

May 3, 1951

Letter, President Syngman Rhee to General Coulter

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Summary:

President Rhee writes to General Coulter to address the issue of prisoners of war. After stating that releasing POWs would "demoralize" Korean soldiers, Rhee expresses his concern for POWs forced to fight in the North's side. Rhee states that "democratic-accepting" POWs can be released only after they pass a series of tests proving them to be anti-communist. Once released, these POWs can "carry their stories of fair treatment under a democratic United Nations."

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May 3, 1951

My dear General Coulter:

I have your letter of April 26th advising the Prime Minister of the military decision that prisoners of war should not be released prior to the cessation of hostilities. Under ordinary circumstances this is a wise and proper decision. The morale of the fighting men could be seriously undermined if they thought that prisoners of war who had recently been fighting against them and killing them were being permitted to go free and avoid further danger.

However, there is a distinction to be drawn between prisoners of war generally and certain prisoners of war who have been captured with North Korean Communist troops. It is a well known fact that many Korean nationals living in that part of this country which was and is under Communist control, were forced to join the Communist armies against their will. Many of these men are not Communists at all and should not be considered as such. To continue to hold them as prisoners, treating them as Communists, may very well have the effect of making Communists out of them.

Since it has been decided that no prisoners of war are to be released, it appears to me that the next best thing is to permit the Republic of Korea to send in judges or other officials to examine the Korean prisoners for the purpose of segregating those who are not Communists from those who are. There are all shades of faith in the Communist ideology and the prisoners should be screened so that the dangerous elements, the anti-government prisoners and violent Communist sympathizers, are not left in position to indoctrinate those Koreans who have been unwilling to accept Communism.

One/

Lt. Gen. John B. Coulter
Deputy Commanding General
Eighth United States Army



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One of the fundamental precepts, common to all democratic governments, is the presumption of innocence and the right to a fair trial. Under ordinary conditions of war there is little or no question about the beliefs and inclinations of the enemy and strict adherence to the Rules of Land Warfare is entirely appropriate. But in Korea the warfare combines both military and ideological tactics. A high percentage of the troops of the Communist enemy is ready and willing to accept Democracy as opposed to Communism. Screening and examining processes can discover them and they can be segregated, proving to all the people that Democracy is a vital, functioning, equitable force even in time of war.

Once the segregation has been completed, I would suggest further that those prisoners who never bore arms against the United Nations forces be released and not held as prisoners of war. Let them return to their homes and farms where they are needed, carrying with them the story of fair treatment under the democratic processes practiced by the United Nations.

I would appreciate it very much if you would use your good offices to obtain permission for the appropriate ROK officials to investigate, screen and make suggestions to the United Nations officials concerning the segregation and possible release of selected prisoners of war. In case the United Nations officials should desire to examine the prisoners whom the Korean judges have already tried, I will instruct the judges to turn their court records to them so that they may check the decisions of the Korean judges.

Sincerely yours,