Koreans*, 57–58.

⁵⁷ Though the empirical evidence is inconclusive, Przeworski intuitively that "finer analysis may still show that economic factors operate in a uniform way: Liberalization occurs when an economic crisis follows a long period of growth." Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market*, 97.

⁵⁸ Telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, "Second Demonstration at Seoul National University," 20 September 1979.

⁵⁹ MacDonald, *The Koreans*, 58.

fall of the Park regime.⁶⁰ As the first cycle of liberalization unfolded, labor became more and more active as evidenced by the Peace Market strike, the miners' strike in Sabuk, the FKTU's threat to sue the government over the Special Measures Law, the Pusan steel mill riot, the FKTU rally for the right to strike, and strikes at hundreds of other firms throughout the period, especially as wages were being renegotiated in spring 1980.⁶¹ The Kwangju uprising itself was an example of "labor and student unrest."⁶² Recognizing the importance of labor, one of the first actions of the Chun government was to coerce the FKTU to make a statement calling for an end to labor strife.⁶³ This evidence indicates that labor played an even more important role in the events of 1979 and 1980, meaning that it cannot be credited as a critical factor in the timing of democratization.

Third, Samuel Huntington argues that hardliners in South Korea were constrained by the *nunca más* effect, named for a December 1982 event in Argentina in which the death of a protester led to a call for reconciliation and reduced violence in the transition. In the Korean protests of 1986 and 1987, Huntington notes that Korean authorities were "careful to avoid using firearms so as not to replicate the Kwangju massacre."⁶⁴ While this might have been a declared reason to avoid another crackdown, it does not explain why huge peace marches in April 1980 commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the Rhee government's massacre of 200 students failed to have the same effect. Students were undoubtedly screaming "never again" shortly before the massacre at Kwangju. Hence, if we are to believe that hardliners were indeed constrained by the *nunca más* effect in 1987, the failure of this constraint in 1980 must be explained.

Fourth, other observers argue that the 1988 Olympics played a critical role in constraining hardliners by drawing world attention to the government's actions.⁶⁵ The conventional wisdom asserts that if Chun had used the military to crack down on demonstrations, the International Olympic Committee would have moved the Games.⁶⁶ General Roh contributed to this perception when he

⁶⁰ Tat, "From Relative Autonomy," 638; and Kihl, *Politics and Policies*, 76–78.

⁶¹ Telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, "Garment Workers Strike," 11 April 1980; Kihl, *Politics and Policies*, 78; telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, "Organized Labor Calls for Suspension of Special Measures Law," 29 April 1980; telegram from Gleysteen to SecState, "More Violence on Labor Scene," 1 May 1980; telegram from Gleysteen to Muskie, "FKTU Holds Rally for Right to Strike," 14 May 1980; Frederica M. Bunge, ed., *South Korea: A Country Study* (Washington, DC.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982), 179; and telegram from Gleysteen to Christopher, "The Labor Scene: Disputes, Remedies and Recommendations," 6 May 1980.

⁶² MacDonald, *The Koreans*, 131.

⁶³ Telegram from Gleysteen to Muskie, "Unions Feel Pressure from ROKG," 3 June 1980.

⁶⁴ Huntington, *The Third Wave*, 196; Former Director of Korean Affairs Robert G. Rich, Jr. concurred with this assertion in an interview with the author on 27 February 1997.

⁶⁵ Okonogi, "South Korea's Experiment," 11; Cotton, "From Authoritarianism," 33; and Jameson, "U.S. Reportedly," 12.

⁶⁶ Johnson, "South Korean Democratization," 104.

announced that liberalization would take place in the name of political tranquility, a smooth transition, legitimate government, and a peaceful Olympic Games.⁶⁷ However, the importance of the Games is questionable. They did not lead to liberalization in other nations—the Soviet Union not only did not liberalize prior to games in Moscow in 1980, it invaded Afghanistan. Moreover, the threat of moving the Games in the event of a crackdown was probably overstated. The committee had, after all, decided to locate the Games in Seoul despite the hundreds killed in Kwangju. Chun could just as easily have been convinced that the committee's assignment of the Games to Seoul was based on his ability to maintain order by any means necessary.

Finally, many observers argue that the first cycle of liberalization ended in failure because of the weakness of the leader of the interim government, President Choi Kyu Hah.⁶⁸ Choi's lack of "political experience and leadership qualities"⁶⁹ became apparent almost immediately after he became the acting president. On 10 November 1979, Choi infuriated opposition leaders when he announced a plan for an interim government before consulting them.⁷⁰ By December, both the opposition and the government expressed fears that Choi's refusal to announce an explicit timetable for constitutional reform and new elections was increasing the possibility of North Korean intervention.⁷¹ Ambassador William Gleysteen was so pessimistic about Choi's ability to run the government that he began to focus on other men within the government such as Prime Minister Shin.⁷² As tensions between radicals and hardliners increased in 1980, Choi's voice was noticeably absent, "adding to the general sense of suspicion rather than setting forth clearly what needs to be done."⁷³ He actually left the country in May on a diplomatic mission to the Middle East, and though he returned before the 15 May demonstrations, he did nothing to calm radicals or allay pressure from hardliners.⁷⁴ In a last ditch effort to get Choi to act, Am-

⁶⁷ Bell, *Towards Illiberal Democracy*, 87.

