



Gwangju Diary

Beyond Death, Beyond the Darkness of the Age







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Lee Jae-eui

Translated by Kap Su Seol and Nick Mamatas





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Acknowledgments

Like its Korean original, this book did not just happen. The English edition of *Gwangju Diary: Beyond Death, Beyond the Darkness of the Age* is the culmination of many people's efforts.

The first edition of *Gwangju Diary* was published as part of the U.C.L.A. Asian Pacific Monograph Series, in 1999. The book fell out of print in 2006, when the series was discontinued.

For the first edition—

Many thanks to Lee Jae-eui, archive adviser with the May 18 Memorial Foundation, in Gwangju; to P'ulpit Press for giving us permission to translate the book; and to Reverend Min-woong Kim for introducing us to Mr. Lee.

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Many thanks to Chairman Cha Myong-seok and Executive Director Kim Yang-rae of the May 18 Memorial Foundation for publishing this new edition of *Gwangju Diary*.

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Translators' Note

This book appeared in two principal Korean editions: in 1985, as *Beyond Death, Beyond the Darkness of the Age* (Chugŭm ūl nŏmŏ sidae ūi ōdum ūl nŏmŏ); and, in 1989 (with substantial additional material from a lawsuit filed against the military government, which is not included here), as *May 18: The Record of Life and Death* (O ilp' al kŭ sam kwa chugŭm ūi kirok). Both were published by P'ulpit Publishing House and attributed to novelist Hwang Sok-yong, for reasons explained by Lee Jae-eui in his Author's Preface. Our translation is based on the 1989 edition (pages 15 to 259).

The work we have done is primarily that of translation, but we have also corrected factual errors and supplied notes to account for changes in our historical understanding since 1985. Rather than note each change, which seemed cumbersome for readers, we decided (with Lee Jae-eui) to present this first English rendering as a revised edition. We chose a new title: *Gwangju Diary: Beyond Death, Beyond the Darkness of the Age*.

We made a few other changes to the 1989 edition, which is the standard version in Korea. We minimized the use of district names, to make the book more accessible to an English-speaking audience, and relied on directions and landmarks instead: south, north, the Y.M.C.A., etc.

We did not include part one of chapter one, which provides historical background, since the English edition includes Bruce Cumings's introduction. Nor did we include part twelve of chapter three ("The Spread of the Uprising"), which felt redundant and fragmentary. We believe that Tim Shorrock's essay fills this gap for English-speaking readers.

We ameliorated the tone of certain sentences in the original text, and simplified some overly detailed accounts. We edited for repetition, which is more acceptable in Korean than in English.

We corrected the descriptions of certain events, and accounted for discrepancies in numbers, time, and chronology, to fit our current understanding of the uprising, as Lee Jae-eui notes in his preface.

References to U.S. dollar amounts are based on the fixed exchange rate of 500 won to 1 USD that the South Korean government maintained until 1980. That country's per capita GNP, in 1980, was \$1,503. The annual real household income for an urban worker was approximately 1,448,000 won or \$2,896.¹

1. *Social Indicators in Korea*, 2nd ed., Christian Institute for the Study of Justice and Development (Seoul: Minjung, 1987), 91, quoted in MartiSWn Hart-Landsberg, *The Rush to Development* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1993), 211.



The locale

Gwangju is the provincial capital of South Chölla Province. In 1980, it had a population of seven hundred and thirty thousand people, one-seventh of whom were high-school or college age. Seventy percent of the population was considered working class, but there were only six companies that employed more than one thousand people each, and only three factories that employed more than one hundred. The average wage of Gwangju workers was forty-seven percent lower than the national average. In Gwangju, industrial development was extremely uneven: South Korea's largest truck and military-vehicle assembly plant and huge textile factories existed alongside hundreds of small sweatshops, stores, and restaurants.²

–Kap Su Seol and Nick Mamatas

May 2017

2. Pak Hyön-ch'ae, ed., *Ch'ongnyonul wihan Han'guk hyondaesa* (A Young Person's Modern Korean History) (Seoul: Sonamu, 1991), 315-17. Pak categorizes menial workers and service-sector employees as petty bourgeois; we include them in the "working class."



Author's Preface to the English Edition

I received news of the English translation of *Gwangju Diary: Beyond Death, Beyond the Darkness of the Age* with happiness and a tinge of fear. Happiness, because I'd never expected an English edition, in 1985, when I wrote the book. Back then, my only concern was to tell the truth about what had happened in Gwangju as effectively as possible. I am now very glad to see the English edition come out fourteen years after the Japanese, the first in a foreign language. The fear? Having to write this preface. The book was initially credited to Hwang Sok-yong,³ one of the most prominent novelists in South Korea. He was sentenced to eight years in prison in 1994, after an unauthorized visit to North Korea. I had wanted the book to remain under his name, but no secrets last forever. A few years ago, the South Korean press revealed that I was the real author of *Gwangju Diary*. The translators of the book thus insisted that the English edition be attributed to me.

I was a junior at Gwangju's Chönnam University in May of 1980. I joined the uprising, not because I possessed unusual courage or an uncommon sense of justice, but because I happened to find myself in the middle of a massacre, like so many other Gwangju rebels. At first, I was struck with horror; then, the anger burning in my heart drove that horror out.

It all started when machine-gun fire ripped through the heart of the city. A young man fell right next to me. He writhed and groaned. When the gunfire ceased, a few of us bystanders carried him to a hospital. Someone howled, "Enough is enough!" Almost naturally, we sought to arm ourselves. I was a drop of water in the riptide of an angry crowd.

Throughout the uprising, I experienced the bitterness of isolation. All communication with the world beyond Gwangju was cut off. It was impossible to step outside the boundary of the military cordons. We insurgents struggled to get word of the uprising to the rest of the world. Who would know our truth, if we were all killed? How would history remember us? I fought my pessimism throughout the insurrection.

3. Mr. Hwang made his name with a series of historical novels. In 1994, he was jailed after an unauthorized visit to North Korea and a period of self-imposed exile in the United States. South Korea's National Security Law forbids unauthorized travel to North Korea, and considers it tantamount to espionage, and aiding and abetting an enemy. Amnesty International declared Hwang a prisoner of conscience. He was released by government pardon, upon the inauguration of Kim Dae Jung, in March 1998. (Note: All notes are by the translators.)



I was fortunate to survive the many crises of the uprising—but I did face arrest and torture. In prison, I was tormented by the fact of my survival; I had dodged the final moments of the uprising, the climax that signed so many people's death certificates.

Most of my comrades fearlessly stood their ground in that last fight. Many, including Yun Sang-wŏn, spokesperson for the rebel leadership and an upperclassman at my school, were killed defending Province Hall.⁴ By choosing death over surrender, they sought to prove the righteousness of the people's resistance and reveal the extent of the military dictatorship's violence.

When I decided to write a report on the Gwangju uprising, in January 1985, Chun Doo Hwan's regime was still a deadly one. All political meetings were banned; many people were arrested without warrants and later found dead. And any publication that criticized Chun was suppressed, while "the truth about the Gwangju uprising" was told in an incomplete, distorted way. Given these conditions, documenting the uprising was like belling a cat.

The pro-democracy movement in South Korea never completely recovered from the crackdown following the Gwangju uprising. In September 1983, Minch'ongnyŏn (Youth Association for the Democracy Movement) was established by former student activists in Seoul—the first semi-legal political organization to form since May 1980. Then, on November 18, 1984, rebels and other former student activists in Gwangju formed Chŏnch'ongnyŏn (South Chŏlla Youth Association for Democracy). I was a member of the latter's policy board.

Chŏng Sang-yong headed that group. As secretary of external affairs during the uprising, he'd been among those who defended Province Hall. He was later sentenced to life in prison by a military court, but was granted amnesty a year later, along with other insurgents.

Chŏnch'ongnyŏn decided that its first task would be to publish a report on the Gwangju uprising, a matter of urgent necessity. When it was proposed that I write the report, my heart raced. I had just returned to college, after having been expelled for my involvement in the uprising, and was a newlywed—I'd married a civil servant less than a month earlier.

By agreeing to the plan, I would risk another arrest, torture, and time in prison. I was paralyzed with fear. My wife would be fired; our marriage ruined. I nearly declined, until my fallen comrades appeared in my mind's eye. Their faces haunted me. I decided to take the assignment, but felt sorry for my wife, who was still thinking about our honeymoon. I told the association, "Okay, I will do it!" and, when I told my wife, received a plain reply: "If you have to do it, you should," she said.

I formed a clandestine writing team with two talented friends, Cho Yang-hun and Ch'oe Tong-sul. We had all belonged to the same underground campus club,

4. Province Hall refers to Toch'ong, or the provincial office building. The translators chose to use "Province Hall" rather than "provincial office building" in order to convey its function as a city or town hall.



amid massive government repression. We worked well together.

We obtained two boxes filled with lists of the dead—logs maintained by the Roman Catholic Church and other religious organizations. We gathered statements, flyers, and pictures of the uprising. Many people who'd collected this information had been arrested, and a lot of their material was seized. Fortunately, we tracked down most of what we needed. The intelligence agencies were frantically searching for the same.

We interviewed about forty key figures in the uprising. We met with rebel leaders; members of mobile units, outpost militias, and the propaganda group; hospital workers; labor activists; and the Settlement Committee. As these were secret interviews, we never met in the same place twice. Many conversations ended in tears. Those who'd been criminalized for their role in the uprising wept after giving their statements. Every word of their testimony constituted a living, breathing record that will last throughout history.

After three months spent reviewing source materials and interviewing insurgents, we took two months to write our draft. We needed a framework of analysis. The uprising lay in boxes, a huge mound of facts. We had to prioritize.

Our primary aim was to bring the Gwangju uprising to light. We identified patterns in the spontaneous mass movement of May 18 to 21, 1980, when the resistance drove the military out of the city. The evolution of this effort—from the first terrified response to the military's brutal massacre, to an organized resistance, to an armed uprising—underscored a dynamic specific to this mass movement. Grasping this dynamic, we attempted to characterize the twists and turns of the uprising.

Our other concern was to adequately convey the dignity of those involved. The horror one feels when faced with death typically reins in our behavior, but during the uprising, I witnessed the remarkable potential of ordinary people. The citizens of Gwangju risked their lives to resist a violent system. We wanted to capture this "human courage beyond death." It was a matter of human dignity, the universal value of humanity.

This book does not exaggerate. It is serenely objective and impartial.⁵ We simply recorded the facts we were able to confirm, leaving the rest to historians. Nevertheless, I feel dissatisfied, for political conditions prevented us from fully documenting the military's actions. A decade after publication, new facts were uncovered, and several books on the uprising were published. Excluding a few minor points, these accounts have corroborated the substance of *Gwangju Diary*. The translators of the English edition have corrected and footnoted my work.

Cho Yang-hun and I shuttled between each other's houses while working on this manuscript. We would always place a small stone on the doorstep when leaving.

5. This book is not "serenely objective" or "impartial"; it is instead a dramatic and forceful retelling of an urban uprising and military crackdown from the viewpoint of Gwangju's citizenry. (Korean rhetoric tends to employ more hyperbole than in the West.)



We told our wives to remove the stone if they suspected intelligence agents of conducting surveillance. Fortunately, those stones stayed put throughout five months of research and writing. Still, each day was tense.

Our wives helped us type the manuscript. To remove any trace of our handwriting, we typed all of our notes as well as each draft of the manuscript, doubling the amount of work. Every night, we covered the windows with blankets to obscure the light and noise.

How Hwang Sok-yong came to be listed as the author

After finishing the manuscript, in May 1985, we began to look for a cover author. We needed a name to protect both Chŏnch'ongyŏn and ourselves. Publishing the book under our own names would have led to massive arrests and a crackdown on our organization. Also, the publisher wanted a high-profile name to market the book and bolster its credibility.

The book was nominally compiled by the South Chŏlla Social Movement Association and written by Hwang Sŏk-yŏng. The Movement Association was a network of farmers, religious leaders, youth, and families who'd lost loved ones during the insurrection.

Mr. Hwang was the other well-known figure we contacted who was willing to lend his name to the project; the others believed that the book would put them in danger. Despite such concerns, Mr. Na Pyŏng-sik of P'ulpit Publishing House, in Seoul, volunteered to publish the book. He was a Gwangju native who, as a student leader, was jailed in 1974.

Mr. Hwang handwrote our entire manuscript. We borrowed the title, *Beyond Death, Beyond the Darkness of the Age*, from the poem "A Song of Resurrection," by nationalist Mun Pyŏng-nan.⁶

In mid-May 1985, police raided the P'ulpit Publishing House. They arrested Mr. Na and seized twenty thousand copies of our unbound book from the print shop. Mr. Hwang was also placed under arrest.

On May 20, a week after the raid, the book began to be secretly circulated. The publisher, having predicted the raid and arrest, had printed additional copies in another shop. Marking the fifth anniversary of the Gwangju uprising, protests erupted on college campuses. The book, soon nicknamed *Beyond, Beyond*, fueled the flames of these demonstrations and became a thorn in the side of the military dictatorship. Despite the attempted censorship, *Beyond, Beyond* found its way into bookstores. Many of these shops were searched, and copies seized, but *Beyond, Beyond* became an underground bestseller—read by students, workers, and all kinds

6. Mr. Mun wrote the poem in commemoration of the victims of the Gwangju uprising.



of other people, as word spread. Intelligence officials, prosecutors, senior police officials, and even President Chun Doo Hwan, the mastermind of the massacre, read confiscated copies. *Beyond, Beyond* quenched the people's thirst for the truth about the Gwangju uprising. For the first time, we could bring the truth of isolated Gwangju to the world.

The book had to wait another two years—until Chun stepped down—to be lawfully published. Put more precisely, the book could be freely displayed in bookstores only after a national uprising, in June 1987, toppled the regime.⁷

In a testament to human dignity, South Korean youth risked imprisonment and even their own lives to reveal the massacre of Gwangju. They did not hesitate to follow in the steps of those who had died. Their commitment to this cause eventually put two former presidents and the murderers of Gwangju on trial, fifteen years after the uprising.

I hope that the history of resistance in Gwangju will inspire those who still suffer inhuman institutions and violence. The response of Gwangju's people, in 1980, embodies the human values inherent in both Eastern and Western cultures. In this respect, the struggle of Gwangju continues around the world. We hope that our bitter experience will be instructive elsewhere, and with future generations.

I would like to thank everyone who faced jail or persecution to obtain this book. I would also like to thank Kap Su Seol and Nicholas Mamatas for translating.

I dedicate this book to the souls who fell in May 1980.

—Lee Jae-eui

Archive Adviser, May 18 Memorial Foundation

1999

7. The year 1987 was a watershed in South Korean history. In January, Pak Chongchŏl, a student activist, was killed by water torture while in police custody. When the initial police story, that Pak dropped dead when an inspector pounded on a desk, turned out to be a sham, anger boiled. The storm gathered when Chun Doo Hwan banned constitutional reform until after the 1988 Seoul Olympics and hand-picked Roh Tae Woo, his military buddy and one of the masterminds behind the suppression of the Gwangju uprising, as his successor. Students, dissidents, and even conservative opposition parties mounted pressure for a constitutional reform, in order to replace Chun's rubber stamp constitution and to allow for direct presidential elections. They scheduled a mass nationwide protest for June 10, the day Chun's Democratic Justice Party would have held a convention to name Roh as the official presidential candidate. The tidal wave of protests poured hundreds of thousands of people into the streets and lasted for more than twenty days. Finally, Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo made concessions on June 29 to reform the constitution, along with a host of other liberalizing policies.





Introduction

By Bruce Cumings

The Gwangju rebellion was South Korea's Tiananmen crisis—an event that shaped the broad resistance to the 1980s dictatorship, and paved the way for democratization in the 1990s, as well as the conviction, on charges of treason and sedition, of the perpetrators who massacred innocent citizens in Gwangju. It was a strong warning to other authoritarian regimes, in Asia and elsewhere, about the possible consequences of their draconian actions. An anti-American movement also followed, in the wake of the rebellion, and so it is particularly appropriate that we now have an English translation of Lee Jae-eui's classic narrative, *Gwangju Diary*. This is by far the most accurate account, and a major contribution to modern Korean history. It is also a book that concerned Americans should read, not just because of its critical importance to recent history in Korea, but also because the Gwangju tragedy had joint authorship: in Seoul, and in Washington.

It is an irony perhaps appreciated only by those who know South Korea's history that, in the winter of 1997–98, the worst economic crisis in the country's history arrived just in time for the election of Kim Dae Jung, a dissident born in South Chōlla Province who suffered under earlier dictators as much as any political leader in the world. President Kim embodied the courageous and resilient resistance to decades of authoritarianism that, no less than Korea's high-growth economy, distinguishes the country. Korean democracy has come from the bottom up, fertilized by the sacrifices of millions of people. If they have not yet built a perfect democratic system, they have constructed a remarkable civil society that gives the lie to common stereotypes about Asian culture and values. As an American, it also pains me to say that this movement has had to confront decades of American support for Korea's military dictators.

