

SYNGMAN RHEE: STATESMAN OF THE NEW KOREA

Story of His Rise From Prison to President

By Robert T. Oliver

Korea, child of the United Nations, with its new sovereignty recognized by over twenty countries, is not only among the newest but also among the oldest of existing nations, with a history stretching back for 4,283 years. Doubling the paradox of old and new is fact that its first president, Dr. Syngman Rhee, is actually "first president" for the second time, since he had previously been elected first president of the Republic-in-exile, established when the Koreans revolted against Japan in 1919.

Still cut roughly in two, with a Communist puppet government supported by Soviet arms in its northern industrial half, Korea entered into its new independence deeply indebted to the stubborn persistence of Dr. Rhee. He, it was, who sparked the independence movement during the Japanese occupation of Korea from 1905 to 1945. He led the fight against a five-year trustee-ship proposal emanating from Moscow and insisted upon consideration of the problem by the United Nations. Following the UN-sponsored election of May 10, 1948, his has been the task of supervising plans for the present government and future re-unification of the still-divided thirty million Koreans.

Spokesmen for the great powers capture the headlines and occupy public attention. But big statesmen are not the exclusive property of big nations. In the chess game of international politics, where power counts, the leaders of small nations must be shrewd if they expect



their countries to be anything more than helpless pawns. On the record, one of the clearest-visioned statesmen of our times is the indomitable Syngman Rhee.

Few heads in international politics have been battered longer or harder than his. During a political career that began in 1894, Dr. Rhee has spent seven years in prison, seven months under daily torture, and forty-one years in exile with a price on his head. He has directed a revolution, served as President of the world's longest-lived government - in-exile, knocked vainly at the portals of international conferences, and finally shepherded his cause to success.

As President of the Republic of Korea, he entered a new phase of his active political career. Instead of quietly enjoying the fruits of success, however, he has had to lead a continuing fight against the ambitions of Russia, just as for fifty years he led the movement for independence from Japan.

Before the submission of the Korean question to the United Nations, Dr. Rhee's situation was admirably summed up in a one-sentence characterization by a highpranking officer in the American occupation force in Korea: "Dr. Rhee is so much the greatest of Korean statesmen that he might be said to be the only one; but he has made himself so objectionable to Russia that he can never have a part in any American-sponsored government of South Korea." That was said in the summer of 1946, when the American Military Government was trying to bend the stiff Korean necks into a Communist-Coalition collar. When this thankless effort was abandoned, Dr. Rhee came once again into American favor. Now he is fighting on our side, with no effort to "straddle the fence" even though his country is



in an advanced position, fronting Soviet Russia and Communist China, with the cold war in that area becoming dangerously hot.

With such a program, Dr. Rhee has been beset from all sides. Violent Korean nationalist factions long denounced his forbearance with American policy in south Korea. Communists and their sympathizers pronounced him unfit for public life because of his charge that Russia used the Communist party as a means of trying to secure control of all Korea. The American Military Government squirmed under his adamant refusal to enter into its dream solution of a "Left and Right Coalition." The State Department trained its guns on his refusal to accept the five-year trusteeship of Korea agreed to by Byrnes, Bevin and Molotov in December, 1945. He has been at various times called anti-Japanese, anti-Russian and even anti-American, though the more accurate term in each instance is the simple one of pro-Korean. Through all the struggles, Dr. Rhee has found that in a power-politics world, an advocate of small-nation independence has to walk a steep and rocky road.

Dr. Rhee's life divides naturally into four periods. From 1894 to 1905 he fought for reform of the old Yi dynasty and the democratic modernization of Korea. From 1905 to 1945 he struggled for the freedom of his country from Japan. From 1945 to 1948 he stood inflexibly for Korean reunification and independence. And since August 15, 1948, he has headed the Republic of Korea in its continued efforts to regain the Communist-held north and to establish economic, political and military stability.

#### Period 1

Syngman Rhee was born on March 26, 1875. He was educated in the



Chinese classical tradition, but sought also a Western education in the Pai Jai Mission School.

From his twentieth year he became a leader of democratic forces in Korea. He founded and edited the first daily newspaper ever published in Korea. He organized student and youth groups to protest the corruption of the court and the surrender to Japanese and Russian pressure-groups. When the Japanese murdered the great Korean Queen Min, 1895, young Rhee declared personal warfare against them. Two years later, he was arrested for his political insurgence, and spent the next seven years in the Kamoksu prison in Seoul.

