Korean War Comic Books and the Militarization of US Masculinity

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The Korean War years, 1950-53, were the peak period for US comic book sales and impact (but not respect). Possibly thousands of stories about the Korean War appeared in the hundreds of issues of the dozens of (mostly short-lived) US war comic book titles. They were originally created as throw-away entertainment.

These comic books (and those in other popular genres) were produced with print runs of hundreds of thousands of copies and were read both by children and by those serving in the military.

Figure 1 (Opposite page) Logos of Korean War comic books. Illustration assembled from public domain comics posted at the Digital Comic Museum (digitalcomicmuseum.com/)
During the Korean War, comic book stories sometimes provided fictionalized versions of recent identifiable events, both large and small (including, for example, the Incheon landing, prisoner-of-war riots, General Crawford Sams’s mission to investigate germ warfare charges, flying saucer sightings in Korea, and so forth).

More frequently, however, the writers and drawers of these glib comic books did not mention identifiable incidents of the Korean War, and they provided almost no specific background information about the history, culture, politics, society, economy, language, or geography of Korea.

In US comic books, Asian enemies, Japanese, Koreans, Chinese, and Vietnamese blurred together.

**Figure 2** The communist enemy in Indo-China wears earflaps as protection against from the cold. “Wild Cargo,” Wings Comics, no. 124 (1954).
Boy readers wanted well-drawn action-adventure fantasies in which generic masculine heroes fight bad guys, using their bodies and weapons. They did not want to read comics about the actual “Operation Killer,” in which soldiers advanced through rain and mud to washed-out bridges, their supply trucks sinking in quagmires on unpaved roads, while meeting only slight enemy resistance.
The self-defense and bodybuilding ads that frequently appeared in the backs of war comics spoke directly to readers’ male anxieties about being beaten up by bullies. These ads used comic-book-style illustrations. Sometimes they suggested that the same skills useful for protecting oneself from bullies would also allow a man to prevail over his military opponents.
“HERE’S every science of self-defense and lethal attack, wrapped up into one triple-action package.”

“Never again cringe or shy away from a bully. Imagine the wonderful thrill of confidence to know that nobody can push you around. Think of the respect others will have for you, the safety they’ll feel being with you, when they find out what a rough and ready scrapping, deadly efficient he-man you can be.”

“Learn the amazing secrets of GUERILLA DEFENSE—the Dual Method of Offensive Defense based on natural, instinctive impulse-action. . . . You may be a lightweight but you can overpower the biggest bully!”

“I broke his hand like a MATCH! IT WAS EASY! He was helpless. He howled with pain! I was amazed how quickly I turned the tables on the thug with this simple bone-crushing hold!”

“. . . learn this smashing, crashing, bone-shattering, nerve paralyzing method of combat defense.”

“No true American wants to be a tough! But YOU, and every red-blooded man and boy wants to be always ready and able to get out of any tough spot . . . no matter what the odds. You want to have the real know-how of skillfully defending yourself . . . of fearlessly protecting your property, or your dear ones . . . against Bullies, Hoodlums, and Roughnecks and the like. And, if in service or going in, you’ve got to be ready to fight rough and tough, for your very life may depend on it in hand to hand combat.”

Figure 5 Frequently appearing ads from war comic books: ads from the Andrew Publishing Co., Pickwick Co., and Sportman’s Post
The image of the Korean War presented in US war comics with terrific regularity showed a soldier’s survival depending on his skill in knifing, bayoneting, hitting, smacking with a rifle butt, or otherwise overpowering one or more enemy soldiers in close-quarters, hand-to-hand combat. For many US citizens, the image of two men locked in a fight to the death defined their image of the essential nature of warfare.

According to this decontextualized view, US soldiers deserve our thanks for risking their lives overseas to stop dangerous, aggressive, unreasonable, destructive bullies.

**Figure 6** Collage of images of US soldiers bayoneting or knifing enemy soldiers. Sources: Korean War–period war comic book at digitalcomicmuseum.com
World War II comics frequently included women in bright red dresses as part of their stories. During the Korean War, this tradition was maintained in the genre of espionage comics, but in war comics, women rarely appeared in the stories.

When Asian women did appear in Korean War comics stories, their allegiances were often either disguised or falsely suspected.

Enemy women were portrayed as cruel leaders, following the inspiration of Milton Caniff’s invention, the Eurasian “Dragon Lady” in his influential “Terry and the Pirates” comic strip. In these stories, the defeat of enemy women does not involve bloody stabbings.