South Korea's authoritarianism has always had both internal and external dimensions. A paradox of the division of Korea after World War II was that the peninsula's strongest leftwing locale was not the northern region but, rather, the rice-exporting southernmost regions, which came under the administration of the American Military Government (1945–48). This was also a region of underdevelopment, going back to the 1890s, when Japan's economic encroachments (in particular, the export of rice by Japanese businessmen) provoked the Tonghak (or "Eastern Learning") Rebellion in the southwestern Chōlla Provinces. By far the most important peasant rebellion of the nineteenth century, the Tonghak also touched off the Sino-Japanese War, in 1894–95, after which Japan was ascendant





in Korea. Rebel militias from the Southwest also resisted Japanese colonization, in 1907–10, and for many years thereafter Japanese citizens were warned about traveling in the interior of South Chōlla Province.

After Japan's surrender, in August 1945, it took many weeks for Americans to reach the Southwest; when they arrived, they found people's committees in charge of the province. These committees had a diverse leadership, including leftists who had resisted Japanese rule, prisoners released from colonial jails, patriotic landlords, and a handful of communists—but none of them from North Korea. A young man named Kim Dae Jung was a member of a people's committee in the port city of Mokp'o; Kim was not a leftist at the time, but exemplified the patriotic fervor and desire for Korean self-determination held by youth immediately after the liberation from Japan.

American forces worked with many of these committees (which were especially entrenched in the Chōllas), and allowed them to govern towns and counties, until the fall of 1946—when a massive peasant rebellion that began in the Southeast and spilled over to the Chōllas occasioned a general suppression of the committees throughout the South. This suppression, in turn, provoked the Yōsu-Sunch'ōn Rebellion of October 1948 (these two towns occupy a peninsula jutting off South Chōlla), the founding moment of a local guerrilla insurgency. Guerrillas developed a strong base in the Chiri Mountains of South Chōlla, and operated against the Rhee regime from late 1948 into the mid-1950s. During the Korean War, these guerrillas aided the lightning-quick North Korean occupation of the Chōllas. They faced almost no resistance, enabling the Korean People's Army to secure the area in just two days in early July 1950, followed by a daunting march on Taegu and Pusan in the Southeast.¹ After the war, many Chōlla guerrillas ended up in North Korea, for which their families back home paid a dear price: hundreds of thousands of people were denied basic civil rights under South Korean laws that labeled entire families “Red” based on a single relative's status as a guerrilla, or a participant in the people's committees or the 1948 rebellion.

As for the external dimension, from the late 1940s on, Japan and South Korea were subjects of an American dual-containment policy, and engines of growth for the world economy. In 1948–49, Americans were busy in Korea, suppressing the Chōlla guerrillas, just as they were in Japan, reviving that country's formidable industrial base. Their goal was to reconnect former colonial-hinterland territories that were still under Japanese economic influence (South Korea and Taiwan, above all), and enmesh them in security structures that would render them semi-sovereign states. Since that distant but decisive point, American generals have had operational control of the huge South Korean army, and Japan—long the second-largest economy in the world—has depended on the United States for its defense. The American bases

1. I cover these episodes in Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981, 1990).



that still dot Japan and South Korea (containing about seventy thousand troops) were used both to contain the Communist enemy and constrain the capitalist ally. Meanwhile both countries were showered with all manner of support in the early postwar period, part of a Cold War project to make them paragons of non-Communist development. Japan became the paradigmatic example of non-Western growth for the “modernization school” that dominated American policy and scholarship in the 1950s and 1960s, just as South Korea later became the first Asian “tiger.”

As the favored countries in East Asia, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan each exhibited characteristics appropriate to the long era of division that began in 1950, with the Korean War, and lasted through the 1980s. Japan was shorn of its military and political clout to become an American-sponsored “economic animal”; its coercive functions were transferred to bloated authoritarian states in Taiwan and South Korea, which had mammoth armies and spent almost all the income they extracted from their people on coercion, getting what else they needed from direct American aid.² These state apparatuses completed the regional configuration: without such frontline defenses, Japan’s military forces and defense spending would have been much more significant. At the same time, all three states were penetrated by American power and interests, yielding profound lateral weakness. In short, Korea’s massive armed forces have been the Pentagon’s handiwork over the decades—the best army billions of dollars could build, and the worst army any democrat could imagine. Americans trained it, bankrolled it, and, since a 1950 wartime compact, have commanded it: an arrangement that one former U.S. commander called “the most remarkable concession of sovereignty in the entire world.”³

As a result of this internal and external history, from its inception until the 1990s, the R.O.K. has been a country with a rebellious civil society amid weak or nonexistent democracy. Every Korean republic until the one elected in 1992, under Kim Young Sam, began or ended in massive uprisings or military coups. The longest one, the Third and Fourth Republics, under Park Chung Hee (1961–79), began with a coup and ended with Park’s murder at the hands of his own intelligence chief. Both men had served in the Japanese armed forces during World War II, and both had graduated in the same military academy class, in 1946, under U.S. occupation. The next-longest republic, under Syngman Rhee (1948–60), ended in a massive rebellion that threw him out of office and established a year of democratic governance, until Park’s coup. Chun Doo Hwan’s Fifth Republic (1980–87) began with the rebellion in Gwangju and his coup d’état, and ended with urban uprisings that shook the foundations of the system.

Kim Chi Ha was the poet-laureate of a protesting nation, in the 1970s, for which he suffered several jail terms. He was prosecuted under the National Security Law

2. For details see Cumings, *Parallax Visions* (Duke University Press, 1999).

3. General Richard Stilwell, former Eighth Army commander, quoted in Richard B. Foster, James E. Doman, Jr., and William M. Carpenter, eds., *Strategy and Security in Northeast Asia* (New York: Crane Russek, 1979), 99.





for verse said to have promoted “class division, thereby allowing [poetry] to be manipulated as North Korean propaganda.” In one poem, “The Road to Seoul,” he commemorates the myriad sacrifices of young women in Korea, with an account of a Chōlla girl going to the capital:

*I am going.
Do not cry;
I am going.
Over the white hills, the black, and the parched hills,
down the long and dusty road to Seoul
I am going to sell my body.
Without a sad promise to return,
to return some time blooming with a lovely smile,
to unbind my hair,
I am going.
Do not cry;
I am going.
Who can forget the four o’clocks, or the scent
of wheat? Even in this wretched, wretched life, the
deeply unforgettable things...
and in countless dreams I return,
drenched with tears,
following the moonlight...
I am going.
Do not cry;
I am going.
Over these parched hills that anguish
even the skies, down the long and dusty road to Seoul
I am going to sell my body.⁴*

I had not read Kim’s poem when I traveled extensively through the Chōllas, in 1972. But I have never forgotten the days I spent in Gwangju, walking all over the city. I was particularly struck by the extensive red-light districts, and the extraordinary commotion I caused by simply walking through one of them. Women tugged at my sleeve, trying to pull me into their rooms, but I remember one woman, of perhaps sixteen, who followed me through the streets for several blocks. Prostitution was often the only employment available to young women, whether in their native towns or in Seoul. Peasant families would survive on a daughter’s wages, sent back from the traffic in female bodies. This seemed to happen more in the

4. Kim Chi Ha, *The Middle Hour: Selected Poems of Kim Chi Ha*, trans. David R. Mccann (Stanfordville, NY: Human Rights Publishing Group, 1980), 19.





Southwest than elsewhere; Chŏlla women were well represented in South Korea's ubiquitous sex trade.

To tour the province, I hopped on local buses jerry-built with sheet metal perched on old half-ton military trucks. Unlike in Seoul, local people on those buses stared at me with uncomplicated, straightforward hatred. The roads were still mostly hard-packed dirt. Sun-browned peasants crouched over oxdriven plows in rice paddies and shouldered immense burdens, like pack animals. Thatch-roofed homes were sunk in conspicuous privation, and old Japanese-style city halls and railroad stations were unchanged from the colonial era. At unexpected moments along the way, policemen would materialize and waylay the bus to check the identification cards of every passenger, with a generalized sullenness and hostility that I had only before seen in America's poorest urban neighborhoods. The Chŏllas had been left alone during the colonial period, to produce rice for Japan, and they were left alone again as the regime poured all kinds of new investment into the Southeast.

For three decades, the core coercive power of the regime was the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (K.C.I.A.). It was established by Kim Chong-p'il, with American C.I.A. help, in 1961. As the late Gregory Henderson wrote, it:

replaced ancient vagueness with modem secrecy and added investigation, arrest, terror, censorship, massive files, and thousands of agents, stool pigeons, and spies both at home and abroad ... In [Korean] history's most sensational expansion of ... function, it broadly advised and inspected the government, did much of its planning, produced many of its legislative ideas and most of the research on which they were based, recruited for government agencies, encouraged relations with Japan, sponsored business companies, shook down millionaires, watched over and organized students ... and supported theaters, dance groups, an orchestra, and a great tourist center [Walker Hill].⁵

A *New York Times* reporter wrote this, about the K.C.I.A., in 1973: "The agents watch everything and everyone everywhere ... the agency once put a telephone call through from Seoul to a noodle restaurant in the remote countryside where a foreign visitor had wandered on a holiday without telling anyone." Korean citizens believed that the best way to deal with K.C.I.A. surveillance was "not to talk about anything at all to anybody," including members of one's family.⁶

The dreaded event was "the trip to Namsan (South Mountain)"—to K.C.I.A. headquarters, where the most important interrogations and torture were conducted. In 1974, George Ogle, an American missionary and human-rights activist, was taken there for seventeen straight hours of the third degree. Yi Yŏngt'aek, chief of K.C.I.A.'s

5. Gregory Henderson, *Korea: The Politics of the Vortex* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 264.

6. *The New York Times*, August 20, 1973.





sixth section, grilled Ogle on how he could possibly defend eight men about to be executed for treason as socialists. Didn't he know that one of them, Ha Chae-wŏn, "had listened to the North Korean radio and copied down Kim [II Sung]'s speech?" This seemed to be Yi's main proof that Ha was a Communist. Then Yi "switched over into an emotional monologue": "These men are our enemies," he screamed. "We have got to kill them. This is war. In war, even Christians pull the trigger and kill their enemies. If we don't kill them, they will kill us. We will kill them!"⁷

To make a long and bloody story very short, we might say that Park and Chun misjudged the hidden strengths and growing maturity of Korean civil society. This sector was overdeveloped in relation to the economy, and therefore the target of the expanding authoritarian state: a vast administrative bureaucracy; huge, distended armed forces; extensive national police; a ubiquitous C.I.A. with operatives at every conceivable site of potential resistance; and thorough ideological blanketing of every alternative idea in the name of forced pace industrialization. Park's authoritarian practice, learned at the knee of Japanese militarists in 1930s Manchuria, created an unending crisis of civil society. The urban unrest in Masan and Busan, in August and September of 1979, led to Park's assassination by the K.C.I.A. chief in October, which then led to the "coup-like event" mounted by Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo in December, and the denouement of Gwangju, in May 1980.

While American analysts confidently predicted that democratic politics would come after Korea's economy developed, Koreans always wanted development and democracy to go together. Nothing better illustrated this point than the events that ushered in a year of crisis, in 1979–80. In 1979, the economy ran into severe difficulties—caused first by sharp increases in oil prices during the so-called second oil shock of the Iranian revolution; second, by idle assembly lines (many of which were running below thirty percent of capacity) in the heavy industries of General Park's "big push" program, begun in the early 1970s; third, by an enormous debt burden commensurate with Argentina's and outdone only by Mexico's and Brazil's (rising from \$18 billion in 1978, to nearly \$44 billion by the end of 1983); and finally, by rising labor costs among skilled workers due to the export of construction teams to the Middle East (to recycle petrodollars). Korea's rate of growth fell by five percent in 1979, and its GNP dropped six percent in 1980; exports were dead in the water from that point until 1983. As the crisis deepened, another event of great symbolic importance transpired: the "YH incident."

In early August of 1979, young female textile workers at YH Trading Company engaged in a sit-down strike. YH was a medium-sized factory, located east of Seoul. It employed women between eighteen and twenty-two years old to stitch Korean hair into wigs for export, and paid them just 220 won per day—the price of a cup of coffee. YH had become the largest exporter of Korean wigs in the late 1960s,

7. George E. Ogle, *South Korea: Dissent within the Economic Miracle* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Zed Books, 1990), 52.



and was ranked fifteenth in export earnings in 1970. By the late 1970s, however, YH had lost its hold on wigs and instead employed workers to do simple needlework behind sewing machines, in “execrable” conditions.⁸ On August 7, 1979, the owner abruptly shut down the factory, dismissed all employees, and closed their dormitories and mess halls. He then absconded to the United States with all the company’s assets. Police evicted one hundred and seventy women, beating many of them mercilessly. After consultations with Kim Young Sam, then chairman of the opposition New Democratic Party, the women escaped to party headquarters. Two days later, about one thousand policemen stormed the building, injuring scores of people and killing one woman worker. Park Chung Hee ordered the government to investigate the Urban Industrial Mission (U.I.M., which George Ogle had helped to establish), and called for “a thorough investigation into the true activities of certain impure forces which, under the pretense of religion, infiltrate factories and labor unions to agitate labor disputes and social disorder.”⁹

The state-controlled media also claimed that the U.I.M. had Communist connections and was bent on inciting class conflict. The Carter administration, however, denounced the government’s actions as “brutal and excessive,” which led the opposition party to step up its support of the workers.

The Park regime quickly unraveled. Within a few weeks, massive urban protests hit Masan and Pusan, in the Southeast. Workers and students took to the streets of cities into which Park had poured so much new investment, shocking the leadership. For the first time since the Masan Free Export Zone was established, in 1970, workers succeeded in organizing four labor unions (which were outlawed in such zones); other export zones, in Iri and Kuro, were also affected.¹⁰ Students returned to their campuses and mounted large demonstrations. By October, the regime’s leaders were at loggerheads over whether more repression or some sort of decompression of the dictatorship was the better remedy for the spreading unrest. This internal debate was the subject of conversation on October 26, 1979, when President Park went to a nearby K.C.I.A. safe house to have dinner with its director, Kim Chae-gyu. Sitting with Park at the dinner table was his bodyguard, Cha Chi-ch’öl, a short, squat man without a visible neck, known for his ability to kill a man with his bare hands. Cha had exercised an increasingly strong influence on President Park.

At some point, an argument broke out. Kim Chae-gyu drew his pistol and exclaimed, “How can we conduct our policies with an insect like this?” He shot Cha, who tried to crawl out of the room to mobilize his guard detail. And then, inexplicably (for it never has been explained), Kim also shot and killed Park Chung Hee. Pandemonium broke out among the security services’ power elite, and extended well

8. Choi Jang Jip, *Labor and the Authoritarian State: Labor Unions in South Korean Manufacturing Industries* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 287-88.

9. Choi, *ibid.*, 289; Ogle, *South Korea*, 92.

10. Choi, *ibid.*, 103.





through the night—until military forces under General Chŏng Sŭng-hwa took control and ordered Kim Chae-gyu's arrest. When soldiers came for him, on the morning of October 27, Kim reached for the revolver in his leg holster, but it was too late.

All this happened in October 1979, on President Jimmy Carter's watch. Although his administration prided itself on implementing new human rights policies, it did little to support democracy in Korea. Worried instead about internal political disintegration and the military threat from North Korea, Carter sent an aircraft carrier into Korean waters and Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance to Seoul, to express his "hopes for political stability." Carter pointedly refused to commit the United States to a transition to democratic rule. Meanwhile, Pentagon sources told reporters that the best option was to rely on the Korean military, which they considered the only institution with effective power after Park's murder.¹¹

Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo brandished that power on December 12, 1979, using the army's Ninth Division (commanded by Roh), Seoul's capital garrison, and various special forces—all nominally under American operational control—to seize control. According to a 1994 Seoul District Prosecutor's Office report, Chun and Roh met on December 7, and decided to make the 12th their "D-Day." They mobilized armored units in front of army headquarters, forcing high-ranking officers to flee through tunnels, to the U.S. Eighth Army Command across the street.¹² Reporters for *The New York Times* rightly called this "the most shocking breach of army discipline" in South Korea's history, and "a ploy that would have been a hanging offense in any other military command structure," but American officials were unwilling to comment publicly (while privately representing themselves "at a loss").¹³ Since Kim Young Sam's government subsequently had the courage to put Chun and Roh on trial for their seditious activity, perhaps knowledgeable Americans will now come forward to explain what relationship existed between Chun (who headed the Defense Security Command) and American military officers, and what Americans in daily contact with Chun told him during the weeks before and after the December 12 rebellion.

Five months later, Chun's grab for power—he made himself director of the K.C.I.A. in addition to his other positions—detonated the worst crisis since the Korean War. Tens of thousands of protesters flooded the streets of Korea's cities. Chun declared martial law on May 17, 1980; soon, citizens' councils, provoked by the indiscriminate brutality of army paratroopers, took over Gwangju. These councils determined that 500 people had already died in Gwangju, with some nine hundred and sixty missing.¹⁴ They appealed to the U.S. for intervention, but the embassy was

11. *The New York Times*, November 4, 1979, also October 31, 1979, Richard Halloran.