For the first seven months of his imprisonment he was subjected to daily tortures, including beatings with three-cornered bamboo rods, and the burning of oiled paper wrapped around his arms. His fingers were so horribly mashed that even today, in time of stress, he blows upon them. Constantly he wore around his neck a 20-pound wooden cangue, and sat with his feet locked in stocks and his hands handcuffed.

After his imprisonment was eased, Dr. Rhee wrote a book called *The Spirit of Independence*, which is still widely read by Koreans and has served as the chief guide of the independence movement. It has been reprinted several times since Japan's defeat in 1945.

While attending the Mission School, Rhee learned English, and was converted to Christianity. After his release from prison, in August of 1904, Japanese influence was so strong in Korea that he could not remain unless he would abandon his struggle for Korean independence. Consequently he made the hard decision to leave his country and carry on the fight abroad.



## Period 11

Arriving in this country on the eve of the Portsmouth Conference, young Rhee made strenuous efforts to secure the representation of his country at that meeting. President Theodore Roosevelt received him cordially at Oyster Bay, but informed him Korea could not attend the Russian-Japanese meeting. The first article of the Portsmouth treaty provided for turning Korea over to Japan.

Since nothing could be done at this point for Korea, Rhee laid the basis for his later work by attending George Washington, Harvard and Princeton Universities. In 1910, he received the Ph.D. degree from Woodrow Wilson's own hands, with a dissertation written on United States neutrality policies.

For the next fifteen months Dr. Rhee carried on YMCA work and supervised a Methodist Mission School in Korea. Then he was warned that the Japanese were about to arrest him for his dangerous "political thoughts" and once again he returned to the United States. This was the last he was to see of his country until after the defeat of Japan in 1945.

From 1912 until 1932, and again from 1934 to 1938 he maintained a school in Hawaii. Then he came to Washington, D.C., to take charge, personally, of the Korean Commission, through which he had appealed continually to the State Department ever since 1919 for the recognition of the Korean provisional government.

In 1919, on March 1, under the direction of Dr. Rhee and other nationalist leaders, the Koreans staged a country-wide passive revolution against the Japanese. Thousands of the peaceful marchers were slain, but representative leaders from every Province met secretly in Seoul and organized a provisional Republic. They elected Dr. Rhee President, and went into the



Japanese prison, leaving the provisional government to function in Shanghai.

The Japanese government placed a large price upon Dr. Rhee's head. Nevertheless he went to Shanghai to meet the members of the revolutionary government. After he had supervised the organization of the Korean exiled Republic in Shanghai, Dr. Rhee returned to the United States to carry on the fight for its recognition.

In 1918 he sought a passport to go to Paris to present a plea for Korea to the Peace Conference, but by personal orders of Woodrow Wilson the passport was refused, to prevent the "embarrassment" of Japan. In 1922 Dr. Rhee led a Korean delegation to the Washington Disarmament Conference.

Through the 1920's, when United States relations with Japan were close and friendly, Dr. Rhee was often called a "radical" who sought to engage this country in war with Japan for the sake of effecting Korea's liberation. In 1933, when the League of Nations was cautiously refusing to consider Japan's seizure of Manchuria, Dr. Rhee went to Geneva and unsuccessfully sought to secure consideration of Korea's claim to freedom.

It was in Geneva that he met Miss Francesca Donner, daughter of an ancient Viennese family, who subsequently, in 1934, became his wife.

In 1940 Dr. Rhee published his book, Japan Inside Out, which warned that Japan was planning to extend its empire by attacking the United States.

After Pearl Harbor, Dr. Rhee hoped briefly that his long fight was won.



He immediately offered to the State Department the full support of Korean guerrillas, organized by the exiled Korean Provisional Republic, and asked that the government at last be recognized. He urged that recognition would (1) make possible the effective organization of guerrilla attacks upon Japan's supply line in Korea, and (2) would prevent a possible seizure of Korea by Russia. But his request was refused.

During the war years, Dr. Rhee held the provisional government together, and sought by every means in his power to inform the American public of the facts of Korea's plight. The Cairo pledge of independence for Korea was the first ray of real light in his 30-year~~x~~ fight, but even that was dimmed by the phrase "In due course."