⁶⁸ Author's interview with Rich, 27 February 1997; Jameson, "U.S. Reportedly," 12; and Kihl, *Politics and Policies*, 77.

⁶⁹ Kihl, *Politics and Policies*, 77.

⁷⁰ Telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, "Acting President's Speech and Dissidents," 10 November 1979. It should be noted that after much prodding, Choi did meet with Kim Young Sam and dissident groups two weeks later. See telegrams from Gleysteen to Vance, "Acting President Meets Opposition Leader," 24 November 1979, and "Acting President Meets Religious Leaders," 26 November 1979.

⁷¹ Telegram from Rich to Holbrooke, "Weekly Status Report—Korea," 7 December 1979; and telegrams from Gleysteen to Vance, "Conversation with NDP Assemblymen," 12 December 1979, and "My December 20 Conversation with NDP President Kim Young Sam," 21 December 1979.

⁷² See telegrams from Gleysteen to Vance, "Current Political Scene Review with Member of Acting President's Staff," 30 November 1979, "Discussion of Military Grab With President Choi," 13 December 1979, "New Defense Minister," 15 December 1979, and "Korea Focus—My Meeting With Prime Minister December 18," 18 December 1979.

⁷³ Telegram from Gleysteen to Christopher, "Korea Focus: Building Tensions and Concern Over Student Issue," 8 May 1980.

⁷⁴ Telegram from Christopher to Gleysteen, "Korea Focus—Tensions in the ROK," 8 May 1980; and Kihl, *Politics and Policies*, 77.

bassador Gleysteen met with his secretary general on 17 May to emphasize that Choi was the only one who had a chance of heading off the looming confrontation.⁷⁵ The meeting obviously failed.

However harshly history might judge Choi's character, he should not be blamed for the failure of the transition. In the wake of Park's assassination, any acting president would have had three choices: ally with the moderate opposition and seek a negotiated transition to democracy, ally with hardliners and support renewed authoritarianism, or make no commitments. That Choi did not ally with hardliners indicates that he must have desired a transition and believed that it was possible. However, any alliance with the opposition so soon after Park was killed in the name of democracy would undoubtedly have alarmed hardliners. Though Park's assassination was "semi-popular,"⁷⁶ reformers were naturally constrained by the subversive nature of this attempted political change. Any stronger action by Choi to move toward transition might have encouraged a purge of reformers, perhaps including civilians like Choi himself, even before 12 December. After the purge, Choi was on his own.⁷⁷ An indictment of Choi thus misunderstands that he could only be as strong as the reformers who could help him stand down the hardliners.

THE ROLE OF THE UNITED STATES

None of the above ad hoc explanations are satisfactory, because they leave out what must be considered a crucial variable—the role of the United States. The scholarly literature has addressed U.S. influence, but most of these treatments get bogged down by the debate over the use of CFC forces to put down the Kwangju uprising.⁷⁸ Some observers blame the United States for approving the brutal use of force in Kwangju.⁷⁹ Others side with the State Department, which

⁷⁵ Telegram from Gleysteen to Muskie, "My 17 Meeting with Blue House SYG Choi Kwang Soo," 17 May 1980.

⁷⁶ Author's interview with Gleysteen, 27 February 1997.

⁷⁷ Even though reformers did retain posts in the military (some of whom would be instrumental in 1987), Chun effectively forced them to remain silent by installing loyalists deep within the ranks. Author's interview with Gleysteen, 27 February 1997. By February, a reformer faction in the military was "virtually non-existent," meaning that a negotiated transition to democracy was unlikely. See telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, "Role of the Moderate Opposition in the Transition Away from Authoritarianism," 11 February 1980.

⁷⁸ See Kim Hyun K., "Unification Fever and Resentment: A Comparative Analysis of U.S. and Korean Press Reports on Radical Student Movement" in Tae-Hwan Kwak and Lee Seong Hyong, eds., *Forty Years of Korea-U.S. Relations, 1948-1988* (Seoul: Kyung Hee University, 1990), 194. For an especially balanced treatment, see Donald Clark, *Korea Briefing, 1991* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1991), 156-159.

⁷⁹ See Yang, *The North and South*, 431-432; Selig S. Harrison, "Political Alliance in the Two Koreas: The Impact of the American Presence" in Doug Badow and Ted Galen Carpenter, eds., *The U.S.-South Korean Alliance* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1991) 123; and Tim Shorrock, "U.S. Knew of South Korean Crackdown: Ex-Leaders Go on Trial in Seoul," *Journal of Commerce* 27 (February 1996).

has repeatedly claimed that it was “not involved.”⁸⁰ Resolving this debate is important, because it will illuminate the choices that U.S. officials faced during the period.