12. *Korea Herald*, October 30, 1994.

13. Henry Scott Stokes, *The New York Times*, December 15, 1979, 1; James Sterba, *The New York Times*, June 15, 1980 (News of the Week in Review).

14. These figures were compiled by Gwangju citizens and sent to the most important watchdog group in the United States at the time, the North American Coalition on Human Rights in Korea, led by Rev. Pharis Harvey.



silent. It was left to General John A. Wickham to release the Twentieth Division of the R.O.K. Army from its duties along the D.M.Z., on May 22. Five days later, Korean troops put a bloody end to the rebellion.

Once again, troops under U.S. command were used for domestic repression; this time, the bloodletting rivaled Tiananmen, in June 1989. The declassified documents that Tim Shorrock, a reporter for the *Journal of Commerce*, obtained through the Freedom of Information Act make clear that the United States, at the highest levels, decided to support Chun Doo Hwan and his clique in the interests of “security and stability” on the peninsula, and to do nothing to challenge them in the interest of human rights and democracy. Indeed, the materials prove that leading liberals—such as Jimmy Carter and his ambassador in Seoul, William Gleysteen; his National Security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski; and, especially, Richard Holbrooke, then Undersecretary of State for East Asia—have blood on their hands from 1980: the blood of hundreds of murdered and tortured students in Gwangju.

At a critical White House meeting on May 22, Brzezinski summed up the conclusions of a Policy Review Committee: “in the short term support [of the dictators], in the long term pressure for political evolution.” The committee’s posture on Gwangju was this: “We have counseled moderation, but we have not ruled out the use of force, should the Koreans need to deploy it to restore order.”

If the suppression of the Gwangju citizenry “involves large loss of life,” the committee would meet again to discuss what to do. But when this very “large loss of life” came to pass (independent estimates suggest that between one thousand and two thousand people died¹⁵), Holbrooke and Brzezinski again counseled patience with the dictators and cited concern about North Korea. Within days, the carrier Midway steamed for Korean waters, and Holbrooke told reporters that there was far too much “attention to Kwangjoo [sic]” without proper consideration of the “broader questions” of Korean security.¹⁶

These documents also show that Americans in the Pentagon were well aware, in advance of the deployment of Korean Special Forces to Gwangju, that these troops had a special reputation for brutality. After they had bayoneted students, flayed women’s breasts, and used flamethrowers on demonstrators, a U.S. Defense report of June 4, 1980 stated that “the [Special Forces] troops seem elated by the Gwangju experience”; although their officers desire to get them out of internal-security matters, that “does not mean they will in anyway [sic] shirk their duty when called upon, regardless of that duty.”

In August, Chun declared himself President, with official American blessings. The new documentation makes clear that the highest-ranking official offering those blessings was none other than human rights paragon Jimmy Carter. Within a week

15. Although dissidents in both countries argue that thousands were massacred, it appears that about 700 protesters were killed in China. In Korea the exact number has never been established; the Chun government claimed about 200 died, but recent National Assembly investigations have suggested a figure no lower than one thousand.

16. Associated Press, June 11, 1980; *The New York Times*, May 29 and June 22, 1980



of the rebellion, he sent the U.S. Ex-Im Bank chairman to Seoul, to assure the junta of American economic support, including a \$600 million loan that Carter had just approved. The President told *The New York Times* that, “the Koreans are not ready for democracy ... according to their own judgment.”¹⁷ But Carter had plenty of help. After Tiananmen, critics of China made a big issue of official and unofficial visits to Beijing by Brent Skowcroft, Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, and others. After the slaughter in Korea, there were many more contacts, with everyone intoning the mantra that internal turmoil would only hearten the North Koreans and hurt Korea’s security and its business environment.

The first American civilian to visit the Blue House—to chat with the new dictator and assure him of American support after Gwangju—was Richard “Dixie” Walker, on June 6. (Walker was the likely ambassador to Korea, in the event of a Ronald Reagan presidency, a supposition that proved accurate.) He was followed by T. Jefferson Coolidge, Jr., a businessman who negotiated Harvard University’s original grant for Korean studies, from Seoul, in the mid-1970s (June 10); right-wing national-security pundit Frank N. Trager (August 5); and, somewhat later, world-class banker David Rockefeller (September 18). Berkeley professor Robert Scalapino had, as early as April, arrived in Korea to warn everyone (for the umpteenth time) that the Soviets had “vigorously endorsed” Kim II Sung’s policy of armed reunification, and returned in October, to say the same thing.¹⁸ Richard Stilwell, an important former C.I.A. official and lifelong “Korea hand”—and all-out advocate of the dictators since 1961—flew into Seoul just before Gwangju to assure Chun of Republican support, whatever the Democrats might think of him.¹⁹ In short, a seamless web of Democratic and Republican officials backed Chun’s usurpation of power, beginning with Carter, Holbrooke, and Brzezinski, and ending with a newly inaugurated Ronald Reagan, who fêted Chun at the White House, in February 1981, for the “new era” he had created. By that time, at least fifteen thousand dissidents were detained in “reeducation” camps.

Some of the prominent Americans who supported Chun’s rise to power were later handsomely rewarded for their efforts. In 1984, Korean newspapers reported that Scalapino was an adviser to the Daewoo Corporation in Seoul, paid a consulting fee of some \$50,000 per year. Other high-level corporate consultants included Spiro Agnew, Richard Holbrooke (for Hyundai), and Alexander Haig, Reagan’s Secretary

17. Samsung Lee, “Gwangju and American Perspective,” *Asian Perspective* 12 (Fall-Winter 1988): 22-23

18. Walker said nothing could serve Communist purposes better than “internal instability, urban terrorism and insurgency [a reference to Gwangju], and the disruption of orderly processes” (*Korea Herald*, June 7, 1980). Coolidge wanted to assure foreign investors that Korea was still a good environment (*Korea Herald*, June 11, 1980), while Trager said, “the current purge drive in South Korea is good and fine if it is an anticorruption measure” (*Korea Herald*, August 5, 1980); Rockefeller called the R.O.K. “a worthy model” of development (*Korea Herald*, September 18, 1980). Scalapino turned up during the turmoil in April (*Korea Herald*, April 9, 1980) and then again in October, at a conference attended also by Walker, where he once again stated that the Soviets and North Koreans were exploiting internal instability in the South (*Korea Herald*, October 7, 1980).

19. Stilwell’s visit in early May 1980, and the commotion it caused in the Seoul Embassy (which thought Stilwell was undercutting its efforts to restrain Chun), are discussed in the F.O.I.A. documents in possession of Tim Shorrock. On Stilwell more generally, see Bruce Cumings, *War and Television: Korea, Vietnam, and the Gulf War* (London: Verso, 1992), 245-48.





of State at the time of Chun's White House visit.²⁰ Richard Stilwell signed on as a consultant with the Hanil *chaebol* in 1986, for an undisclosed fee.²¹ Meanwhile, Korea's exports were flat from 1979 to 1982, and foreign debt increased to \$41 billion, third in the world after Brazil and Mexico (according to 1983 Morgan Guaranty figures). What to do? Chun began touting South Korea's role as a front-line defender of Japan, something no other R.O.K. president had admitted publicly; in return, he wanted a \$6 billion package of aid and credits. Under pressure from the Reagan Administration, Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone coughed up a package of \$4 billion, in January 1983—equal to ten percent of the R.O.K.'s outstanding debt.²²

In the year after the Gwangju Rebellion, Chun either purged or proscribed the political activities of 800 politicians and eight thousand public and corporate officials. He threw some thirty-seven thousand journalists, students, teachers, labor organizers (including two hundred prominent labor leaders), and civil servants into "purification camps," located in remote, mountainous areas, where they underwent a harsh "reeducation." His Act for the Protection of Society authorized preventive detention for seven to ten years, yet more than six thousand people were also given "additional terms" under this law between 1980 and 1986. The National Security Law defined as "anti-state," and therefore treasonous, any association or group "organized for the purpose of assuming a title of the government or disturbing the state," and any group that "operates along with the line of the Communists" or praises North Korea. The leader of such an organization could be punished by death or life in prison.

During Chun's rule, a man named Lee Tae-bok was sentenced to life in prison merely for publishing books said to advocate "class struggle," including classic academic texts authored by G.D.H. Cole, Maurice Dobb, and Christopher Hill. (Lee was jailed from 1981 to 1986.) In mid-1986, a female student named Kwon In-suk was arrested for being a "disguised worker" in an auto factory: "Mun Kwi-dong [a policeman] ordered her to take off her clothes. As [she did], Mun Kwi-dong pushed up her brassiere, unzipped her pants, and then put his hand into her private parts." Subsequently she attempted suicide, and was sentenced to an eighteen-month prison term at the end of 1986. In the meantime, Secretary of State George Shultz visited Seoul (in May 1986). He praised the government for "a progressive movement going in the terms of the institutions of democracy," while criticizing "an opposition which seeks to incite violence" and refusing to meet with either Kim Young Sam or Kim Dae Jung.²³ But support for Chun's dictatorship was completely bipartisan, as we have seen.

20. *Korea Herald*, May 16, 1984. The \$50,000 figure is not reported in this article, but a friend of mine who works for Daewoo gave me it to me.

21. *Korea Herald*, November 18, 1986.

22. *Asian Wall Street Journal*, May 31, 1982; *The New York Times*, January 12, January 13, 1983.

23. All information from *Asia Watch*, *A Stern*, *Steady Crackdown: Legal Processes and Human Rights in South Korea* (Washington, DC: Asia Watch, May 1987), 21-22, 3133, 88-89, 84-95, 123-24.





South Korea, long lauded as an “economic miracle,” was, by the late 1990s, said to be a hotbed of “crony capitalism.” If so, mutual corruption between Korea and the U.S. has followed suit: it extends, for example, to the Pentagon and the huge U.S. military presence in Korea, which was always anxious to back up the nation’s dictators and justify itself by reference to the ever-ferocious “North Korean threat.” In one exemplary case, in 1978, the Securities and Exchange Commission filed a complaint against E-Systems, a Dallas-based arms exporter, for “failing to disclose a \$1.4 million commission payment to the Korean Research Institute, E-Systems’s Korean agent.” It turned out that the money actually went to Colonel Yi Kyu-hwan, a military attaché at the R.O.K. Embassy, and that a vice-president of E-Systems, Robert N. Smith, had \$10,000 of that sum kicked back to him. Smith, a retired Air Force lieutenant general, had been chief of staff for the United Nations Command in Seoul. The S.E.C. refused to comment, however, on whether the \$1.4 million had been used to bribe members of Congress and other U.S. officials.²⁴

The U.S. Defense Department frequently sponsors conferences and symposia on Korea and East Asia, where high-ranking Korean officials speak alongside the usual cast of Americans. The National Defense University, for example, sponsored a symposium at Fort McNair, March 1–2, 1990, entitled “The Coming Decade in the Pacific Basin: Change, Interdependence, and Security.” Invited speakers included McGeorge Bundy, Michel Oksenberg, Donald Zagoria, Richard Holbrooke, Richard Solomon, and “The Honorable Kim Chong-Whi, Assistant to the President [Roh Tae Woo] for Foreign and National Security Affairs.”²⁵ In the mid-1990s, Kim Chong-Whi ran away from prosecutors in Seoul (presumably to the U.S.), who had indicted him for profiting on arms deals; in 1996, prosecutors demanded a five-year prison term for Kim, for receiving some 230 million won in bribes to secure military sales contracts for foreign firms.²⁶

Koreans are much more aware than we are of the degree to which the Chun regime either received or bought support from prominent Americans, just as they knew of the extraordinary corruption of the regime long before any Wall Street pundit declaimed about “crony capitalism.” Gwangju convinced a new generation of young people that the democratic movement had developed not with the support of Washington, as an older generation of more conservative Koreans thought, but in the face of daily American support for any dictator who could quell the democratic aspirations of the Korean people. The result was an anti-American movement in the 1980s that threatened to bring down the whole structure of American support for the R.O.K. American cultural centers were burned to the ground (more than

24. E-Systems had won a contract to export military radios to Korea using Foreign Military Sales credits. E-Systems refused to admit or deny guilt, but agreed to an injunction against such activities (i.e., paying “fees”) in the future. Gen. Smith agreed to return the ten grand to E-Systems (*The New York Times*, March 14, 1978, 49).

25. Quoting from an invitation issued January 2, 1990, by Vice-Admiral J. A. Baldwin, president of the National Defense University.

26. *Yonhap News*, February 9, 1996. On Kim’s role as a “Korean War expert” dispatched from Seoul to London to mess up the making of a Thames Television documentary on that war, see Cumings, *War and Television*, pp. 151–56.



once in Gwangju); students immolated themselves to protest Reagan's support for Chun; and the U.S. Embassy, which sits conspicuously adjacent to the seat of government in Seoul, came to resemble a legation in Beirut, with concrete revetments and blanketed security to keep the madding crowd at bay. It didn't help that the American presence was often marked by racism toward Koreans—whether on military bases, among the U.S. multinationals doing business there, or in the embassy entourage. The inevitable result of these factors was all too apparent in the 1980s: anti-Americanism became so bad that few Americans could walk the streets of Seoul without fear of insult, calumny, or worse.

U.S. officials often saw the students' protests in a narrow empirical light: the students were angry about American involvement in Chun's two coups, and in supporting Chun's crackdown on Gwangju. The embassy would respond that there was no such involvement, which, as a matter of official policy in Washington, may have been true, but could not have been true in day-to-day U.S. - Korean relations. The U.S. maintained operational control of the R.O.K. Army; Chun violated the agreements of the joint command twice, in December 1979 and May 1980. Why did the United States not act against those violations? With his service in the Vietnam War and his position as chief of Korean military intelligence, in 1979, Chun had to have a thick network of ties with his American counterparts. Had they stayed his hand? Or did they even try? Above all, why did President Reagan invite this person to the White House and spend the early 1980s providing him with so many visible signs of support? There was no good answer to most of these questions, especially not the last one. The first of many anti-American acts was the torching of Gwangju's U.S.I.S. office, in December 1980. By the mid-1980s, such events were commonplace, and many young people continued to commit suicide for their beliefs.

At the end of 1986, American policy shifted, however, as Washington began to worry about a popular revolution in South Korea. U.S. policy shifted globally, toward support for limited forms of democracy—something that William Robinson has now brought to light in an important book, *Promoting Polyarchy*. Robinson argues that the Philippines was a key test case for the Reagan Administration, after the murder of Benigno Aquino, in 1983. A secret N.S.C. directive, approved in November 1984, called for American intervention in Philippine politics: "we are urging revitalization of democratic institutions, dismantling 'crony' monopoly capitalism and allowing the economy to respond to free market forces." This was followed by meetings in Manila between Ferdinand Marcos and C.I.A. Director William Casey (in May 1985), and Senator Paul Laxalt, Reagan's personal emissary (in October 1985). Washington also vastly augmented the Manila embassy's political staff.²⁷ The same thing happened in late 1986, in Korea: longtime C.I.A. official James R. Lilley became ambassador to Seoul, and began meeting with opposition forces for

27. William I. Robinson, *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, U.S. Intervention, and Hegemony* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 91-92, 121-25.



the first time since 1980.

Korean politics began to reawaken with the National Assembly elections of February 1985, held under American pressure. By the spring of 1987, an aroused, self-organized citizenry again took over the streets of major cities, with late-coming but substantial middle-class participation. Catholic leaders played a critical role in this episode. Korean civil society has its core strength in myriad Christian organizations; there are nearly twelve million Christians now, about one-quarter of the population, of which three million Catholics represent the fastest-growing group. Cardinal Kim Sou Hwan is the most influential religious leader in the country; the Myongdong Cathedral in downtown Seoul was one of the few sanctuaries the dictators feared to enter. It has been a center of protest for the past two decades, and played a critical role in shielding dissident students in May and June of 1987, just before the downfall of the Chun regime. (In the 1990s, it has worked closely with independent labor unions.)²⁸

In June 1987, amid a popular rebellion threatening to spread beyond control, various Americans—and especially Lilley—pressured Chun and Roh to change their policies. On June 29, Roh Tae Woo announced direct presidential elections for December 1987; an open campaign, without threats of repression; amnesty for political prisoners, including Kim Dae Jung; guarantees of basic rights; and revision or abolition of the Press Law. In an episode that still needs to be clarified, American electioneering specialists went to Seoul to help elect General Roh; some Koreans later charged that computerized election results were altered. But the main factor enabling the emergence of an interim regime under the other, somewhat shrewder, protégé of Park Chung Hee, Roh Tae Woo, was the split in the opposition between Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung, who both ran for president and lost.

Roh's regime first accommodated, and then sought to suppress, a newly energized civil society, which had come to include a liberated, very strong labor movement. (More strikes and labor actions occurred in 1987–88 than at any other point in Korean history, or most national histories.) The political system under Roh, wrote one expert, was by no means “a civilian regime ... the military coexisted with the ruling bloc while it exercised veto power over opposition groups.” When one courageous journalist, O Hong-gun, suggested clearing the military culture completely out of politics, agents of the Army Intelligence Command stabbed him with a bayonet.²⁹ The partial democratization that occurred, in 1987–88, in South Korea also proceeded without dismantling repressive state structures, such as the successor to the K.C.I.A.: the Agency for National Security Planning, or A.N.S.P.