Dr. Rhee offered his services to the Office of War Information, and through its facilities made several broadcasts to the Koreans, urging them to prepare for the day when they could profitably arise to strike the Jap army from behind its lines.

After the surrender of Japan, Dr. Rhee returned to Korea. He and other members of the exiled Provisional Government promised to return "as private persons" and to assist the American Military Government of South Korea in working out plans for the rapid realization of independence.

Upon Dr. Rhee's return to Korea he was greeted with wild enthusiasm by his countrymen, to whom his name symbolized their determination to be free. Crowds of two hundred thousand and more gathered when he spoke. Every political party in Korea, including even the Communist-dominated People's Republic Party, offered him their chairmanship. But Dr. Rhee decided against affiliating himself with any specific parties, and instead established the Society for the Rapid Realization of independence,



of which he became chairman, and to which all political parties except the Communists pledged their support. This was the time when Dr. Rhee publicly declared that Korea will never accept the Moscow decision imposing a trusteeship on Korea.

General John R. Hodge, Commander of American troops in Korea, recognizing Dr. Rhee's leadership, named him as chairman of the Representative Democratic Council, which he established as an advisory body. But soon Dr. Rhee and General Hodge found themselves pursuing divergent policies. Dr. Rhee launched a determined attack against Communism and sought to cement all nationalist sentiment into one solid demand for immediate independence, working in cooperation with the professed American program. The military authorities, on the other hand, sought to curb Dr. Rhee's anti-Communist campaign, and tried to impose a program of "coalition" of left and right forces, while postponing independence until an agreement with Russia could be reached.

The issue came to a head in November, 1946. The military government authorized an "Interim Legislature" for South Korea. It was to have no authority to deal with international affairs with financial and military problem, with food production or distribution, or with the disposition of expropriated Japanese properties. Whatever it might do within the bounds of these limitations was to be subject to an absolute veto. Still further to insure that the legislature might never get out of hand, only half the members could be elected, and half would be appointed by the commanding general of the U.S. occupation forces.

Of the the 45 elected members, 43 were followers of Dr. Rhee. Thereupon, the military authorities appointed one follower of Dr. Rhee and 44 of his opponents. The explanation offered was to provide for the representation



of the segments of the population that lost the election! After this bitter disappointment, Dr. Rhee came to Washington and spent three months in conferences seeking a basic change of American policies in Korea.

The charge was delayed while the State Department again arranged a conference with the Russians in Seoul - a conference that met for four months without even agreeing on a common explanation for its failure to develop any program. Then Secretary Marshall invited the Russians to a four-power conference in Washington to settle the Korean issues, but this the Soviet refused even to attend. Finally, on September 17, the State Department denounced the Moscow trusteeship agreement of November, 1945, and presented the case of Korea to the General Assembly of the United Nations.

Period IV

The General Assembly of the United Nations readily agreed that an election should be held in all Korea to permit the Korean People to set up a free government of their own choice. Russia, however, refused to permit the UN Commission to cross the 38th parallel line. The question was referred back again to the Interim Committee of the UN, which advised holding the election "in all parts of Korea accessible to" the Commission. On May 10, 1948, 90.6 percent of all registered voters of south Korea cast their ballots to elect 198 members of a new National Assembly. Two districts of Cheju Island remained unrepresented for another year, because Communist disorders made an election impossible; and 100 seats were held open for representatives to be elected from northern Korea. The basis of representation was one for each 100,000 of the population.



When the National Assembly convened on May 31, by a vote of 189 to 8 Dr. Rhee was elected as permanent chairman. A Constitution was adopted, and under it Dr. Rhee was elected President for a four-year term by a vote of 180 to 16. Lee Bum Suk was confirmed as prime minister by a vote of 110 to 84 thus giving evidence of a working majority in the new legislature.

The problems to which President Rhee has subsequently addressed himself fall into three major categories: (1) to provide for the defense of his nation; (2) to develop both the forms and the spirit of the real democracy; and (3) to restore a badly shattered economy and lay a basis for sound economic progress. The three problems were all interwoven and, together or singly, beset with heaviest difficulties. Besides, there was a lack of trained and experienced personnel. Many friendly critics feared that the new government would collapse in disorder, but despite the handicaps, substantial progress soon became apparent in each of the three major areas of endeavor.

Since this fourth period of President Rhee's life is continuing to unfold, it cannot be summarized as conclusively as could the preceding ones. A word or two, however, may be said about each of the major problems with which he has dealt.