Until 1994, all South Korean troops were technically under the supreme command of an American officer. The CFC structure was originally designed to enable South Korea to quickly deploy its own forces if needed for emergencies other than an invasion by North Korea. While giving the South Koreans more flexibility, the CFC system still kept a considerable amount of authority in the hands of the Americans.⁸¹ In theory, the South Korean government was supposed to obtain U.S. approval before removing forces from the CFC command. However, there was no logistical reason that would prevent the government from removing units first and notifying the United States later.⁸² The CFC procedure was used for the first time prior to the Pusan and Masan riots. Ambassador Gleysteen observed that CFC Commander General John A. Wickham had been consulted and the new system worked “in an orderly manner.”⁸³ Six weeks later General Chun demonstrated that the CFC command could be completely ignored when he moved Korean forces away from the border in order to support his takeover of the military.⁸⁴

American officials assert that the special forces sent to put down the original demonstration in Kwangju on 18 May were not under CFC control.⁸⁵ Moreover, they imply that the Korean military was not required to and did not consult American authorities before using them.⁸⁶ However, there is evidence that on 7 May the United States released from CFC control the 11th and 13th Special Forces Brigades in anticipation of the 15 May demonstrations.⁸⁷ The following day Gleysteen wrote: “In none of our discussions will we in any way suggest that the USG opposes ROKG contingency plans to maintain law and order, if absolutely necessary by reinforcing police with the army.”⁸⁸ Assistant Secretary

⁸⁰ Moon Ihlwan, “U.S. Still under Fire for ‘Role’ in 1980 S. Korea Massacre,” *Reuters North American Wire*, 30 November 1995. See also Kim Hyun K., “Unification Fever,” 195.

⁸¹ For an interesting discussion of the uniqueness of the CFC system, see Harrison, “Political Alliance,” 123.

⁸² Clark, *Korea Briefing*, 158.

⁸³ Telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, “Text of Scope Paper RE State Funeral for Korean President Park,” 1 November 1979.

⁸⁴ Pae Sung Moon, “Korean Perspectives on American Democracy” in Kim Ilpyong J., ed., *Korean Challenges and American Policy* (New York: Paragon House, 1991), 468–469; and Harrison, “Political Alliance,” 123.

⁸⁵ Michael Armacost in *Hearings before the Subcommittee on Asian and Public Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs House of Representatives*, 96th Congress, 2nd sess., 25 June 1980 and 28 August 1980, 10. See also Harrison, “Political Alliance,” 123.

⁸⁶ Armacost, *Hearings*, 10; Kim Hyun K., “Unification Fever,” 195.

⁸⁷ Telegram from Gleysteen to SecState, “ROKG Shifts Special Forces Units,” 7 May 1980.

⁸⁸ Telegram from Gleysteen to Christopher, “Korea Focus: Building Tensions and Concern Over Student Issue,” 8 May 1980. See also telegrams from Gleysteen to Muskie, “Korea Focus: May 9 Conversation with Blue House SYG Kwang Soo Choi,” 10 May 1980, and “May 19 Discussion with FonMin on Domestic Politics,” 20 May 1980.

of State Warren Christopher wrote back: "We agree that we should not oppose ROK contingency plans to maintain law and order."⁸⁹ Although none of this heavily sanitized evidence specifically applies to Kwangju, it does indicate that the United States was aware of a large-scale preparation for a crackdown, which they explicitly did not oppose.

American officials do admit that they approved the release of units used in the final assault on Kwangju.⁹⁰ Again, the State Department telegrams emphasize the concern for law and order that motivated officials not to oppose the use of force. On 23 May: "While we will not deny U.S. approval of troop movements and will affirm our belief that the primary task at present is the restoration of law and order, we will not engage in prolonged debate of these actions."⁹¹ On 26 May: "We were not telling the government to refrain from military action since we recognized the dangers of an extended period of lawlessness in Kwangju. . . ."⁹²

Many writers have focused on the U.S. role at Kwangju as though it were crucial to the outcome of the first cycle of liberalization. The belief is that if only the Americans had "disapproved" the use of CFC forces, the crackdown would not have occurred and Chun would have been forced to accept a transition to democracy. However, normative arguments about this choice have misunderstood the positive constraints on U.S. actions. Chun did not ask for or receive approval to move CFC forces on 12 December. By May he would have felt even less pressure to avoid a crackdown, because he had already purged reformers in the Korean military. Thus it is not likely that General Chun would have complied, even if General Wickham had told him no.⁹³ The American choice was constrained by the lack of actors within the Korean military who could have used an American signal of disapproval to convince Chun not to crack down. Since U.S. decision makers believed that they could not change the outcome, the choice between giving a tacit green light or ruining relations with Chun was obvious. On the other hand, if the United States could have done something earlier to strengthen reformers, the option to disapprove would have been more lucrative, because it would have increased the probability of a successful transition to democracy.

Other observers have argued that the events at Kwangju demonstrate that the influence of the United States was "limited" or "marginal."⁹⁴ The fear of

⁸⁹ Telegram from Christopher to Gleysteen, "Korea Focus—Tensions in the ROK," 8 May 1980.

⁹⁰ Armacost, *Hearings*, 11. General Wickham approved 20th division reinforcements. See Clark, *Korea Briefing*, 158; Pae, "Korean Perspectives," 469; and telegram from Gleysteen to Muskie, "Korea Sitrep, 1800, May 22, 1980," 22 May 1980.