Figure 7  Collage of images of Asian women in Korean War comic books. Sources: “The Might of the Marines” and “‘Iron Mike’ McGraw,” Marines in Battle, no. 10 (February 1956); “Combat Kelly,” Battlefront, no. 9 (February 1953); and “Battle Brady,” Battle Action, no. 11 (April 1953). Published by imprimaturs of Marvel Comics. Bottom tier from “Hex Champ,” Joe Yank, no. 8 (May 1952).
US soldiers were eroticized as muscular hunks.

Asian men were shown as fat enemy officers or as emaciated citizens.

Korean boys appeared as orphans taken in by US units.

Elderly Korean men (“Grandfathers”) were shown in traditional costume, with tall hats, white beards, and long pipes, wisely supporting the United Nations military forces against the Reds.

Two adjacent panels in a Blackhawk comic book show that a US cartoonist (Reed Crandall) has tried to replace old World War II–era racist stereotypes of Asian allies like “Chop-Chop” with more respectful portraits, like that of Chop-Chop’s cousin Wah Jung.

One story shows a Korean communist impersonating a woman to try to seduce a US citizen into signing a false confession.

Stories about South Korean soldiers were vanishingly rare.

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**Figure 8** Collage of images of US and Asian men in Korean War comic books. Sources: “Gunfire!,” *Battle Cry*, no. 4 (November 1952); “Many Must Die!,” *Soldier Comics*, no. 8 (March 1953); “Guerilla Killers,” *G.I. Combat*, no. 9 (September 1953); “Victory in the Village,” *Combat Kelly*, no. 30 (April 1955); “Red Ransom!,” *Blackhawk*, no. 55 (August 1952); “Red Trap!,” *G-I in Battle*, no. 8 (May 1953).
THE TERRIBLE CARNAGE WAS OVER
IN A MATTER OF MINUTES!
CLEAR OUT! BACK TO THE HILLS
BEFORE THE SMOKE ATTRACTION
AN ENEMY!

BUT YOUR SOLDIERS DID NOT
STEAL FROM US, NOR TREAT US AS
ANIMALS! YOU ALSO RESPECTED
THE TEMPLE OF OUR RELIGION,
THOUGH IT IS NOT OF YOUR BELIEF!
AND YOUR MEN TENDED OURSICK
AND GAVE FOOD AND CLOTHING TO
OUR WOMEN AND CHILDREN!

MESSAGE ALSO SAYS
UNLESS I SEND TAX
MONEY, UNCLE
WILL BE EXECUTED!

THE RATS! IT'S
A VARIATION OF
THE OLD KIDNAP
RACKET! THE
"TAX" IS REALLY
RANSOM MONEY!
THEY INTEND TO
MILK ANY KIND
OF PEOPLE
LIVING IN
CHINA!

IF YOU PAY MONEY NOW, THEY'LL
DEMAND MORE LATER! THE
ONLY WAY TO STOP ANY
RACKET IS TO FIGHT IT!
WE'RE GOING INTO RED
CHINA AND GET
YOUR UNCLE OUT
OBOY
OF THERE!
OBOY! NOW
YOU TALKING?
HOOLAY FOR
BLACKHAWKS!

AND LAW GETS THE SHOCK OF
HIS LIFE...
A MAN! A
FEMALE IMPERSONATOR!
CLEVER, THOSE BOOKS! FIGURED
THAT IF THEY PLED WITH ME
WITH WINE AND WOMEN, AND
A FEW DRINKS, I'D SIGN
THAT CONFESSION.
Although wilder and weirder than the rest of US mass media at the time, Korean War comic books operated under various pressures and constraints. The basic rule governing popular culture representations of war has been that it encourage, or at least not discourage, military recruitment and retention. By describing military service as an adventurous rite of passage to masculine adulthood, comic books supported the messages preferred by military recruiters.

Figure 9 “Killer Patrol,” p. 5, panel 7, detail. Writer and artist unknown. Battle Cry 1, no. 7 (May–June 1953), Stanmor Publications, Inc. The character on the left is saying “Aw, it’s not so bad . . . Just keep your nose clean and before you know it, you’ll be back here in your sack!” The caption beneath the drawing concludes the story: “That’s it, Tom. Give him the scoop. Tell him what to expect. You’re a veteran now. You’ve been through the mill, after all. Patrol Action isn’t so rough . . . or is it?”