In 1990, this regime sought to fashion a Japanese solution to democratic pressures: a “Democratic Liberal Party” (reversing the characters of Japan's Liberal

28. The best source on the political role of the Catholic church is Kim Nyong, *Han'guk Chongch'i wa Kyohoe-Kukka Kaldung* (Korean politics and church-state conflicts) (Seoul: Sonamu, 1996).

29. Park, Kie-duck, “Fading Reformism in New Democracies: A Comparative Study of Regime Consolidation in Korea and the Philippines,” Ph.D. diss. (University of Chicago, 1993), 161, 170-71.





Democratic Party). It would bring the moderate opposition, in the form of Kim Young Sam and his Busan-based political machine, under the tent of the southeastern Taegu-Kyöngsang elites (or “T-K Group”) that had dominated the R.O.K. since 1961, thus forming a single-party democracy that would rule for the ages—or at least the next generation. A host of analysts (not least of which was the U.S. Embassy in Seoul) came forward to laud this “pact” between elite soft-liners and hardliners, which seemed to mimic the 1980s transitions to democracy in Latin America.

The D.L.P. solution could not last, however. Unlike Japan’s system, it excluded labor (no political party had roots in Korea’s massive working class, and labor unions were prevented by law from involving themselves in politics until early 1998), and failed to reckon with unresolved crises in postwar Korean history (especially Gwangju). It also glossed over sharp splits within the political elite—the continuing repression of anything resembling a serious left (through the National Security Law), the restiveness of the *chaebol* groups under continuing strong state regulation, and, above all, the continuing exclusion of representation for the southwestern Chōlla people in the politics of Seoul. But Roh Tae Woo made one major contribution to democratization, in 1992: he retired and returned to the barracks his many fellow militarists, enabling the election of the first civilian president since 1960, Kim Young Sam.

In 1995, a series of dramatic events and actions unfolded, with consequences no doubt unforeseen at the time, but producing an audacious assault on the dictators who ruled Korea from 1961 onward. Unlike every other former-military dictatorship in the world, the new democratic regime in Korea did not allow bygones to be bygones: the two former presidents ended up in jail, convicted of monumental bribery and treason against the state. Kim Young Sam probably allowed the prosecution of Chun and Roh on the initial charge of bribery to help him overcome the influence of the Taegu-Kyöngsang group within the ruling party. But he was then forced, in November 1995, to allow both of them to be indicted for treason—for their December 1979 coup and the subsequent suppression of the Gwangju citizenry—when a “slush fund” scandal threatened his reputation. Also important was the emergence of a new generation of prosecutors, who’d been educated and come of age amid civil-society struggles, and were now equipped to invoke “the rule of law” against their dictatorial antagonists. The fall-out among the ruling groups, the trials of Chun and Roh, and revelations of slush-fund scandals (big business had given more than \$1.5 billion in political funds to Chun and Roh in the 1980s) bathed the state and *chaebol* groups in a harsh light and put an end to the military’s role in politics. This was the finest moment for Korean democracy up to that point, vindicating the masses who had fought for just rule over the previous fifty years; it also represented a partial rehabilitation of those who had rebelled in Gwangju, though no full reckoning has yet occurred.

But South Korea still was not a full-fledged democracy, and even with the election





of Kim Dae Jung and his protégé Roh Moo Hyun, it still is not. The National Security Law remains on the books, and continues to be used to punish peaceful dissent, in spite of an unusual State Department entreaty (in August 1994) that Seoul do away with this anachronistic and draconian measure. The law embraces many aspects of political, social, and artistic life. As recently as the summer of 1994, a professor's lecture notes were introduced in court as evidence of subversive activity, yet his actions never went beyond peaceful advocacy.³⁰ Kim Dae Jung brought about a major transformation by bringing labor into high-level negotiations with the state and business, an arrangement similar to democratic corporatist practices in Germany and elsewhere. The R.O.K.'s acceptable political spectrum is now wider than America's, as leftwing newspapers like *Hankyoreh* circulate widely. Most important, Korean civil society has matured into a force that, when mobilized in massive but peaceful candlelight parades, is virtually impregnable. These demonstrations, which began in 2002, embraced millions of ordinary people by 2016, and were the elemental political force behind the impeachment of President Park Geun Hye.

The first real democratic transition to the opposition occurred when Kim Dae Jung was elected. Unfortunately, this victory for democracy came at a time when the nation's "miracle" economy was severely depressed, a result of the financial crisis and \$57 billion I.M.F. bailout of late 1997. In an interview shortly after his election, Kim blamed this crisis on military dictatorships that lied to the people and concentrated only on economic development, to the detriment of democracy, leading to a "collusive intimacy between business and government." He said that the way out of the crisis was to reform the government-business nexus, induce foreign investment, and increase exports.³¹ Kim did his best to reform this "collusive intimacy;" his economic team included several well-known critics of Korea, Inc. and the chaebol—most of them from the disadvantaged Southwest, and several of whom had been fired for their political activities during the Chun period. These include Chŏn Ch'ŏl-hwan, a progressive economist and human rights activist, who headed the Bank of Korea; North Chŏlla governor You Jong-keun, a free-market advocate who was a special adviser to the President; and Lee Jin-soon, Kim Tae-dong, and several other key members of the Citizen's Coalition for Economic Justice, which promoted labor and criticized *chaebol* concentration.³² With I.M.F. and World Bank support, they advocated for new safety nets for laid-off workers and New Deal-style public works projects (roads, bridges) to employ the jobless.

Democratic reforms also proceeded rapidly under Kim Dae Jung. Kim Young Sam did nothing to change Korea's ubiquitous A.N.S.P., merely putting his own

30. Park Won-soon, *The National Security Law* (Los Angeles: Korea NGO Network, 1993), 122-23.

31. Mary Jordan's interview with Kim Dae Jung, *The Washington Post*, January 9, 1998. See also the government white paper, "The New Administration's Directions for State Management," Korean Overseas Culture and Information Service (February 1998), which called for financial transparency, good accounting, improvement of capital adequacy, and no "unrestricted diversification" by the *chaebol*—but made no mention of breaking them up.

32. See the backgrounds of new appointees in the *Korea Herald*, March 11, 1998, and in Shim Jae Hoon, "Dream Team," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 30, 1998, 14.



allies in control. The agency prosecuted hundreds of cases under the National Security Law, in the mid-1990s, including against labor organizer Park Chung Ryul. Agents arrested him in the middle of the night, in November 1995; ten men rushed into his home and dragged him off to an unheated cell, where, for the next twenty-two days his tormenters beat him, poured cold water over him, and limited him to thirty minutes sleep per day, all to get him to confess to being a North Korean spy—which he was not. A government official told a reporter that such measures were necessary because, “We found the whole society had been influenced by North Korean ideology.” The same official estimated that upwards of forty thousand North Korean agents existed in the South.³³

An investigation in early 1998 proved that the A.N.S.P. had run an operation, just before the election, to tar Kim Dae Jung as pro-Communist. Incoming officials also obtained for reporters the list of K.C.I.A. agents who had kidnapped Kim Dae Jung in Tokyo, in 1973. In February the *Sisa Journal* published, for the first time, the full administrative structure of the A.N.S.P., showing that it had more than seventy thousand employees (and any number of informal agents and spies), an annual budget of around 800 billion won (about \$1 billion), and almost no senior officials from the Southwest (three from among the seventy highest-ranking officials, one among thirty-five section chiefs). It controlled eight academic institutes, including several that provide grants to foreign academics and publish well-known English-language journals. Kim Young Sam’s son, Kim Hyon-ch’öl, ran his own private group inside the A.N.S.P. and gave critical information to his father; many therefore blamed Kim’s inattention to the developing Asian crisis on the arrest of his son in mid-1996 (for arranging huge preferential loans and massive bribery). The Kim Dae Jung government cut the “domestic” arm of the A.N.S.P. by fifty percent, reduced the rest of the agency’s staff by ten percent, fired twenty-four top officials and many other employees, and reoriented the agency away from domestic affairs, toward North Korea. A top official said that the A.N.S.P. “will be reborn to fit the era of international economic war,”³⁴ not a bad characterization of the contemporary world economy.

The “peak bargaining” that Kim initiated between the state, big firms, and labor, in early 1998, was another major achievement, and seemed finally to institutionalize participation by labor in the political process (thereby avoiding the disorders and debilitating strikes that many pundits expected to accompany Korea’s economic reform process; today labor is conditioning the reform rather than destroying it). President Kim also pardoned and released from jail many dissidents, including novelist Hwang Sök-yŏng and poet Pak No-hae, along with many radical students associated with pro-North political ideas. His government modified the odious practice, derived from Japanese colonialism, of requiring political “conversion” before

33. Andrew Pollack, *The New York Times*, February 22, 1997.

34. *Korea Herald*, March 19, 1998.





leftists and Communists could be let out of jail; political prisoners now merely have to say that they will abide by the laws of the R.O.K.³⁵ But this is a classic Catch-22, since it means abiding by a National Security Law that declares any sympathy for North Korea to be a crime. Thus U Yöng-gak, a North Korean sympathizer, was jailed for forty years, among the world's longest-serving prisoners of conscience.³⁶

Perhaps the greatest contribution that Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun made was to reconcile the previously restive and oppressed southwestern region with the rest of the country. After 1945, there were, in many ways, three Koreas—not just two. Along with the R.O.K. and the D.P.R.K. was a large population in the Southwest that did not feel integrated into, or an accepted part of, the Republic of Korea. Today, there are impressive monuments to the Gwangju rebellion and the Cheju Island uprising, along with many lesser memorials in towns and villages that suffered vicious repression under the dictators. After President Lee Myung Bak took office in 2008, his regime made many efforts to return to the anti-Communist, repressive past that his “ruling party” seemed to cherish. But enough toothpaste had come out of the tube, between 1980 to 2008, to make his efforts—and those of his successor, Park Geun Hye—a reactionary impulse that will not stand the test of time. Meanwhile, Park has left office in complete disgrace.

In recent history, the contribution of protest to Korean democracy cannot be overstated; it is a classic case of “the civilizing force of a new vision of society... created in struggle.”³⁷ A significant student movement emerged in Western Europe and the United States in the mid-1960s, and had a heyday of perhaps five years. By contrast, Korean students were central activists in the politics of liberation, in the late 1940s; in the overthrow of the Rhee regime; the repudiation of Korea-Japan normalization, in 1965; and the resistance to the Park and Chun dictatorships, between 1971 and 1988. Particularly after the Gwangju tragedy, through the mediation of *minjung* ideology and praxis—a kind of liberation theory stimulated by Latin American examples—Korean students, workers, and young people brought uniquely original, autonomous configurations of political and social protest into the public space, threatening many times to overturn the structure of American hegemony and military dictatorship. Slowly but surely, this movement morphed into the massive, dignified candlelight parades that any Korean leader ignores at his or her peril.

In August of 1998, Kim Dae Jung became the first Korean president to visit the graves of the victims of the Gwangju massacre. There, he met with aggrieved relatives, and told reporters that the Gwangju rebellion “was behind the birth of

35. *Han'guk ilbo*, August 15, 1998.

36. *Korea Herald*, August 15, 1998. Recently President Kim told Pierre Sane of Amnesty International that it was still too early to revise “some poisonous parts” of the NSL, but that such changes would come soon (*Korea Herald*, September 10, 1998).

37. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 231, 38. *Korea Herald*, August 26, 1998.



his democratic government” and a key element in his own courage to resist the dictators: “I never gave in to their death threats, because I was unable to betray Gwangju citizens and the souls of the May 18 victims.”³⁸ This was the prelude to closing the chapter on this terrible—but also important and definitive—episode in recent Korean history. If only Americans would assume a similar sense of responsibility for revealing the role of the Carter and Reagan administrations in the unfolding of this tragedy.

—Bruce Cumings
March 2017

38. *Korea Herald*, August 26, 1998.





Chapter I: The Uprising Begins

May 14 and 15—Taking to the streets

After the street demonstrations in Seoul, on May 13, democratic aspirations spread across the country—to the city of Gwangju.¹ The students of Chŏnnam and Chosun universities protested, attempting to take over the streets. By 1:00 p.m. on May 14, riot police had cordoned off Chŏnnam University, where ten thousand students retreated to the front of the library. The student union grouped students by college; each was to hit the police line at a certain point. The students fought through the riot squad's tear gas and truncheons, and broke through the first line at the university's main gate. They spilled off the campus and into the street. A wave of demonstrators then swept through the whole of downtown Gwangju. Students rushed to the fountain at Province Hall Square, handing out flyers and growing in size along the way. Police nearly gave up on trying to disperse the crowd, which captured the area.

In the square, the crowd rallied for democratic reforms. Thousands of citizens joined in, cheering, as the students demanded the lifting of martial law. After the rally, they staged an overnight sit-in at the school.

By May 15, youth could take to the streets with little trouble from the police. Student demonstrations had swept across the country, and were unlikely to end on their own and too large to subdue. Rather than fight them, the police begged the students to behave and protest peacefully, but outside the city, troops waited to be deployed; a list of those to be arrested was prepared.

Some sixteen thousand students from Chŏnnam University, Chosun University, and Gwangju Teachers' College sat around the fountain of Province Hall Square, calling for an end to martial law. Sympathetic professors at Chŏnnam University wore ribbons distributed by the student union. At that day's rally, representatives of each of the schools read joint statements. A young man studying for his

1. On May 13, 1980, students from six universities in Seoul took to the streets in defiance of the Choi Kyu Ha interim government as well as their own moderate leadership. In opposition to the majority of the college-based activist leadership, which took a wait-and-see attitude, the protestors believed in a more confrontational stance against the government to win democratic reforms. The impact of these street demonstrations rippled across the nation, and led to a rally of one million people in the center of Seoul on May 15. —Trans. (Note: all notes are by the translators.)



college-entrance exams spoke, and many other citizens spontaneously took to the podium. Their demands: “Lift martial law!” “Secure workers’ rights!” and “Step up political reforms!”

The organization of the Gwangju student movement made these collective student demonstrations possible. Unlike in other cities, the students’ rallies were well planned and orderly, carried out with spirited support from local people. The Province Hall fountain became a crucible of public opinion and a launching pad for the pro-democracy movement.

After the rally, six students led a march, holding a large Korean flag. Some fifty professors followed, then thousands more students. It was the first march that had unified pupils and faculty since the demonstrations, in April 1960, against Syngman Rhee.²

As the movement gained momentum, the student leadership began to worry that the government would shut down the campus, as it often had since the Yushin period.³ From the beginning of May, the leaders had been considering a number of contingency plans. In the event of a shutdown, the Chōnnam University student union would gather by the main gate at 10:00 a.m., and, if stopped at the gate, meet instead at Province Hall Square at noon. They spread word of this plan throughout the student body, and announced another rally for the following day.

May 16—March of torches

In Seoul, the student leadership ended their street demonstrations on May 15, to watch for new political developments. But in the Chōlla Provinces, organizers planned a march of torches that would unite youth with the rest of the urban population. May 16 was the anniversary of Park Chung Hee’s 1961 coup, which had trampled on the gains of the April 1960 popular uprising. Gwangju’s student leaders nevertheless believed that their struggle would ultimately defeat government repression. They aimed to raise a massive number of torches to symbolically cast out the darkness of eighteen years under Park Chung Hee’s military dictatorship.

This was the front line of resistance against government violence. Young activists congregated at the Nōktu bookstore and the Modern Culture Institute, which had become impromptu debating halls in the late 1970s. A meeting place for the student organization Chōnnam Young Political Prisoners Association, in the early 1970s, the

2. Syngman Rhee was South Korea’s first president, ruling from 1948 to 1960. He initially held power under U.S. tutelage when Korea was liberated from Japanese rule after World War II. A popular uprising in April of 1960 toppled his government after a rigged general election outraged the populace.

3. The Yushin period refers to the third and last period of the Park Chung Hee dictatorship. After his successful coup of May 16, 1961, Park rewrote the country’s constitution three times to prolong his rule. He named the third constitution *yushin*, meaning “restoration.” Park took the term from Japan’s Meiji Restoration, the coup staged by members of the Samurai class in 1868 to spur their country’s industrial growth in response to the threat of Western capitalism. Park wanted to quell political opposition on the pretext that such opposition would threaten economic prosperity and hamper his ability to respond to the communist North.



Nöktu Bookstore, run by Kim Sangyun, encouraged and tempered young activists through study groups. It also operated as an information center, through links with other regions. The Modern Culture Institute, which sought to mold activists into a more potent force, was in contact with secular portions of the democracy movement as well as the labor movement. The Institute comprised the Reader's Club; the Democratic Youth Association; White Pine Tree, a group formed by the wives of political prisoners; a night school for workers; and the guerrilla theatre troupe Clown.