1) An Army had to be built from the ground up, since no Korean army had been permitted before inauguration of the new Republic. At the same time, a north Korean Communist force estimated at around 200,000 men had been recruited, trained and armed. As rapidly as possible a Korean armed force of about 100,000 was put into training and armed with American weapons. One of the questions involved in its development has been the extent to which it should be allowed to become a real army, equipped



for full-scale war. Should it have tanks, planes, naval ships and heavy artillery? Should it be allowed to stockpile ammunition and equipment? President Rhee has argued insistently for equipment adequate to defend his nation against a full-scale attack from the north. American officials have opposed this view on two grounds; (1) that such a development might encourage the Republic to launch an attack against north Korea, thereby incurring the danger of a world-wide war; and (2) that stockpiled weapons might be captured by the northern Communists and subsequently used against the United States. Only the future can reveal with certainty which program should have been followed.

(2) Democracy had good soil in Korea in which to grow, because of the natural sturdy individualism of the Korean character, and because of the tradition of local government on matters most intimately affecting the people. However, there were tremendous obstacles to be overcome: fear engendered by a full generation of totalitarian and ruthless Japanese rule; ignorance caused by lack of schools and lack of radio, newspaper, magazine and motion picture facilities for widespread adult education; and lack of any Lockian tradition of equality. However, under the new Constitution full legal equality was granted to women; an explicit bill of rights was included; and free public education was guaranteed. Critics from the left have freely condemned the Republic for its failure to achieve overnight all the characteristics of school-book democracy; but in any long view it seems remarkable that so much of the libertarian spirit has developed so quickly. The foreign press has been allowed full freedom to find and report whatever news and views it wishes; educational facilities have been vastly and rapidly expanded;



foreign critics (including groups of American Congressmen) have been welcomed and shown everything they had time to see, with their reactions normally ranging from "well satisfied" to "amazed at the rapid progress." Several by-elections have been held since May, 1948, with observers all agreed that the voters acted in complete freedom and with a dignified and mature understanding of the democratic process.

3.) Economic rehabilitation consisted of two major problems: (a) to rebuild an economy shattered by three years of neglect and bleeding to death from its artificial division along the 38th parallel; and (b) to rectify the injustices of a land tenure system under which some 65 percent or more of the farmers were tenants. The latter was the easier to remedy, and the requisite steps were promptly taken. First, the Japanese-owned farm lands were sold to their tenant occupants at a nominal price; and fifteen months later, the National Assembly (inevitably containing a majority of landlord members) voted to enforce sale of Korean-owned land on the same basis. Thus by voluntary action, farm tenancy in Korea was reduced to approximately ten per cent, among the lowest in the world. With inflation causing the price of farm products to soar, agricultural debts have been wiped out and the south Korean farmers are unquestionably better off than ever before in their history.

Restoration of Korean industry would have been difficult enough at best, with the coal, minerals, heavy industries and hydro-electric power of the north cut off from the agriculture and fabrication industries of the south. It was rendered much harder by the Communist action of cutting off the flow of electricity from north Korea immediately after the May 10, 1948 election. During the subsequent period, south Korea has opened up its own coal mines, has increased its own production of



electricity, has restored its fisheries, has developed its manufacturing - all to the point of sheer indredibility. Whereas in 1948 many friends of the Republic frankly doubted its ability to survive, it has been demonstrated that a continuance of minimum assistance by the United States through 1952 will enable the people of south Korea to attain a decent and stable living level, even if they are not able by that time to reclaim the resources of the north.

The name of Syngman Rhee will bulk larger as the history of our time emerges in perspective. He has consistantly foreseen developing forces and movements far in advance of the events themselves. He has stood foursquare for international justice, for the right of self-determination of peoples, for national and individual democratic freedom. Against massive odds and in the face of repeated rebuffs, he fought on for fifty years for the reform and redemption of the Korean people. Long before the eyes of the West saw the dangers, he warned first of the threat of Japanese militarism and then of the canker of Russian Communism. Though his warnings were unheeded, he kept his courage and his optimistic determination. Seeing needaess problems piled up by the blindness of the men in power, he has pleaded the cause of enlightenment, but when his pleas failed he has buckled down to the heavy task of remedying the accumulated evils. History, in assessing his role, must conclude: Here was a man who represented the twentieth century at its best.