⁹¹ Telegram from Gleysteen to Muskie, "Possible ROK Domestic Reaction to U.S. Position," 23 May 1980.

⁹² Telegram from Gleysteen to Muskie, "May 26 Meeting with Blue House SYG Choi," 26 May 1980.

⁹³ Doug Bandow, *Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 1996), 42.

⁹⁴ Sohn Hak-Kyu, *Authoritarianism and Opposition in South Korea* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 146; author's interview with Gleysteen, 28 February 1997; Lee Manwoo, Ronald D. McLaurin, and

North Korea and the importance of security in Northeast Asia prevented the United States from seriously considering the use of economic or military sanctions to promote liberalization. But this does not exhaust the means of influence at the U.S. command. In the second cycle of liberalization, the United States would make its presence felt primarily through the use of public pressure.

For its first six years, the Reagan administration had explicitly followed a policy to avoid public criticism of allies like Korea.⁹⁵ However, the silence was broken in February 1987 when Assistant Secretary Gaston Sigur gave an “exceptionally outspoken” speech in which he called on the Korean government to permanently “civilianize their politics” and implied that Chun could not count on American support if he resisted popular demand for change.⁹⁶ The United States also publicly called for a dialogue between the government and the opposition to avert a breakdown that might lead to a North Korean intervention.⁹⁷ By June, the United States had dramatically increased its public efforts to pressure the government to proceed with constitutional revision.⁹⁸ To head off a plan by Chun to declare martial law, the State Department issued a sharp statement on 19 June.⁹⁹ In the aftermath of the Roh declaration on 26 June, many American officials credited public speeches and statements for being the “major instrument of persuasion and impact at the U.S. Command.”¹⁰⁰

Public pressure was brought to bear in the first cycle as well. In August and September 1979, the Korean government complained to the State Department about its increasingly vocal criticism of the renewed enforcement of EM-9, the arrest of NDP officials, and police brutality in the Y. H. Trading Company sit-in at NDP headquarters.¹⁰¹ When Kim Young Sam was expelled from the National Assembly, State Department officials expressed “deep regret” and claimed that

Moon Chung-in, *Alliance Under Tension: The Evolution of Korean–U.S. Relations* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1988), 45, 150; and Holbrooke, *Hearings*, 28.

⁹⁵ Claude A. Buss, *The United States and Korea: Background for Policy* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution, 1982), 164; Harrison, “Political Alliance,” 123; and Bandow, *Tripwire*, 42.

⁹⁶ William Gleysteen and Alan D. Romberg, “Korea: Asian Paradox,” *Foreign Affairs* 65 (Summer 1987): 1052. See also Oberdorfer, “U.S. Policy,” 179; Lee, McLaurin, and Moon, *Alliance*, 44; Kim Chonghan, “Korea–U.S. Relations: The Convergence and Divergence of National Interests” in Kwak and Lee, *Forty Years*, 12; and Morton Kondracke, “Seoul Searching: South Korea Isn’t a Democracy—Yet,” *The New Republic*, 27 July 1987, 24.

⁹⁷ Bedeski, “State Reform,” 65.

⁹⁸ Harrison, “Political Alliance,” 123; and Oberdorfer, “U.S. Policy,” 180.

⁹⁹ Kondracke, “Seoul Searching,” 24.

¹⁰⁰ Oberdorfer, “U.S. Policy,” 179. Ambassador Lilley concurred in his interview with the author, 28 February 1997.

¹⁰¹ Telegrams from Gleysteen to Vance, “Embassy Expresses Concern Over Arrest of NDP Newspaper Editor,” 2 August 1979, and “U.S. Criticism of EM-9,” 9 August 1979; telegrams from Vance to Gleysteen, “U.S. Criticism of EM-9,” 9 August 1979, and “Police Assault on NDP Headquarters in Trading Co Sit-In Incident,” 14 August 1979; and telegrams from Gleysteen to Vance, “Police Assault on NDP Headquarters,” 14 August 1979, and “Situation Report: Y. H. Incident—August 16,” 16 August 1979.

the expulsion was “inconsistent with the principles of democratic government.”¹⁰² More importantly, for the first time ever, the U.S. ambassador to South Korea was recalled to Washington.¹⁰³ President Park “complained bitterly” to Ambassador Gleysteen about the recall¹⁰⁴ and with good reason—days later, anger over Kim’s expulsion would lead to riots in Pusan, which would lead to Park’s assassination. Gleysteen later reflected that U.S. public pressure may have “unwittingly contributed” to his death.¹⁰⁵