These two small institutions became vital connections for the on- and off-campus resistance. By May 1980, they had achieved a certain standing in the movement. That month saw heated debates among the leadership about how the military and the United States—central to the current state of affairs and the only players that could bring about change—might react to the protests. Seoul's student leadership suspended demonstrations, believing that the military was subordinate to the United States but still independent from the domestic government. Everyone expected a military response as the movement peaked. But if it used force to end the pro-democracy movement, what would the U.S. do? The prevailing opinion was that the U.S., as the leading neo-imperial world power, was responsible for holding back the reunification of Korea. Nevertheless, it was thought that, at this stage, democratic reforms in South Korea were in Washington's interest. The U.S. would not want radicals to incite anti-American feelings as part of the resistance to military rule. The students imagined that the U.S. would welcome reforms, so long as those reforms did not run counter to its interests in the region. If the pro-democracy movement were to intensify, the U.S., seeking to avoid another Iran-style fiasco, would likely cooperate in transferring political power from the military to a civilian parliament.⁴ The activists' most important task was to guide the movement to the point where the U.S. would intervene on the side of democracy.

The night of May 15, students engaged in a sit-in spotted military-reconnaissance squads lurking about the campus. None of the foreign lecturers at Chönnam University showed up to teach their classes the next morning.

On May 16, the students intended to trigger a "blackout" during the torchlight march—they had encouraged residents to turn off their lights in support, to disprove claims by the news media that the students stood alone. The blackout was canceled before dark; it felt too much like the city's monthly bombing-raid drill. Even though activists in other cities had suspended their street demonstrations, students from nine colleges and universities in Gwangju held a rally at Province Hall Square.⁵

4. Most of the South Korean opposition believed in President Carter's human rights diplomacy and had great expectations for it. They interpreted the upsurge of anti-Americanism in Iran after the revolution as the outcome of the administration's miscalculated support for the Shah.

5. Indeed, Gwangju was the only city where street demonstrations were held on May 16. After building momentum on May 15, students outside Gwangju decided to suspend street protests temporarily. The reasons: students thought they needed time to develop a more articulate campaign to win wider popular support and to avert a military scheme to exploit their poorly organized protests as a pretext for a coup; and a new session of the National Assembly was to open on May



At the fountain, the students read a second set of joint statements. Chŏng Tong-nyŏn, a thirty-eight-year-old Chŏnnam University student, spoke on behalf of activists who'd recently returned to school after the lifting of some emergency decrees—they'd been expelled for their role in anti-Yushin protests. At 6:30 p.m., students began to circle the fountain.⁶ At 8:00 p.m., they split into two groups and began marching through downtown Gwangju, carrying huge flaming torches. They chanted slogans and sang songs, such as "Justice" and "A Militant's Anthem," and carried four hundred torches, banners, and pickets through the streets. They returned to the square and burned symbols of the May 1960 coup in effigy. The police were very cooperative, unlike in Seoul, where they had clashed violently with protesters the day before. Some students cleaned trash and cigarette butts from the streets after the march.

The protest ended in silence, a final pause before the uprising. Though it was a peaceful demonstration, people had packed the sidewalks, fascinated by the burning torches. The people of Gwangju followed the students' lead. The students had the streets; the citizens took the sidewalks. There was unity.

That night, some of the leaders argued for time, to see how the government would react. They decided to hold another rally on May 19, to keep pace with their counterparts in Seoul. In the meantime, they would watch for new political developments and get some rest. The sitin ended around 10:00 p.m. At Chŏnnam University, they agreed to congregate immediately at the main gate, should a shutdown be imposed.

May 17—Prelude to suppression

The government declared that the National Assembly would convene on May 17, to settle the political disputes caused by student protests and other dissident movements. It claimed that the Assembly would discuss lifting martial law and propose a new timeframe for political reforms. This seemed to be the solution to a complicated political situation. The pro-democracy movement saw the announcement as a step forward, and student activists anticipated a real change. At 5:30 p.m. on May 16, fifty-nine student leaders held the first meeting of the National

17 to discuss constitutional reform.

6. There was another student leader we should remember in connection with the torchlight rally, Pak Kwan-hyŏn. Twenty-six-year-old Pak was the leader of the Chŏnnam University student union. At the rally, after his passionate speech, tens of thousands of citizens who had stayed on the sidelines joined student protesters marching. Though he managed to escape the city and evade the mass arrests the following day, Pak was arrested in April 1982. Six months later, in October, he died in prison in 1982 after a forty-day hunger strike for improved penitentiary conditions. The Chun Doo Hwan government maintained that he died of a heart attack. Students in Gwangju protested, defying hundreds of riot police stationed around the clock on their campuses. In its internal bulletin, *National Intelligence Daily*, on October 16, 1982, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency stated: "The death this week of a former student leader imprisoned in Gwangju [Pak Kwan-hyŏn] has touched off major antigovernment demonstrations by university students in the city, the site of bloody civil disturbances in the spring of 1980." "The number of demonstrators reportedly had risen to 5,000 yesterday [October 15, 1982]." The C.I.A. stated further: "If the government [of Chun Doo Hwan] does not produce credible evidence to back its version of the death, the incident could provide a new rallying point for students and Christian dissidents in Seoul and elsewhere." (See <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/C.I.A.-RDP84T00301R000500010152-4.pdf>)



Student Union Corps at Ewha Women's University, in Seoul. The meeting continued through the night, into the next morning.

On the evening of May 16, military vehicles carrying paratroopers were seen heading toward Gwangju on the Seoul-Gwangju Expressway. By the next afternoon, nearly one thousand paratroopers awaited instructions from the Combined Arms Command (CAC) in Gwangju.

A female undergraduate placed a call to the student union of Chŏnnam University, on the afternoon of May 17. With urgency in her voice, she reported that all the leaders in Seoul had been arrested under martial law—the students' worst fears had come true. Having learned that massive arrests were imminent, Chŏnnam's student leadership fled to Mudŭng Cabin on the outskirts of the city. At 9:00 p.m., they went to the Taeji Hotel and attempted to check on the situation in Seoul, but failed to make contact. Members of the union decided to go into hiding. Less than an hour later, just after the student leaders had left, police raided the hotel.

At 11:00 p.m., youth activists and dissident leaders throughout the city were placed under arrest. In a broad sweep, military-intelligence agents and police raided their bedrooms and led them out at gunpoint. The officers shoved crying family members aside, and dragged activists out of their homes, like rabid dogs. Undercover agents, who'd conducted surveillance all evening, captured key leaders, professors, and members of dissident organizations. Those who managed to evade the police went into hiding. Many activists in other parts of the country were captured that night, but not the student leaders of Chŏnnam University. They were, however, isolated and unable to mobilize their followers. The unified leadership behind the rallies was dismantled; the movement was paralyzed.

May 18—Total martial law

At 11:40 p.m. on May 17, the Minister of Culture and Information proclaimed that martial law would be extended to the whole country, effective at midnight. This had already been the reality for most Koreans, since October 27; now, it applied to Cheju Island as well. But the deeper effect of the notice was to clamp down on the pro-democracy movement and its potential. The government's official statement—"considering the suspicious movements of the North Korean military and the nationwide unrest, we have declared a state of emergency"—once again conflated appeals for democracy with the totalitarianism of the North. Kim Dae Jung and other opposition leaders were arrested on false charges of engineering the workers' and students' protests.⁷ Some holdovers of the Yushin era, including Kim Chong-p'il,

7. Kim Dae Jung is a longstanding opposition leader. He ran in the 1971 presidential elections against Park Chung Hee. Kim's popularity overwhelmed Park in the early period of the campaign. Park's secret police unsuccessfully attempted to kill Kim in an engineered car accident, but Kim limped away with an injured leg. To split the vote, Park inflamed provin-





also found themselves imprisoned. Twenty-six politicians from both the ruling and opposition parties were arrested.

Two hours after the government's announcement, the military occupied Chŏnnam and Chosun universities. Some students remained on campus following the May 16 march. Troops raided the buildings, roughing up students who slept curled up in chairs. The students were kicked and beaten before being detained in the student center; several managed to escape by climbing down a water pipe on the side of the building.

The trigger

Before dawn, on May 18, riot police and paratroopers occupied the provincial government offices and the city center. By morning, the streets were chillingly tense. Middle-age plainclothes officers strolled in twos and threes, reinforcements brought in from neighboring counties. Worried passersby whispered to one another. The march of the torches that lit up the area just a day earlier still lingered in many people's minds; those flames had been extinguished. On Kŭmnam Avenue, in the heart of the city, people began to assemble and share what they'd heard; small clusters of people grew. The police occasionally moved in to disperse the crowds. Some balked, but most complied.

At 9:00 a.m., students started to assemble at Chŏnnam University's main entrance. Most were on their way to the library or to collect things they'd left on campus; others had heeded the student union's plan—to meet there at 10:00 a.m. in the event of a shutdown. A squad of soldiers stood at the gate and told them to leave, but the crowd lingered and steadily increased in size. By 10:00 a.m., nearly one hundred students were there, taunting the soldiers and feeling emboldened. The squad leader used a megaphone to tell them to move, but was shouted down.

Almost by reflex, fifty people began a sit-in on a nearby bridge. As they sang and chanted anti-government slogans, others joined in. Nearly three hundred students yelled, "End martial law!" "Chun Doo Hwan, you must be gone!" "Martial law troops go away!" and "End the shutdown!" The squad leader's threats to remove them by force were drowned out. Suddenly, the soldiers raised a battle cry of their own and charged the students. They waded into the crowd, swinging military-grade batons. At first, the students tried to resist, but the soldiers looked ready to kill. Several students writhed on the ground, and the concrete ran red with their blood. Others

cial prejudice, a remnant of the feudal age, of his native North Kyŏngsang Province against Kim's native South Chŏlla Province. Since then, anti-Chŏlla sentiment had been institutionalized and deeply rooted in South Korean society. With his stranglehold on the economy and the government, Park favored companies in his native Kyŏngsang. Native Kyŏngsang officials and military officers had almost exclusive access to key posts, while Chŏlla natives had virtually no access and were discriminated against in housing and in the job market. The Chun Doo Hwan clique was also from North Kyŏngsang Province. Therefore, support for Kim Dae Jung among the people of Chŏlla was nearly absolute; he was a son of the Chŏlla Provinces and the fiercest fighter against Park within the political establishment.



were chased onto a side street and cornered by half a dozen troopers. The students managed to regroup and threw stones at the squad of soldiers, who then launched a bold assault. They rushed the crowd, not bothering to dodge the rocks; each soldier chose a target, incapacitating them with a quick blow to the head and dragging them away. The battle lasted for half an hour. It was clear that the troops were trained in anti-riot tactics and urban warfare—bare hands and hope were not enough.

Revolt in the heart of the city

The students leading the sit-in had to retreat before more fell victim to the raid. They needed more people, and knew how to get them; they called for the scattering crowd to regroup at Gwangju Train Station.

From there, close to four hundred students decided to march toward Province Hall Square, via the Intercity Bus Terminal and Catholic Center. They chanted, “End martial law!” “Free Kim Dae Jung!” “Chun Doo Hwan, you must be gone!” “Martial-law troops, go away!” Their slogans echoed throughout the city, bringing news of Kim Dae Jung’s arrest to those who hadn’t yet heard. Two slogans best summed up the military’s crackdown on the people’s aspirations for and anticipation of democracy: “Kim Dae Jung has been arrested!” and “Chun Doo Hwan subverted democracy!”

News of Kim’s arrest shook the city. Throughout modern Korean history, South Chölla Province had been a victim of institutionalized prejudice. Now, South Chölla’s favorite son, Kim Dae Jung, was imprisoned. Gwangju had hoped that he might reverse their region’s reputation as a national backwater.

Military trucks pulled up, circling the central district around Kümnam Avenue, and deployed their forces. Students marched to Province Hall unimpeded and, at 11:00 a.m., began a sit-in along the street in front of the Catholic Center. Their number had swelled to five hundred; traffic stood still. People flocked from the other parts of the city, but remained on the sidelines instead of joining the relatively small crowd. The students called out, encouraging them to take a stand, and though most of the spectators were depressed and angry, they dared not join the sit-in. Some passersby were students and did join, bringing the group up to some seven hundred people. Ten minutes later, the police moved in, wielding tear-gas grenades. The students scattered, only to be chased down and beaten. The police were brutal and swift, in contrast to the day before. They formed small attack clusters and rushed a student demonstrator, beating him severely before dumping him into a police van. Shocked witnesses jeered at the police, while running to escape clouds of tear gas. The demonstrators were outnumbered and easily dispersed. Students ran for side streets and regrouped, chanting slogans to rally the thinning crowd. Groups of thirty or forty attempted to take Kümnam Avenue, only to be beaten or arrested.





Kūmnam Avenue and Province Hall Square represented the symbolic and geographical heart of the city. Banks, government offices, the Y.M.C.A. and Y.W.C.A., the Catholic Center, and Chōnil Broadcasting Company were also in the area. Kūmnam Avenue was also a central thoroughfare, so shutting down the road would clog a major city artery. The confrontation at Province Hall Square quickly rippled outward. Since the revolt against Syngman Rhee, in 1960, Province Hall had been a center of struggle, much like London's Hyde Park. Demonstrators had waged many battles with the government to occupy the square, which was christened "Democracy Square," when students began to rally the week prior. They now tried to recapture this municipal symbol.

The protesters seemed to be losing, as even sympathetic spectators declined to join them. Isolated and scattered, the students were forced to retreat from Kūmnam Avenue, and more experienced demonstrators retreated to the side streets to avoid police. Along either side of the road, they made their way to Ch'ungjang Avenue, chanting, "Chun Doo Hwan is a traitor! People, join us!"

On east Kūmnam Avenue, the same thing was happening. Small groups of demonstrators scattered around the northeastern section of the Intercity Bus Terminal, Taehan Cinema, Citizen's Hall, and Chungang Elementary School took up the chant. Finally, some onlookers joined the students, their slogans echoing throughout the central district. Police cars cruised the side streets to break up small knots of protesters.

Soon, more than five hundred demonstrators took Ch'ungjang Avenue, and wove together with several hundred others marching from east Kūmnam Avenue. Both groups had thought themselves isolated, only to find comrades fighting on the opposite front. A huge cheer rose from the heart of the city. When the crowd advanced on "Citizens' Hall" from the Intercity Bus Terminal, a helicopter circled overhead, reporting on the students' movements. Riot police moved to intercept the column of protesters, who entered the terminal and implored travelers headed for other cities to spread word of the crackdown. The terminal was soon surrounded; canisters rained down on the building, filling the concourse with billowing smoke. Demonstrators tried to escape to Taein Market, threading through alleyways too narrow for police cars, and reorganized on the street between Citizens' Hall and Chōnnam Girl's High School.

A police chopper quickly spotted the students, and forces moved in. The students tried to retreat to Kyerim Cinema, but many were picked off and arrested, while others dispersed. The police pulled back, dragging the demonstrators away, but around twenty students remained behind. The helicopter continued to hover above the central district, searching for the main group of demonstrators.





Domino effect

Twenty students held a quick operational meeting at a nearby table-tennis parlor. Though small in number, they acted as a catalyst, like those at Ch'onnam University's main gate had earlier that day. They were determined to fight to the last, and set a time and place for their next street demonstration: Municipal Student Hall, 3:00 p.m.

Small clusters of demonstrators wandered throughout the city. The police substation on Ch'ungjang Avenue was torched. As morning turned into late afternoon, a calm set in, and stores downtown closed up.

Meanwhile, twenty military trucks gathered at Such'ang Elementary School, at 1:00 p.m., transporting paratroopers. Within an hour, they received their commands and formed combat cells, armed with M-16 rifles slung over their shoulders, military helmets with wire visors, and bayonets and weighted batons in either hand. By 2:00 p.m., soldiers had reached the Intercity Bus Terminal, and were ready to spread across the city.

Again, students came together in the central district and at the square in front of Gwangju Park. Those who'd decided to meet at the Municipal Student Hall found themselves blocked by troops, and detoured to the block between the Ch'ungjang Avenue police substation and T'aep'yong Cinema. By 3:00 p.m., nearly five hundred students had assembled. They threw rocks at the police, as did three hundred students in the park square.

Messengers ran through the central district, relaying the movements of riot police to demonstrators. Students, now numbering two thousand, quietly infiltrated the Municipal Student Hall block through a loose cordon. In front of the hall, about thirty policemen were taking a break next to their vehicle, which was equipped to spray tear gas. Students pelted them with rocks until they retreated, then destroyed their vehicle and equipment. One student wearing a big smile lifted a radio over his head and smashed it against the pavement, while others tried to torch the tear-gas container, set the seats on fire, and tip the vehicle on its side. They cheered the flaming wreck, and quickly left the scene.

Those who had been dispersed by police that morning developed a new tactic. A leader would march in front, followed by a flag bearer; behind them, dozens stood shoulder to shoulder chanting slogans to draw more people to their group. Should they be broken up, they could quickly regroup around a flag bearer, so all afternoon, small clusters fell into this pattern: they were gathered, scattered, then reassembled.

The shape of the protests changed in the afternoon. In the morning, the demonstrations had been small, drawing no more than five hundred, and were outmaneuvered by the troops. But as the afternoon wore on, the size of the protests increased dramatically, and the students became more organized and aggressive.





Fighting in the streets

Local citizens encouraged the ragged demonstrators by passing out snacks and drinks. Again and again, the crowds were broken up by batons and tear gas, but they regrouped and tried to take the streets. Workers and older residents mustered their courage to join in.

As some fifteen hundred people advanced toward the Gwangju River, they picked up small knots of fellow protesters. They clapped and cheered when they met five hundred students marching from Gwangju Park, and confidently advanced on the old city hall site, via a riverside road—but were driven back by tear gas. Demonstrators regrouped at the rear gate of Gwangju Park, moving toward the Provincial Education Committee Building. While temporarily subdued, nearly two thousand people battled the police, their numbers continuing to swell. It seemed impossible to subdue them. They threw stones at the committee building, to protest the state-controlled curriculum, and at the residence of the owner of Hwach'on Machinery, the most luxurious mansion in the city.

A group stormed a police substation and tore it down. One demonstrator lifted up a portrait of Choi Kyu Ha, the acting president.⁸ The crowd yelled, "He is a dummy, a puppet! Kill him!" His picture was thrown to the ground and stomped on, while police files and furniture were set on fire. The crowd was ecstatic, and rushed and destroyed another police substation—officers had already evacuated the premises. Two motorcycles, two bicycles, telephones, desks, and chairs were set on fire in the middle of street. Demonstrators circled the blaze and sang the national anthem. The crowd grew solemn.

Demonstrators and captives

The march continued on to Sansu-tong Junction in the east of the city. Suddenly, the demonstrators toward the back cried out: a busload of riot police had just turned the corner.

Protesters threw rocks at the bus and surrounded it, calling for the police to come out. But the cops were too frightened to move. The bus's anti-riot window screen was demolished, though a few officers covered the window with their shields. Students climbed onto the bus to remove the screen and break the windowpane; one by one, the police surrendered.

8. President Choi was a professional bureaucrat who built a career in diplomacy. He was Park Chung Hee's last prime minister and became acting president after Park's assassination. Choi was soon elected president by the same electoral college that rubberstamped Park's presidency. Choi's government soon found itself trapped between hardliners in the government, the military that wanted the continuation of old rule, and the people who want to have democracy. His government became increasingly impotent; neither the people nor the military supported Choi. He resigned as president after Chun Doo Hwan staged a coup and quashed the uprising in Gwangju.



Some forty-five police officers, deployed from a neighboring county, were quickly disarmed. Three were injured; all turned pale with fear. Demonstrators sent the three men to the hospital, after commandeering a taxi, and held the rest of the police hostage, to be exchanged for arrested students. The police were all in their mid-thirties. The students fed them some bread and water, and then surrounded them to march to Province Hall.

Military trucks packed with paratroopers drove past the group, perturbing some of the students. A few of the protesters argued for the release of the hostages; others left the scene, frightened of the military. The police were eventually let go, back into the streets.

“The Fascinating Vacations”

At 4:40 p.m., the police were released. Soon afterward, the troops—in cooperation with police—began to attack the demonstrators. They broke up the crowds and ran down individual students, beating them to the ground.

A cluster of troops converged on students, cracking open their heads, stomping on their backs, and kicking them in the face. The victims resembled piles of rags drenched in blood. These rebels were killed in different ways: at first, most were beaten to death; later, they were bayoneted or, at the climax of the insurgency, shot.

Paratroopers grabbed fallen students by the neck and dragged them into police vans, tossing one on top of another, like dead animals. Those left behind screamed in horror, and scattered.

Onlookers were shocked as the troops continued to pile the students—young and old, male and female; some kicking and screaming, most barely able to move—into the trucks. The soldiers kicked and swung their batons arbitrarily, cutting through the mass of bodies.

Paratroopers carried out five operations in Gwangju. The code name for the initial deployment was Fascinating Vacations; the final operation, which included killing the dissidents, was called Operation Loyalty. The Seventh Special Warfare Corps was prepared to act as Chun Doo Hwan’s private army,⁹ and acted with particular cruelty from the very beginning. These were the same soldiers who had crushed revolts in Pusan and Masan the year before.¹⁰

9. Chun Doo Hwan was one of the four South Korean army officers who transformed rudimentary paratrooper units into modern special warfare brigades in the early 1960s, after being trained in special and psychological warfare at Fort Bragg and Fort Benning in the U.S. He subsequently had a strong influence on the brigades thanks to his access to funding and personnel.

10. On October 17, 1979, a small student demonstration against Park’s Yushin rule in Korea’s second largest city, Pusan, spilled into the streets. The students were joined by thousands of citizens and workers. The revolt spread into the neighboring industrial city of Masan. Special Forces troops quashed the riots in a way similar to what they would do a year later in Gwangju, rounding up one thousand, five hundred and sixty-three people. Among the rioters were five hundred and ninety-nine students. Most of the rest were workers or members of the urban underclass. The massive resistance was a shock to the government since many citizens and workers, who had formerly stayed on the sidelines, joined the student demonstrations and eventually escalated the revolt. One week after the Pusan-Masan revolt, Park Chung Hee was assassinated.



The troops slipped by night onto the campuses of Chõnnam University, Chosun University, and Gwangju Teachers' College. As street demonstrations intensified, they moved to secure the central district around the Intercity Bus Terminal.

From the center, they moved outward in small packs, attacking anyone who looked like a student. They used batons on their victims' heads, and kicked them in the ribs; when demonstrators fought back, they deployed their bayonets. Within ten minutes of the elite troops' advance, the resistance collapsed. Soldiers searched every alleyway and side street; they made arrests, and beat and bound their captives, shoving them into trucks.

Inside the vehicles, radio operators stripped the protesters and gave them another beating. Screams echoed through side streets and alleyways, where one student dropped to his knees to beg for his life. An elderly man intervened, throwing himself on top of the young man and demanding that the soldiers let him go. A soldier stepped forward and struck the old man, shouting, "Get out of my way, you old bastard!" The old man fell, bleeding. When the student tried to pick up a stone, the soldier swung his baton and struck him in the back. He then dragged him by his legs into the street.

Another student ran into an old woman's house and hid in a closet. A group of soldiers entered and demanded that the woman turn the youth over. When she hesitated, a soldier brought his truncheon down on her head and shouted, "Bitch, I'll take care of you!" She lost consciousness. They found the student, beat him, and dragged him back outside.

On one street, soldiers grabbed a schoolgirl by her hair, then kicked and punched her, and ripped off her blouse and bra in public. She lost consciousness as the soldiers sneered, "You whore—you were in the protests! You're dead!"

Around the terminal, a squad stopped all the city buses and checked the passengers. Every young person was pulled off, and when some kids complained, half a dozen soldiers shouted, "We'll kill every bastard in Gwangju," and attacked them. When a female ticket-taker demurred, she too was beaten, and fell from the bus, unconscious. On other buses, soldiers beat drivers for missing their stop signals, even by few meters.

The soldiers' faces were flushed with excitement and rage. They tore through the city, moving on only after there was no one left to attack. In their brutal wake, witnesses in their fifties and older burst into tears. Crying was all they could do to remain sane.

One old man cried, "How did this happen? I saw many brutal Japanese cops during colonial times. I saw Communists during the Korean War. I have never seen cruelty like the killings today! Students are not criminals! These paratroopers are not our soldiers! They are devils in disguise!" A middle-age man was similarly

sinated by Kim Chae-gyu, his righthand man, the chief of the hated Korean Central Intelligence Agency.



disbelieving, declaring, “I’m a veteran of Vietnam! I killed Vietcong, but we were never this brutal.”¹¹ These kids were beaten to death; it would’ve been kinder to shoot them! We should kill all these bastards!”

The cobblestone streets ran red with blood, and the heart of the city was silenced. Forty students were killed or injured in Tongmyŏng-tong¹² alone during the uprising. Demonstrations had ceased when the assault began, at 5:00 p.m., but the soldiers felt no need to stop their violent spree. They searched local stores, tearooms, barbershops, offices, restaurants, billiard halls, and even people’s homes. They dragged the students they found back into the streets.

At 7:00 p.m., students and youth fought a squad of paratroopers in the streets near Gwangju High. The demonstrators had come prepared, arming themselves with planks, steel pipes, and kitchen knives. They fought hard, determined not to retreat.

Students slowly gained the upper hand, forcing the soldiers to fall back. They retreated to a five-way intersection in Sansu-tong, where the soldiers had some reinforcements.

Protesters dispersed and hid in residential areas. By night, paratroopers sealed off the neighborhood, nabbing anyone resembling a student.

The Martial Law Command of South Chŏlla Province announced that it would impose a 9:00 p.m. curfew and instructed all residents to stay indoors.

That night, the telephone wires buzzed with rumors of the crackdown. The city, horrified and lost in a fog of anger, did not sleep.

Revolt of the newsletters

During this period, underground and semi-legal labor groups initiated various education programs. After the student rallies of May 14 to 16, activists saw a new political opening. They finalized a plan on May 17 and implemented it the next morning. They discussed a wage strike at Honam Electronics that had occurred earlier that year.

Cloistered within Salesian High School, the J.O.C.,¹³ or Young Christian Workers, held a labor-education program for seventy women who worked for Honam Electronics and Samyang Silk. The lecturer was Yi Ch’ang-pok, the eminent labor activist.

11. Funded by the United States, South Korea sent combat troops to Vietnam. At the peak of the conflict in 1969, a total of fifty thousand army troops, marines, and paratroopers fought in the war, outnumbering the North Vietnamese regular army. The South Korean troops were famous for swift action and infamous for brutality (see Noam Chomsky, *Rethinking Camelot: JFK, the Vietnam War and U.S. Political Culture*, Boston: South End Press, 1993). In an attempt to demoralize protesters in Gwangju, the paratroopers seemed to resort to the same brutal methods they used when sweeping into South Vietnamese villages. According to Kang Kil-cho, a survivor of military captivity during the uprising, one paratrooper brandished a bayonet in front of his captives, bragging: “This is the bayonet I used to cut forty V.C. women’s breasts!” (*Han’guk Yŏksa Charyo Yŏn’guso* [Korea historical material research] ed., *O il p’al kŭ sam kwa ch’ŭgŭm ŭi kirok* [May 18: the record of life and death] [Seoul: P’ulpit, 1996], 396).

12. “Tong” refers to the smallest and basic unit of Korea’s municipal administration.

13. J.O.C. is a French acronym referring to *Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne*, or Young Christian Workers, an international organization founded by a Belgian priest, Joseph Cardijn, in 1912. The organization, itself integrated into the Catholic Church hierarchy by the mid-twentieth century, was not considered radical or even liberal internationally. However, in the 1970s and 1980s, it was common for South Korean labor activists and dissidents to seek sanctuary from religious groups.





At the Y.W.C.A., the radical poet Mun Pyŏng-nan spoke in front of ninety workers from Samyang Silk, Ilsin Textile, Chŏnnam Silk, and Chŏnnam Textile.¹⁴ They discussed the previous day's battles and the fight ahead.

During these convenings, workers talked about the demonstrations and tried to devise a response to the crackdown. They decided to act according to their conscience, as there were no organizations to mold their response or leaders to bring them together. They also feared a government crackdown on any collective action.

Leaflets appeared on the streets on the afternoon of May 18, spreading news of the military's brutality. They were produced by members of *Voice of the University*, Chŏnnam University's underground paper, and the theater activists in Clown, an arm of the Modern Culture Institute. Word of the crackdown reached the outskirts of the city, along with reassurances that some student leaders were remaining in place to lead the struggle for democracy. Four days later, these activists joined forces with various small pamphleteering groups to publish the first issue of *Militants' Bulletin*, a publication that played a pivotal role in propagandizing for the movement.

Government response

Shortly before the coup, in a three-hour interview with *Time*'s Tokyo bureau chief, Edwin M. Reingold, and correspondent S. Chang, Chun Doo Hwan said, "The geopolitical situation in Korea leaves us constantly confronted with the danger of invasion... We have to develop a political system compatible with our own conditions. It is imperative for us to build a democracy that will contribute to our own national development-whether it is Western-style or not." His first interview with foreign journalists was published in the May 26, 1980, issue of *Time*.

President Choi Kyu Ha, issued a statement at 4:30 p.m. on May 18. He imposed total martial law, warning that the unrest would shake the country to its foundations if allowed to continue.

General John Wickham, commander of the U.S.-R.O.K. Combined Force Command, arrived in the United States on May 14, to brief the White House on the situation in Seoul. He had planned to return to South Korea on May 27, but was back by May 17.

14. Workers at all four factories successfully formed independent trade unions in spite of state repression. They represented the cream of the Gwangju labor movement in 1980 and played an increasingly pivotal role throughout the uprising.



Chapter II: Open Rebellion

May 19—Day two of the uprising

From student demonstrations to people's uprising

That night, students and citizens hid in horror in their homes. As dawn broke on May 19, they headed into the streets, anxious to know what had happened overnight. Families with teenagers and college students worried themselves sick, and those with children missing were sleepless. Some parents sent their kids away, to escape the arbitrary brutality of the occupation. Others simply kept their children inside and waited.

Colleges and universities were shut down, but not elementary or secondary schools. Most stores in the central district were closed, while government offices, corporations, and factories were left open. Soldiers and the police sealed off Kūmnam Avenue at dawn. The streets were busy, and occupied by soldiers—a platoon was arrayed on every crowded corner. They stopped buses and cars, checking for young passengers' identification. All vehicles driving through the Kwangch'on Industrial Compound, the city's largest working-class district, were searched. In the markets, hawkers carrying their wares on their backs exchanged stories of what they had seen the day before.

The heart of the city felt tense with simmering anger and sorrow. Rumors flew. "They will kill Kim Dae Jung and slaughter everyone in Gwangju!" "The paratroopers are all Kyōngsang natives." "The soldiers have been ordered to wipe out South Chōlla."

News and speculation circulated by word of mouth to every part of the city, fueling the people's anger. Citizens began to gather along Kūmnam Avenue.

By 10:00 a.m., the crowd was nearly four thousand and growing. Most silently watched the soldiers set up cordons and checkpoints, united in the face of a crack-down they never expected and did not understand. Their anger and sense of unity increased with their numbers. Students were a minority; most were street vendors,



store clerks, and housewives. Police manned their loudspeakers and ordered the people to disperse. Army helicopters flying overhead made the same announcement. The crowd, cursing and shaking their fists at the aircraft, did not obey.

At 10:40 a.m., police used tear gas to attempt to break up the crowd. People escaped to the side streets and threw rocks at the police, making fitful progress in occupying Kūmnam Avenue. They became increasingly violent. Broken flowerpots and bricks flew through the air, and the street was barricaded with a guardrail and telephone boxes.

Students sang the national anthem, “Justice,” and “Our Wish Is Reunification” in an effort to rally the public. A nearby construction site provided steel pipes, small girders, and wooden planks to the demonstrators, a few of whom also had Molotov cocktails. By that afternoon, protesters made many more. Nōktu Bookstore became an impromptu firebomb factory, as did some residences.

After a thirty-minute battle, truckloads of paratroopers enveloped the demonstration. Like hungry beasts attacking prey, they threw themselves at the protesters.

Soldiers pushed through the crowd, swinging bayonets, rifle butts, and batons. Their camouflage uniforms quickly became soaked and sticky with blood.

People ran, leaving the injured on the streets. They tried to hide in houses, tearooms, offices, and stores, but waves of soldiers pulled them back outside.

Paratroopers kicked down doors to locate young men and women. Those who resisted arrest were stabbed in the thigh or the ribs. They made an example of their captives by stripping them in the middle of the street. They hog-tied them and made them crawl along streets littered with stones and broken bottles, or forced their heads to the ground between their own outstretched legs.

Women were stripped naked and kicked in the stomach and breasts; or grabbed by the hair, their heads slammed against a wall. The soldiers wiped their bloody hands on their uniforms and grinned. Their unconscious victims were piled into waiting trucks.

Even aboard these vehicles, soldiers beat their captives and made them sing songs. Kūmnam Avenue was a scene out of hell—eyewitnesses later said that they did not see paratroopers as fellow citizens. The name of the operation said it all: the soldiers were enjoying a “Fascinating Vacation.”

People holed up in their homes were instructed to “close the windows and curtains!” Armed vehicles sealed off the central district for the soldiers’ violent spree. The paratroopers seemed intent on annihilating the entire population of Gwangju.

Any student trying to leave the city by bus was arrested. Paratroopers searched these vehicles—and the drivers’ faces for the slightest sign of noncompliance, bloodying some in the process. Young passengers were pulled from taxis and buses.

At noon, students at Mudŭng Test Prep Center on Kūmnam Avenue, a cram school for college applicants, were caught witnessing the violence. A group of paratroopers stormed the school and forced some fifty students outside, where





they were beaten unconscious and trampled, then loaded onto a military truck.