Immediately following Park’s assassination, U.S. public pressure declined dramatically. On the plane to Park’s funeral, Director of Korean Affairs Robert Rich, Undersecretary of State Richard Holbrooke, and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance decided that an opportunity existed for democratization, which meant that “we had to shut our mouths a bit” and instead pursue liberalization through increased private diplomatic pressure.¹⁰⁶ As a result, the State Department maintained relative silence in November and in stark contrast to their protest of the 1960 coup, refused to criticize the actions taken by General Chun in December 1979.¹⁰⁷ American officials instead protested the breach of CFC command through private channels.¹⁰⁸ After the Korean government agreed on a vague timetable for reform, Holbrooke promised that the U.S. government “would not publicly contest the ROKG version of recent events.” In January, reformers in the Korean government hoped they could strengthen their hand by holding a Carter-Choi summit meeting, but the request for the meeting was denied.¹⁰⁹ U.S. public comment remained muted throughout 1980, even in the aftermath of the May declaration of military rule and the Kwangju uprising.¹¹⁰ Carter’s statement to the Democratic Platform Committee on 12 June claimed: “We have promoted an increasingly frank and friendly dialogue with the Korean Government.” Throughout the trial of Kim Dae Jung, the policy of the State Department was to avoid public comment.¹¹¹

Thus, in 1979 and 1987, public statements by the American government contributed to the progress of Korean transitions by catalyzing the radical op-

¹⁰² Telegram from Rich to Holbrooke, “Weekly Status Report—Korea,” 4 October 1979.

¹⁰³ Sohn, *Authoritarianism*, 163.

¹⁰⁴ Author’s interview with Gleysteen, 27 February 1997.

¹⁰⁵ William Gleysteen in David D. Newsom, ed., *The Diplomacy of Human Rights* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1986).

¹⁰⁶ Author’s interview with Rich, 27 February 1997.

¹⁰⁷ Pae, “Korean Perspectives,” 468.

¹⁰⁸ Telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, “Younger ROK Officers Grab Power Positions,” 13 December 1979.

¹⁰⁹ Telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, “Trial Balloon RE Visit of President Choi to US,” 7 January 1980.

¹¹⁰ Lee, McLaurin, and Moon, *Alliance*, 38. For a specific example, see the telegram from Christopher to Gleysteen, “Crackdown in Seoul,” 18 May 1980, in which the State Department deliberately delays and weakens its response.

¹¹¹ See, for example, the telegram from Christopher to Gleysteen, “Korea Focus: Instructions to See General Chun,” 7 August 1980.

position and influencing reformers to act against hardliners.¹¹² Meanwhile, the failure of liberalization in 1980 can be at least partially attributed to the weakness of reformers, especially after they were purged by Chun on 12 December 1979. While there can be no certainty that sustained U.S. public pressure in late 1979 and early 1980 would have strengthened the reformers enough to make a transition to democracy possible, the result is strong enough to raise two important questions. U.S. officials clearly wanted Korea to democratize in 1980, so why did they eliminate an option that could have catalyzed the opposition and strengthened the reformers as happened in 1987? And if there was a good reason to avoid public statements, what caused officials to use public statements in 1987?

PUBLIC PRESSURE IN THE FIRST CYCLE OF LIBERALIZATION

The word “caution” rings time and again like a mantra throughout declassified telegrams between Ambassador Gleysteen and the State Department. In the first cycle of liberalization, Gleysteen struggled with the State Department’s increasing use of public criticism. Before the Carter-Park summit, Gleysteen cautioned the president not to endorse any individual or group engaged in human rights activities.¹¹³ When discussing the Y. H. Trading Company incident with the Korean foreign minister, he explained that he would not have worded the public criticism so strongly.¹¹⁴ In September 1979, Gleysteen urged that Washington not denounce the expulsion of Kim Young Sam, but instead call for “mutual restraint.”¹¹⁵ Days later, when Kim Young Sam criticized President Carter’s visit and the embassy in a *New York Times* article, Gleysteen refused to rebut in order not to exacerbate tensions in the present environment.¹¹⁶ Richard C. Holbrooke further noted that public statements had been moderated because of Gleysteen’s influence.¹¹⁷ In October, Gleysteen recommended avoiding comment on military law and the demonstrations in Masan and Pusan.¹¹⁸

¹¹² This also appears to be true of 1960, when U.S. statements “catalyzed” the movement that sent Syngman Rhee into exile. See MacDonald, *The Koreans*, 53.

¹¹³ Telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, “Summit Background Paper 3: Human Rights,” 25 May 1979.

¹¹⁴ Telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, “Meeting with FonMin on Y. H. Trading Company Incident,” 17 August 1979.

¹¹⁵ Telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, “Meeting with Blue House Official on Political and Human Rights,” 15 September 1979.

¹¹⁶ Telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, “Kim Young Sam Criticizes President Carter’s Visit and Embassy,” 17 September 1979.

¹¹⁷ Telegram from Vance to Gleysteen, “Assistant Secretary Holbrooke’s Bilateral with ROK Foreign Minister Park R—Korean Political Developments,” 27 September 1979.

¹¹⁸ Telegrams from Gleysteen to Vance, “Situation in Pusan Following Declaration of Martial Law,” 18 October 1979, and “Embassy Thoughts on Current Mood Following Declaration of Martial Law in Pusan,” 20 October 1979.