In front of Such'ang Elementary School, paratroopers hung a young man upside down, and stripped and beat him with their batons. He screamed and lost consciousness as his face was unrecognizably battered.

Injured rebels left behind by fleeing protesters were picked up and driven to the hospital by sympathetic cab drivers. Soldiers apprehended some of these taxis, subjecting drivers and passengers to ruthless clubbing.

Martial law troops also used their batons on local policemen who tried to evacuate the injured. One major told the director of the provincial police, An Yöng-t'aek, "If police try to hide any injured rioter or student, they'll be treated like sympathizers!" Having seen what the soldiers were capable of, one riot cop pleaded with bystanders on Ch'ungjang Avenue: "Please go home. If the paratroopers see you, they'll kill you all!"

The fanatical violence carried out by the paratroopers overwhelmed the crowds. By afternoon, a dismal silence blanketed the downtown area. Traffic came to a halt on Kümnam Avenue, and riot police blocked the streets around Province Hall. Every business was closed. All that remained were soldiers on alert, and foreign correspondents and camera crews looking for news.

Fighting for survival

The vicious morning attack shocked the populace. The city had to be defended, and the troops defeated, no matter the cost.

The struggle entered a new phase on the afternoon of May 19. In the course of the uprising, the resistance had intensified, and was now facing its first turning point.

Ordinary citizens began to outnumber the student activists. The previous day, and throughout the morning, they had been on defense, but they were now galvanized and ready to use violence as necessary. Their trepidation and shock gave way to a unified hatred of government troops.

After a morning spent clearing the streets, the paratroopers moved toward Chosun University for lunch. On Kümnam Avenue, small squads of soldiers and riot police set up barricades. People who had hidden in alleys emerged onto the avenue, and the crowd grew.

The demonstrators, armed with stones and Molotov cocktails, pushed up against the police on both ends of the avenue. Middle-age men and women had now joined in. The soldiers held their ground, even as stones, firebombs, and tear-gas canisters flew over the police barricades. A cop holding a loudspeaker told the crowd to disperse.

One protester turned four cars from the parking lot of the Catholic Center into explosive devices. He started their engines, drenched the seats with gasoline, and





torched them—pushing them over the police barricade. Soldiers and police desperately fired tear gas, but the people roared and moved forward, inch by inch.

Several demonstrators took two petroleum drums from a nearby construction site, set them ablaze, and rolled them toward the police line. One drum burst, as if in sync with the jubilant crowd.

The police and soldiers realized that the tear gas was not working, and changed their tactics. They suddenly charged the crowd, wielding batons, truncheons, rifle butts, and bayonets—but still the crowd regrouped.

The rebels barricaded the streets with flowerboxes, telephone booths, and street signs. Women broke up cobblestones to make them easier to throw, and supplied them to men on the front line. A division of labor spontaneously took shape: workers at a tunnel construction site handed out steel pipes, rods, and other tools that could be used as weapons.

By 3:00 p.m., government forces appeared to run out of both strength and tear gas. They were conspicuously tense and formed a defensive line, armed with shields and clubs. Two military helicopters hovered overhead, raining leaflets and broadcasting a message intended to de-escalate the situation: “Citizens and students! Please do not lose your reason. Please disperse and go home. A small number of impure elements¹⁵ and rioting mobs are trying to incite violence. If you join or show them sympathy, the consequences for you and your family will be severe! We will not be responsible for what happens to you!”

People waved pipes and rods in the air, yelling, “Let’s kill them first! Let’s drop the choppers! Yes, we are a rioting mob, and so what? Kill us all, if you want to!”

By then, the insurrection packed both Kūmnam and Ch’ungjang avenues. The rebels also confronted government forces in front of the Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (M.B.C.).

Five hundred demonstrators howled and stormed the Catholic Center. Only a few paratroopers manned the building as the main contingent evacuated for lunch. From the roof, six armed paratroopers radioed developments to central command. Protesters raided the building, overwhelmed several of the guards, and used them as a human shield as they rushed to the roof.

The six paratroopers fought back with clubs and bayonets, wounding several insurgents, but were outnumbered and overcome by the group’s steel pipes and planks. One demonstrator lifted a recovered M-16 over his head, triumphant. The crowd below cheered and applauded. “We’ve won!” they shouted.

But this moment of hope was brief. At 3:30 p.m., paratroopers began to surround the crowd along Kwangnam Avenue. Armored vehicles mounted with .50-caliber machine guns plowed through, ready to run over anyone in their path. Demonstrators withdrew to the sidewalks, throwing rocks and swinging planks and pipes

15. “Impure elements” is a government euphemism for Communists or North Korean sympathizers.



all the while. Paratroopers responded murderously. They enacted revenge on the rebels who'd infiltrated the Catholic Center and taken a soldier hostage, beating them to death and crushing their faces beyond recognition. They threw their bodies to the street below.

Fighting to the death

With the help of construction workers, demonstrators fled to the future site of an underground shopping mall, and retreated to Gwangju Park. They fought as they ran; paratroopers picked off their rear flank and beat housewives for looking on from the sidewalk. An elderly man tried to intervene, only to have his skull smashed with a baton. The demonstrators suddenly turned back and rushed toward the soldiers, yelling, "Kill us all!"

This caught the outnumbered troops by surprise. They ran from the bank of the Gwangju River to Yangnim Bridge. One paratrooper was pelted by stones as he jumped into the river; others were beaten unconscious and flung off the bridge.

Conditions were similar at Yangdong Market. Two soldiers were trapped and clobbered by demonstrators, then thrown out a window. In front of the market, a woman fruit vendor was kicked in the stomach, when her stand blocked a soldier chasing after two protesters. When an elderly man leaned over to help her up, he, too, was beaten by—with a baton to his head. "You, bitch! You, bastard! You let them get away!" the soldier yelled. The retreating demonstrators suddenly turned back, burning with vengeance. They surrounded another soldier, and stoned and drowned the man just off Yangnim Bridge.

Other demonstrators retreated to the M.B.C. building through the rear gate of Chungang Elementary School, throwing Molotov cocktails as they ran. They ransacked the offices of the M.B.C.—widely perceived as a mouthpiece for the dictatorship—in the first of three charges against the site. They torched two broadcast vehicles and three cars from the company's car depot, as well as an electronics store run by the M.B.C. boss. The paratroopers fought back, repelling survivors toward Gwangju High, only to be massacred by another squad. But even as bodies fell, the uprising expanded.

The revolt spreads

By 4:30 p.m. on the 19th, demonstrations had spread to the outskirts of the city. A bloody resistance began in earnest.

The army called for reinforcements, and brought in some eighteen thousand police officers from eight precincts across the province. Although they succeeded in securing some key districts, tactical points, and intercity roads, they failed to put down the protests.





That afternoon, high school students launched demonstrations on their campuses. They had seen the previous days' brutality, and stories flew from classroom to classroom, and school to school. They felt unable to just sit by as their brothers and sisters, parents and grandparents, succumbed to the paratroopers' bayonets. At 4:00 p.m., the student bodies of Chönnam High, Taedong High, and Chungang Girls' High walked out of their classes and tried to take over the streets, but were blocked by soldiers at the school gate. Two high schools on Gwangju's outskirts conducted their own boycott and staged a sit-in.

After school, students in bands of ten or twenty joined the demonstrations, with teenage passion. High schoolers suffered most during the uprising,¹⁶ inspiring the people to act on their horror, and filling insurgents with sorrow.

The Education Committee of South Chölla Province imposed a one-day shutdown of thirty-seven high schools in Gwangju, on May 20.

At 4:30 p.m., Chön Ok-chu, a middle-age housewife, addressed Gwangju Train Station with a loudspeaker: "I am not a Communist or an instigator. I am just an innocent citizen of Gwangju. I cannot sit back when so many innocent students and citizens are being murdered. Let us all rise up! Save the students. Defeat the forces of martial law. Defend our city!"

Her speech drew thousands of people. They tried to occupy the street, but truckloads of paratroopers soon appeared—yet another bloodbath ensued. Demonstrators were pushed to the junction in front of the Intercity Bus Terminal.

The crowd flowed into the streets around the terminal, while a company of paratroopers gathered around a nearby fire station. One young man, a college student, made a speech about how the soldiers had killed his friend. He wept and called for revenge, then smashed a guardrail and a telephone box. Protesters erected a makeshift barricade and pushed it toward the soldiers, throwing rocks when they came in range.

Protesters surged forward, through thick tear gas, and used the barricade for cover. Suddenly, an armored vehicle ran over the barrier, but this, too, did not defeat the crowd, which was now more than three thousand strong. Ten truckloads of paratroopers stormed them from Kwangnam Avenue, and attacked the crowd in formation. They used tear gas to break up the mass, sending demonstrators running down side streets or up to the roof of the three-story terminal. They dragged fifteen demonstrators out of the building.

The captured insurgents were forced to bend their heads to the ground and keep their hands tied behind their backs. When one of them, a high school boy, suddenly got up and ran toward the crowd, there were cheers. Demonstrators protected the boy from the paratroopers.

But the protesters who'd hid inside the tunnel under construction were savagely

16. Even the South Korean government's official figure of one hundred and ninety-three deaths put the number of high-school casualties at more than forty.





killed. As they felt their way through the darkness, they were bayoneted by soldiers lunging at the quickly-moving shadows. The slaughter lasted only twenty minutes. The military also raided the terminal offices and apprehended female bus crews. Intercity service was diverted to the Gwangju Train Station plaza.

In one case, paratroopers ordered a cab driver to abandon a passenger with a gaping head wound and a broken arm. The back seat was smeared with blood. When the driver objected, saying, “But look, he’s dying and needs to go to the hospital,” a soldier smashed the windshield, yanked the driver out of his car, and stabbed him to death with their bayonets. Three other cab drivers were murdered the same way. Their deaths inspired an automobile demonstration on May 20, another turning point for the uprising.

At 5:10 p.m., demonstrators clashed with paratroopers on the streets in front of Gwangju High. The crowd disabled an armored car by destroying its periscope, then swarmed the vehicle. A lieutenant inside begged a *Dong A Il Bo* newspaper reporter to call for help, but the crowd refused to let the journalist drive away. Why had the media kept silent about the killings, they demanded. (The article, in the May 22 *Dong A Il Bo*, was censored.) Protesters tried to set the armored car on fire from below and above, using a sheaf of straw kindling. A paratrooper opened the hatch, waved away the flames, and poked his M-16 rifle out the door. He shot twice into the air, then shot at a student from Chosun High. The paratroopers escaped through the crowd, as demonstrators tried to move the boy to safety—but he died within minutes; the bullet had severed his neck.

Overhead, military choppers blared: “Citizens, go home and stay home. We cannot guarantee your life if you remain on the streets. Martial-law forces have tried their best to restore order.”

Nobody was listening. At 6:00 p.m., paratroopers evacuated Kūmnan Avenue and Gwangju Park to attempt to deal with the resistance on the city’s outskirts. In the meantime, thousands of people continued to protest and chant, “Crush Chun Doo Hwan!” “Save Gwangju!”

Tears of Gwangju

The sun set around 7:00 p.m. It began to drizzle, as though nature felt the city’s sorrow and anger. On Kūmnam Avenue, clouds of tear gas still hung in the air, and broken telephone boxes and bricks littered the ground. Police and soldiers sealed off the area between there and Province Hall.

Meanwhile, about a thousand people, including a large number of mechanics from the Intercity Bus Terminal, converged on a cargo truck with Kyōngsang Province license plates and called for its driver, a Kyōngsang native, to be lynched. Someone stepped forward to object: “The driver is innocent. Chun Doo Hwan is the





one who deserves to be killed, and so do those bastard paratroopers.” They drove the flaming truck to the army barricades and destroyed a billboard celebrating Choi Kyu Ha’s new government.

Hundreds of demonstrators spread throughout the city, taking up pickaxes, shovels, and planks to continue the protest beyond 9:00 p.m., in violation of the new curfew. At 9:30, some two hundred demonstrators hurled rocks at the Korean Broadcasting System (K.B.S.) building, but were driven off by soldiers from the Thirty-First Provincial Division. Rebels set fire to the police substation in the Im-tong district, provoking a house-by-house search throughout Im-tong and Yutong.

As it rained and grew dark, many people went home. They felt daunted by what they had seen, but resolved to fight the military, at risk of their own families’ safety.

People all over the city tuned in to their televisions, for news of the uprising. But the networks aired their usual soap operas and entertainment shows, as though nothing had happened. People felt betrayed; the next day, M.B.C. was burned to the ground.

By that afternoon, local hospitals and clinics were overwhelmed with patients. College students, youth, the elderly, housewives, and junior high and elementary-school students sought treatment for severe injuries.

The samizdat *Militants’ Bulletin* publicized the spreading violence and appealed for unity against the government. People were led to believe that underground leaders were guiding the uprising. Yun Sang-wŏn, who’d be killed in the final battle, on May 27, led the paper’s production and distribution. (He also ran Wildfire, a night school for workers at the Modern Culture Institute.) The previous day, after massive arrests, Yun had organized activists into a propaganda group,¹⁷ injecting order into a movement lacking direction.

The government did not issue a statement on Gwangju; nor was there any media coverage. That night, the martial-law command pulled the Seventh Special Warfare Brigade out of the city and deployed the Third and Eleventh instead. It also sent reinforcements for the remaining troops.

17. As a relatively new activist who was also deep underground, Yun Sang-wŏn evaded the massive arrests of May 17; the police did not consider him important. Yun was a graduate of Chŏnnam University who had joined the student movement instead of sitting for the foreign-service exam. He was briefly employed at a bank in Seoul, one of the better available jobs in the 1970s, but resigned to organize industrial workers. He eventually ran the Wildfire night school for workers at the Kwangch’ŏn Industrial Compound in Gwangju. His orientation toward the labor movement was somewhat unusual among the mainly nationalist and liberal-democratic thinkers who represented the dissident movement of the 1970s.



Mass uprising: May 20—Day three: the battle of Kŭmnam Avenue

The rain subsided by 9:00 a.m. People started to move downtown from the edges of the city, knowing full well that troops had sealed off the area and erected checkpoints at every junction and bridge. Everyone now realized that his or her life could end in the streets, but no one could imagine staying home.

Women wandered the streets, crying for their lost children. They wailed, pulled out their hair, and ripped at their clothes. Witnesses to this spectacle wiped away tears with clenched fists.

At 10:00 a.m., nearly one thousand people gathered at Taein Market. Housewives, high school students, and the elderly talked about the preceding day's slaughter. They discussed Kim An-bu, a housewife whose mutilated body was discovered on the street; her face had been kicked in. Then there was the college student who'd been stripped and dragged to his death by a military truck. Protesting Taein Market vendors were dispersed by paratroopers backed up by tanks. Along Kŭmnam Avenue, however, soldiers treated the crowds differently. Their M-16s were no longer fixed with bayonets, and they spoke politely, some even in Chŏlla dialect. One major introduced himself as hailing from Hwasun, a county near Gwangju.

But the paratroopers who secured the train station, bus terminal, and Sŏbang Junction were now armed with flamethrowers. The situation was volatile; the resistance was ready to fight. Two days earlier, the people had been defeated; one day earlier: sporadic fights and a partial victory. Thousands of copies of the *Militants' Bulletin* were distributed, as Yun Sang-wŏn continued his underground propaganda; official, censored newspapers were, in any case, unavailable in Gwangju. On May 20, reporters from the local paper refused publication to protest martial law.

At Sŏbang Junction, rebels clashed with paratroopers launching flames from sixty feet away. The protesters in front were incinerated and quickly taken away on military trucks. In Tongmyŏng-tong, three hundred junior high school boys threw rocks at martial-law troops, only to be repelled by tear gas. Sporadic clashes sprang up outside the city.

By 3:00 p.m., tens of thousands of people filled Kŭmnam Avenue. Students, clerical workers, wait staff, cooks, bar hostesses, housewives, and older people came together, moving forward, then back, finding their courage. They wielded primitive planks and kitchen knives, and held a sit-in led by undergraduates. At the intersection of Kŭmnam and Chungang avenues, they yelled, "Kill us all!" One student gave a speech about why they were fighting, and read a statement from the paper. They sang "Our Wish Is Reunification," "Justice," and "A Militant's Anthem." People quickly learned the lyrics and added their voices. The crowd wept while singing "Arirang," a popular folk tune.





A student led the people in chanting slogans, and, when some could not hear, a hat was passed around to collect money for an amplifier. In less than ten minutes, the rebels raised 400,000 won (\$900). Paratroopers moved to the front of the police line, and tried unsuccessfully to break up the crowd. Then they waded in, drawing blood with their batons. People fled, but in contrast to the day before, the paratroopers did not give chase.

The crowd was, however, too large to be driven off entirely. Demonstrators returned to the main stretch, yelling, “Come together, come together!” Using an amplifier powered by a car battery, a student hoisted onto his friends’ shoulders shouted: “Let’s all follow the souls who have already left us!” The buoyant crowd hurled a hurricane of stones and occupied six different roads to Province Hall.