After Park's assassination, Gleysteen was much more successful at restraining comments. After Park's assassination he urged the State Department to work toward political liberalization through diplomatic channels.¹¹⁹ After the 12 December incident, Warren Christopher noted: "On the basis of Ambassador Gleysteen's recommendation, we are being cautious at this juncture in how we publicly characterize the situation and are avoiding any implication of a coup d'état."¹²⁰ A pattern had definitely emerged, which was carried into 1980. During the Kwangju crisis, Gleysteen recommended that Korea-U.S. planning talks set for June not be canceled.¹²¹ And as Congress considered public punitive action in June 1980, he opposed it, preferring that members of Congress write letters instead.¹²² In response to the verdict in the trial of Kim Dae Jung, he opposed a strong public statement.¹²³

The Carter administration "relied very heavily" on Ambassador Gleysteen.¹²⁴ Moreover, Gleysteen has admitted that he "managed to keep public statements repressed" after Park's assassination.¹²⁵ However, it is difficult to believe that this entirely explains the dramatic change observed in the first cycle of liberalization. What conditions existed that would give Gleysteen so much more power over public commentary?

The Iranian revolution and the taking of American hostages in 1979 had a twofold impact on U.S. policy towards South Korea. First of all, it diverted the attention of both the State Department and the administration away from Korea.¹²⁶ Gleysteen noted that "Iran distracted the Administration while it disciplined them," which enabled him to exert more control over the use of public criticism.¹²⁷ Second, though, it motivated analogies that directly influenced U.S. policy. Kim Young Sam drew the analogy in a speech at Yale: "If the U.S. had made the Shah step down ten years ago and had engaged in dialogue with the opposition, there wouldn't exist a situation in which the embassy is being stormed."¹²⁸ In September 1979, Kim compared the embassy in Seoul with that in Teheran just before the shah's downfall.¹²⁹

¹¹⁹ Telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, "Initial Reflections on Post-Park Chung Hee Situation in Korea," 28 October 1979.

¹²⁰ Telegram from Christopher to Vance, "Military Power Play in South Korea," 12 December 1979.

¹²¹ Telegram from Gleysteen to Muskie, "Your Memo to the Secretary for the PRC Meeting," 22 May 1980.

¹²² Telegram from Gleysteen to Muskie, "Korean Focus: Consultations with Congress," 12 June 1980.

¹²³ Telegram from Gleysteen to Muskie, "U.S. Comment on Kim Dae Jung Verdict," 5 September 1980.

¹²⁴ Author's interview with Armacost, 28 February 1997.

¹²⁵ Author's interview with Gleysteen, 27 February 1997.

¹²⁶ Lee, McLaurin, and Moon, *Alliance*, 38.

¹²⁷ Author's interview with Gleysteen, 27 February 1997.

¹²⁸ Telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, 22 February 1979.

¹²⁹ Telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, "Kim Young Sam Criticizes President Carter's Visit and Embassy," 17 September 1979.

The State Department had its own opinions. Robert Rich noted that while the Iran analogy existed at the White House and congressional level, at State it was felt that there was “no possibility” of Korea becoming another Iran.¹³⁰ Gleysteen echoed this skepticism, pointing out that the analogy that was drawn depended on the orientation of the person making it. Those who believed the United States should take an active role in promoting Korean liberalization argued that a public perception by the Korean population that the United States is too closely tied to the Korean government could produce anti-American outbursts like those in Iran. Others used the Iran example to warn against pressing too hard on the Korean government.¹³¹

Meanwhile, newspapers in the United States were drawing their own conclusions in editorials that found their way into State Department telegrams to Seoul.¹³² Heavily influenced by Congress and the press, the White House feared the destabilizing effect of unbridled demonstrations, because after Iran “another failure would have been disastrous.”¹³³ On 4 December, Richard Holbrooke directed Gleysteen to work to moderate the opposition’s actions:

I have been talking privately with key Senators and Congressmen, including [Sam] Nunn, [John] Glenn, [Lester] Wolff, [Richard] Stone, and a few others about our strategy. We have their full support at this time. Their attitudes, like everyone else’s, are dominated by the Iranian crisis and, needless to say, nobody wants another “Iran”—by which they mean American action which would in any way appear to unravel a situation and lead to chaos or instability in a key American ally. . . . What we have in mind is your sending a clear message to Christian dissidents who are now stirring up street demonstrations. . . . Even when these are in fact not demonstrations, but rather just meetings in defiance of martial law, the U.S. Government views them as unhelpful while martial law is still in effect. . . . The purpose of the message to the Christians is to alert them to the fact that they should not automatically count on the same degree of American support now that they might have had a few months ago. . . . The purpose of this approach, quite frankly, is to enhance U.S. credibility with the leadership on the eve of some tough decisions.¹³⁴

Though Gleysteen refused to issue an explicit message to opposition leaders, he wrote back to Holbrooke: “We have been doing something which resembles your refTel proposal.”¹³⁵ Thus, the Iranian crisis not only gave Gleysteen a freer

¹³⁰ Author’s interview with Rich, 27 February 1997.

¹³¹ Telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, “Anti-Government Demonstration at YWCA Hall and Leaflets Distributed at Seoul National University,” 26 November 1979.

¹³² Telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, “Hankuk Ilbo Article on Treatment of ROK Reporters,” 13 October 1979; and telegram from Vance to Gleysteen, “New York Times Editorial on Korea,” 16 December 1979.

¹³³ Author’s interview with Gleysteen, 27 February 1997.

¹³⁴ Telegram from Vance to Gleysteen, “Korea Focus—Nudging ROK Political Leaders,” 4 December 1979.

¹³⁵ Telegram from Gleysteen to Holbrooke, “Korea Focus—Nudging ROK Political Leaders,” 7 December 1979.

hand, but helps to explain why the human rights-conscious Carter administration in 1979 changed its policy of asserting overt pressure on the Korean government for liberalization.

PUBLIC PRESSURE IN THE SECOND CYCLE OF LIBERALIZATION

In the aftermath of Park's assassination, Gleysteen was keenly aware of the potential for igniting a strong anti-American reaction if the opposition believed the United States was not supporting liberalization.¹³⁶ However, he seemed to fear an anti-American reaction within the Korean military even more. As a result, he argued against pushing "too hard and too crassly" for liberalization.¹³⁷ The pivotal event, though, that would cause anti-American sentiment to "explode" and become a significant factor in domestic politics was the Kwangju incident.¹³⁸ Amid their struggle in May 1980, the citizens of Kwangju believed that America should and would actively intervene to enforce justice and bring about a much-desired end to military rule.¹³⁹ But the United States chose not to intervene beyond approving the use of CFC forces to put down the uprising. American authorities were well aware that this action risked fanning anti-American sentiment.¹⁴⁰ The perception of American collusion with the military authorities was further bolstered by the Reagan administration's hasty move to invite General Chun to be the first foreign head of state to visit the White House.¹⁴¹ An anti-American backlash that Gleysteen had feared would come from the military came instead from the opposition and quickly spread to mainstream Koreans.¹⁴²

Anti-Americanism conditioned the second cycle of liberalization as Koreans became increasingly disillusioned with America's continued military, diplomatic, and economic support for the Chun regime. Many who had in the past looked to the United States as an example of participatory democracy came to

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Telegram from Gleysteen to Vance, "Initial Reflections on Post-Park Chung Hee Situation in Korea," 28 October 1979.

¹³⁸ There is widespread agreement on this point. See Lee, McLaurin, and Moon, *Alliance*, 10; Nam, *South Korean Politics*, 223; Kwak Tae-Hwan and Wayne Patterson, "Security Relations Between Korea and the United States 1960–1984" in Lee Yur-Bok and Wayne Patterson, eds., *One Hundred Years of Korean-American Relations, 1882–1982* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1986), 120; Hyun Sing-il, "Anti-Americanism in Korean Student Movement" in Kwak and Lee, *Forty Years*, 36; Bandow, *Tripwire*, 42; and Jameson, "U.S. Reportedly," 12.

¹³⁹ Bandow, *Tripwire*, 42; and telegram from Gleysteen to Muskie, "Kwangju Riot and Political Stability," 21 May 1980.

¹⁴⁰ Telegram from Gleysteen to Muskie, "May 22 Meeting with FonMin," 22 May 1980.

¹⁴¹ Lee, McLaurin, and Moon, *Alliance*, 11.

¹⁴² Nam, *South Korean Politics*, 223; Doug Bandow in Bandow and Carpenter, *U.S.-South Korean Alliance*, 80; and telegram from Gleysteen to Muskie, "Kwangju Riot and Political Stability," 21 May 1980.

believe that the United States was actually “part of the problem.”¹⁴³ As student unrest increased between 1985 and 1987, radicals began to target American citizens and institutions such as the Chamber of Commerce and U.S. Information Agency. In the street demonstrations of 1987, many protesters blamed America “not only for the political intransigence of the Chun government but for its very existence.”¹⁴⁴ Even in the aftermath of Roh’s 26 June declaration, demonstrators in Seoul pulled down an American flag and burned it on the balcony of a hotel amid “wild applause” and a “roar of approval among the hundreds of thousands of protesters.”¹⁴⁵ The effect of this increased anger toward America was the sense that anti-Americanism itself represented “a long-range problem in Korean-American security relations.”¹⁴⁶ Thus, the rise in anti-American sentiment was probably an important catalyst that contributed to the decision to use public pressure. However, it is difficult to believe that this entirely explains the dramatic change observed in the second cycle of liberalization. What conditions existed that would have caused the change in 1987?

Just as the failure of Iran made the Carter administration more risk averse, the success in the Philippines caused the Reagan administration to be more aggressive in South Korea. Before the Philippine events, public criticism would have won little favor as a diplomatic tactic directed toward a friendly foreign government.¹⁴⁷ However, the cry of “people power” in the Philippines reached all the way to Washington.¹⁴⁸ Pressure from the Congress came from Representatives like Stephen J. Solarz, who said: “like the Philippines, South Korea is an example of a country where we can more effectively protect our strategic interests by promoting our political values.”¹⁴⁹ The press echoed these sentiments in editorials that called on the government to “replicate its success” from the Philippines in Korea by abandoning “quiet diplomacy.”¹⁵⁰

Pressure to draw the analogy was so strong that one State Department document noted: “[Ronald Reagan] has difficulties with comparisons that are sometimes made between Korea and the Philippines” and tried to outline the reasons they were different.¹⁵¹ Despite this attempt to draw a distinction, the administration’s experience in the Philippines was clearly an important factor in leading to the belief that public speeches and statements were their “major instrument of persuasion” in Korea.¹⁵² “The impact of the Aquino accession on

¹⁴³ Vincent S. R. Brandt in Lee Chong-Sik, ed., *Korea Briefing, 1990* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1990), 92.

¹⁴⁴ Bandow, *Tripwire*, 28.

¹⁴⁵ Harrison, “Political Alliance,” 123–124.

¹⁴⁶ Kwak and Patterson, “Security Relations,” 125–126.

¹⁴⁷ Oberdorfer, “U.S. Policy,” 179.

¹⁴⁸ Bedeski, “State Reform,” 63.

¹⁴⁹ Olsen, “The Challenge,” 173.

¹⁵⁰ Raymond Bonner, “It’s Time We Start Backing Democracy in South Korea,” *New York Times*, 28 June 1987.

¹⁵¹ Memo, ID#390429SS, FG001, WHORM: Alpha File, Ronald Reagan Library.

¹⁵² Oberdorfer, “U.S. Policy,” 179.

South Korea would be difficult to exaggerate. . . . Though [the opposition] knew that the United States did not topple [Ferdinand] Marcos and install [Corazon] Aquino, they understood clearly the United States role as facilitator of the process.”¹⁵³ Thus, the influence of the Philippines may help to explain why the security-conscious Reagan administration in 1987 changed its policy of avoiding overt pressure on the Korean government for liberalization.

CONCLUSION

As the story of democratization continues to unfold in South Korea, more and more of its citizens will come to appreciate the freedoms they enjoy and will wonder why the transition did not occur during the Seoul Spring in 1979 and 1980. Participation by the middle class and labor in civil protest seems important because the demonstrations in 1987 were somewhat larger and more national in scope than those in 1980. However, we find that both labor and the middle class were also active in demonstrations in 1980. The memory of the Kwangju incident may have constrained hardliners in 1987, but if so we must explain why the memory of the student revolution did not restrain them in 1980. Similarly, world attention drawn by the Olympics may have constrained hardliners in 1987, but it might equally have encouraged them to enforce order more strictly. We might also posit that the weakness of Choi Kyu Hah made a critical difference, but his weakness seemed to be due more to a lack of strength of reformers in the military. None of these explanations is entirely implausible; each probably played a role in determining the outcome. However, they typically do not address the force that drove the transition: the increased strength of reformers within the Korean military meant that they could stand down hardliners in 1987.

The decision by the United States to “approve” the use of CFC forces appeals to many as a reason for a delayed transition, but it is doubtful that opposing the redeployments would have changed the outcome. The lack of reformers who might have been energized by a strong U.S. stand against a crackdown highlights the real role the United States had to play. From Rhee to Roh, public statements issued by the United States had catalyzed the opposition and strengthened the hand of reformers. Yet from November 1979 to January 1987, the United States was conspicuously silent. This silence seems to have been overlooked as a crucial reason that the transition failed.

Contrasting the first cycle of liberalization with the second, we are left with a puzzle. Why was public pressure muted in the first cycle but used in the second? Though Gleysteen always tried to moderate the statements that came out of Washington, public pressure on the Carter administration to avoid “another Iran” ultimately caused it to abandon the use of public pressure. And while rising anti-Americanism in Korea may have increased the Reagan administra-

¹⁵³ Olsen, “The Challenge,” 173.

tion's interest in pressuring Chun to democratize, public pressure to repeat the success in the Philippines made the government realize that they had abandoned a powerful tool.

This analysis of South Korea's delay in transition yields three important results. First, external public pressure can be very important in determining the interactions of domestic factions, especially insofar as public pressure affects the relative strength of reformers. Even when strategic reasons prevent a country like the United States from using economic or military sanctions to encourage liberalization, the power of verbal sanctions and public signals should not be underestimated. As ephemeral as public statements might be, in Korea they were used successfully to exert influence and were sorely missed when they were not used.

Second, foreign policy can be driven by less-than-perfect analogies, even if the people who implement policy do not believe in them. At no time did officials at the State Department believe that analogies between South Korea and Iran or the Philippines were valid. Yet pressure from the press and Congress (and perhaps by extension, the American people) caused the policy to change anyway. In spite of the best efforts of policy makers to treat each situation as unique, they are constrained by a populace and their elected officials who use analogies to cope with understanding complex political situations.

Finally, though President Carter is widely known for his commitment to human rights and President Reagan is better known for his commitment to security, we should be very wary of such facile generalizations. The Carter administration clearly abandoned an important human rights tool in the name of security long before Reagan took the reins. Moreover, the Reagan administration would ultimately risk security by using this tool to promote the transition. These counterintuitive changes under presidents that seemed ideologically pure indicate that both administrations were reacting to rather than driving international changes.*

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