As they barreled through the paratroopers’ cordons with metal drums and flowerboxes, they received water, toothpaste and wet towels from those who lived along the streets. They smeared toothpaste over their faces and covered their nose—to ease the sting of tear gas. They raided construction sites for anything that might be fashioned into a weapon.

On the roads to Province Hall were staggered blockades. Troops and a tank column took up position around the fountain of Province Hall Square.

There were few lulls in the battle.

At 5:50 p.m., a row of about five thousand demonstrators crushed the police barricade and sat in the middle of the road, chanting “Chun Doo Hwan, you must be gone,” and “Soldiers, return to the front!” They appointed representatives to relay their demands: “Police, give way! We will fight the paratroopers to the death! They see us as the enemy!” Many rebels were killed, but Province Hall remained in government hands.

Taxi troops

Around 7:00 p.m., hundreds of honking vehicles drove in formation from Mudŭng Stadium. Up front were eleven giant trucks, carrying young men who waved the national flag, and buses packed with youth armed with wooden planks. About two hundred taxicabs followed. The vehicles tore angrily through the streets.

The transport workers’ action showed the potential of the working class. It was a beautiful moment.

Earlier that day [May 20], at 2:00 p.m., ten cab drivers had gathered at the Gwangju Train Station, their usual hangout. They swapped outrage: “We are not criminals. We just carried our passengers! Why did the paratroopers kill those cabbies?” “If they keep killing us with their batons and bayonets, we will be forced to fight back!”

Other cab drivers listened and joined in. They decided to collectively protest the carnage they’d glimpsed from their windows, and began to spread word of their plan.





The cab drivers gathered in front of Mudŭng Stadium—one of them with a visible head wound. By 6:00 p.m., more than two hundred taxis were parked in front of the stadium. Wearing bandana-like towels around their heads, the drivers resolved to “storm the cordons!” and drove toward Kŭmnam Avenue.

When they arrived, they were greeted with cheers. The rebels cut a path for the taxis, using steel pipes, planks, and firebombs on the military cordon. The army responded with a massive tear-gas attack.

Tear-gas canisters shattered the taxis’ windshields and kept the nauseated drivers some seventy feet at bay. Paratroopers rushed in and beat more than twenty cabbies; those to the rear escaped.

The demonstrators lobbed stones, but the soldiers did much more damage, shattering two hundred windshields as they ran along the pavement. Cars crashed into one another, jamming the streets, and paratroopers smashed headlights to avoid being blinded. The taxicab convoy was pushed to the front of the crowd.

Kŭmnam Avenue was transformed into a war zone. By the end of a twenty-minute battle, people with head injuries and dislocated shoulders sought shelter between dozens of buses, trucks, and taxis. Two women in their twenties, wearing ticket-taker uniforms, cried while propping up a thirty-something bus driver who’d lost consciousness. The rebels shouted, “They’re critically wounded, call an ambulance!” (These details come from an article that was censored on May 22, 1980 by *Dong A Il Bo*.)

Block by block, the soldiers and demonstrators battled for territory. A city bus approached the military cordon, along a path cleared by the rebels, only to be sent hurtling into a tree by a shower of tear-gas canisters. Paratroopers pulled the driver and eight protesters out of the bus, most of whom were already unconscious.

Some five hundred demonstrators ran in to try and rescue their comrades. One middle-age housewife, equipped with wet towels and medicine, fell to her knees and screamed, “Look at this blood! Are you really my country’s army?”

From Ch’ungjang Avenue, the paratroopers’ rear cordon, a bus broke through and hit the fountain in Province Hall Square. Two protesters on the bus were beaten and arrested.

By 7:00 p.m., people filled the five-way junction in Sansu-tong, inspired by the taxis’ action. Two young men ran through the alleys, shouting, “People of Sansu-tong, let’s defeat the martial-law troops tonight! Come out with anything you can use as a weapon.” In less than thirty minutes, the crowd swelled to four or five hundred, and marched, chanting, to the station square.

Around 7:30 p.m., the demonstrators at Kŭmnam Avenue were joined by those who had occupied the Intercity Bus Terminal and commandeered ten buses. With five buses in front, they charged the cordon. “Free the detained students and citizens! Free Kim Dae Jung!” they said. The paratroopers retreated for three blocks, spraying tear gas and damming the road with traffic lights, guardrails, and flowerboxes. Angry protesters advanced around the troops at Province Hall Square.





Everyone had heard about the battle of Kŭmnam Avenue. People just outside the city marched downtown, on every road leading in. Among them, some fifty farmers in white *hanbok*, carrying rakes, hoes, and bamboo spears. The number of demonstrators on Kŭmnam Avenue swelled to over two hundred thousand.

When darkness fell, sirens echoed down the thoroughfare. Three fire trucks seized by demonstrators raced toward Province Hall.

Two thousand people followed, ready for a fight. They pushed aside wrecked cars to make way for the trucks. The troops had armored cars, and martial-law troops fired still more tear-gas canisters, but the demonstrators advanced, choking and coughing all the while.

The fire engines sprayed water at the troops. More demonstrators were killed.

Another group of demonstrators, convinced that a direct attack would be futile, occupied the M.B.C. building, and demanded news coverage of ongoing atrocities. They firebombed the premises, but M.B.C. employees put out the flames. Meanwhile, a different contingent destroyed K.B.S.'s broadcasting facilities and took it off the air.

At 9:00 p.m., tens of thousands of demonstrators drove the police and soldiers out of City Hall, and took control.

Now, most of the city, except for Province Hall and Gwangju Train Station, was rebel-held territory. People on the outskirts commandeered gasoline and made Molotov cocktails to firebomb police substations. Very few of these buildings were left standing the following morning.

Battle at the Labor Supervision Office

Meanwhile, the demonstrators commandeered ten Gwangju Express buses with the help of workers. One bus made it through the rain of tear-gas canisters to pierce the police line, killing four officers. Pae Yong-jun was at the wheel. While finishing his day's work, he'd heard about the demonstrations, filled his bus with demonstrators, and driven it to the front of the formation. By the time he reached the block between Province Hall and the Labor Supervision Office, the street was already a war zone. When a tear-gas canister launched by paratroopers detonated inside the bus, he jumped out. But the bus rolled on, and ran over a cop. Pae received a death sentence for this accident, but was later granted amnesty.

People hurled stones at the government's last line of defense, around Province Hall Square. They seized and torched every car they came across, and pushed them over the cordons. Their assault on the Labor Supervision Office at Ch'ungjang and Kŭmnam avenues was relentless. The entire city seemed to be aflame.

All kinds of vehicles were appropriated: buses, minibuses, jeeps, taxis, and trucks. Demonstrators were just thirty to sixty feet away from breaking through government lines. Dark smoke rose up from burning vehicles, and tear-gas canisters





arced across the battlefield, answered by the insurgents' hail of rocks.

Twenty vehicles burned in the five-way intersection near the Labor Supervision Office. Protesters targeted the Province Hall car depot across the street: they drove flaming cars toward the cordon, jumping out just a few feet from the line. When their timing was off, they crashed and faced beatings and arrest.

The battle was at a stalemate. At 11:00 p.m., exhausted demonstrators left the scene, replaced by those from the fringes of the city. The tide began to turn.

The police and army held Province Hall, the train station, and Chosun and Chŏnnam universities. Governor Chang Hyŏng-t'ae was locked out of his office and forced to flee to the first floor of Province Hall. He fled once more—to the martial-law command—and commanded the local fire station to prepare for any emergency. At 10:00, demonstrators rushed the barriers around Province Hall, and tried to enter through the rear fence. The police force was paralyzed and isolated. At 10:30, paratroopers and demonstrators fought in Tongmyŏng-tong. One man in his thirties, wearing fatigues, was found dead. Soldiers had beaten him after he succumbed to tear gas. As darkness fell, the injured demonstrators, students, cops, and soldiers mixed chaotically in Province Hall. Many officers collapsed from overwork.¹⁸

Battle at the train station and overnight struggle

It was 10:00 p.m. when explosions and flames filled the streets around heavily-guarded M.B.C. The third attack on the building began. The station had stopped broadcasting at 9:00 p.m., after thousands of angry demonstrators stormed the facility and demanded that a precise accounting of casualties be aired during the 8 o'clock news.

M.B.C. management evacuated the station, as did the soldiers of the Provincial Thirty-first Division, who wanted to avoid another battle. Rebels tried unsuccessfully to take over the broadcast, and instead set the building on fire. Neighboring residents had to flee. The conflagration threatened to consume the entire area, but rebels managed to contain the blaze. At 11:00 p.m., a tank tried to ram through the crowd around M.B.C. A child was crushed.

Two hours earlier, at 9:00 p.m., passengers on forty or fifty express buses had heard about the demonstrations. The vehicles they were riding convened at the exit of the Seoul-Gwangju Expressway, and proceeded downtown in a caravan. When they reached the Gwangju Train Station, paratroopers and police tried to stop them with tear gas, but the buses just drove through the clouds. Soldiers fired blanks from their rifles. By 11:00 p.m., some passengers arrived at the burning M.B.C. building; others fought the soldiers at the train station until 4:00 the next morning.

18. A censored article in *Dong A Il Bo*, May 22.



The battle at the train station was as intense as the battle at Kūmnam Avenue earlier that evening. Many demonstrators were killed. It was the decisive battle that drove martial-law forces out of the city. The government was desperate to defend the station, which symbolized public administration and was a key transportation hub—especially because the expressway was more vulnerable to attack by the rebels. The five-way junction was surrounded by row after row of barricades. The rebels attacked in waves.

One demonstrator commandeered two drums of gasoline from a gas station. He drove to the station in a truck carrying the flaming drums. This was at 10:30 p.m. As he approached the barricades he bailed from the burning truck, sixty feet away. The truck broke through and rammed the fountain in the station square; the drums exploded on impact.

Similar attacks took place all over the station. A number of vehicles burned around the fountain. The soldiers tried to disperse the crowd by firing blanks, but then loaded live ammunition. The rebels began to fall, some with rocks still in their hands.

The battle continued around Province Hall, the last building held by the government. By midnight, the demonstrators had the military surrounded and were gaining ground, inch by inch. When gunshots momentarily froze the crowd, tracer bullets fired by machine guns streaked brightly across the sky.

M-16 rifle fire shook the streets and took down the protesters in the front. A second volley tore through the crowd, stopping its advance. The rebels ducked and ran for cover in nearby buildings. Only the dead and wounded were left behind. The paratroopers did not stop shooting until the crowd began to thin. Demonstrators screamed, stomped their feet, and chanted, “They fired on us! Guns! Guns! We need guns! We need guns!”

Nobody could leave the scene of the massacre. Rebels stared at the seemingly impenetrable Province Hall, and vowed under their breath, “I’ll come back with guns.”

At 1:00 a.m., a throng of insurgents stormed the Gwangju Taxation Office behind Province Hall. People in the crowd shouted, “Taxation for the common good, not for buying weapons from the U.S. to kill our own people!” They destroyed the office and torched the buildings. The crowd cheered and sang South Korea’s national anthem.

Other buildings were attacked: the reserve army’s armory—from which carbines were seized—and the Labor Supervision Office. That night, Chōn Ch’un-sim, a heroine of the uprising, addressed the people through a loudspeaker. She was a thirty-two-year-old traditional-dance instructor who had joined the demonstration on a return visit home. Looking out at the crowd, she pleaded, “Riot police, don’t fire tear gas at us, join us! Let’s oust Chun Doo Hwan together. He’s out to annihilate all the men and women of Gwangju. We are barehanded but we will win. Do not retreat! Let us defend our city. The paratroopers are killing our brothers and



sisters. Let's go to Province Hall!" The demonstrators' morale soared. Later, the martial-law command arrested and tried to frame Chôn, claiming she was a North Korean agent. She was later exonerated.

At 2:00 a.m., Chôn boarded a bus, which was followed by another two thousand demonstrators. They drove past Ilsin Textile, Chônnam Textile, and Mudŭng Stadium to the Gwangju Train Station, picking people up along the way. Their arrival encouraged the rebels attacking the station. Another group of demonstrators traveled throughout the city, with further reinforcements. A thinned rebel force finally took the station, and drove off the soldiers, at 4:00 a.m. Protesters marched to the station, waving the national flag, and proclaiming, "We won! We defeated the paratroopers!"

Across from the train station, K.B.S. burned until its sprinkler system put out the fire. Like Province Hall, the station square was crammed with dozens of burning vehicles. Dawn broke over a quiet city; the night of flames and gunfire, shouts and screaming, was over. M.B.C., the Gwangju Taxation Office, Province Hall car depot, and sixteen police substations had been burned down. The Labor Supervision Office and K.B.S. also felt the heat.

The center of city was a war zone, littered with the burnt husks of automobiles, dented barricades, broken bricks, and firebomb shrapnel. There were puddles of blood along the streets, and dark smoke billowing from burning buildings.

At midnight, the long-distance telephone lines were disconnected. Reporters transmitted their articles through the pressroom of Seoul Police Headquarters, and relied on provincial police phones. The news coming out of Gwangju was heavily censored; express buses and trains could not enter the city.

Except for the *Militants' Bulletin* and a few underground leaflets, the press was nonexistent. Two television stations no longer broadcasted, and two local papers stopped publishing. Gwangju was an island and an information desert.

The military was in chaos. At 10:00 p.m., soldiers of the Provincial Thirty-first Division, made up of South Chōlla conscripts, began to leave the train station. When demonstrators stoned them, a voice rang out from a loudspeaker, "We are the Provincial Thirty-first Division. We are not harming you! We are just moving out! Please make way!"

In fact, the Thirty-first was among the first contingent to enforce martial law. But when the paratroopers were sent in and began killing demonstrators, the Provincial Division objected to the brutality. There were rumors that soldiers of the Thirty-first had fired on paratroopers parachuting onto their base—but only the parachute detail was accurate.

The military was at odds with itself. The martial-law commander of South Chōlla province, Yun Hŭng-jong, was fired during the uprising. Chōng Ung,¹⁹ commander

19. Chōng Ung's command was paralyzed during the uprising, as the paratroopers were under the direct command of coup organizers. In 1988, he testified at a National Assembly hearing on Gwangju.



of the Provincial Thirty-first Division, was also discharged in the middle of the uprising. He ran for a National Assembly seat as an independent in 1981. During the campaign he revealed that he had disobeyed the martial-law command's orders, and his popularity soared. But he was pressured by the military intelligence agency to drop out.

On the afternoon of May 20, the entire cabinet resigned. The interim Shin Hyon Hwack²⁰ cabinet ended after just five months and six days. There was still no official government comment on the unrest in Gwangju.

Armed uprising triumphant: May 21 — Day four: rebels seize vehicles

When dawn broke, the demonstrators located just two bodies left behind from the battle at the train station. The military had tried to remove every corpse, but missed two when it had to retreat. The rebels commandeered a military truck to pull a cart carrying the two bodies, each of them covered by a national flag. The bloodstained feet of the dead jutted out from beneath. One demonstrator shouted, "They hid our brothers' bodies. They said nobody died. But look at this, people! Our friends, our brothers have been killed!" The procession of these corpses sparked the crowd's ire. Violet-colored signs attached to the vehicles in the cortege read, "Chun Doo Hwan, free my children!" "Let's rip Chun Doo Hwan to pieces!"

At 9:00 a.m., more than one hundred thousand people packed Kŭmnam Avenue, many with thoughts of arming themselves after the previous night's battle. Demonstrators in front of the Catholic Center shouted, "Let's seize automobiles from Asia Motor. We need weapons! For this, we need transportation! Who's with us? Join us!" Some thirty people came out. They drove to the Asia Motor plant with a commandeered bus, and came upon three hundred and fifty buses, armored vehicles, and military trucks. (Asia Motor was a military contractor that built various types of automobiles.) Street demonstrations had shut down the plant, and workers had not reported for duty. When the protesters arrived, security guards tried to hold them back, and a company executive called for backup.

The group defeated the guards and ran to the vehicles. The seven rebels who knew how to drive each steered a bus back to Kŭmnam Avenue; the crowd cheered when the buses pulled in.

More protesters boarded the buses seized from Asia Motor, and went on to take twenty-two buses, three armored vehicles, thirty-three military trucks, and twenty civilian trucks. In the course of the uprising, demonstrators eventually

20. Chun Doo Hwan positioned his loyalist troops in the central government compound to force the resignation of the Shin Hyon Hwack cabinet. The end of Shin's cabinet marked the success of Chun's coup, which had laid the groundwork for seizing power in the military by removing softline generals on December 12, 1979. Choi Kyu Ha became a puppet of the military until Chun became president the next year.



commandeered all three hundred and fifty vehicles at the plant, including three armored personnel carriers. Many transport workers acted as drivers, and helped to mobilize residents from the outlying areas of Gwangju.

By then, Yun Sang-wŏn's underground propaganda group was keeping a brisk pace. Signs and banners appeared on automobiles; posters were plastered on the walls. Above the streets, the banners read, "Chun Doo Hwan subverted democracy!" "Tear butcher Chun to pieces!" "Free Kim Dae Jung!" "Revenge for the blood of Gwangju!" "Secure workers' rights!" "Free detained students and people!" "We defend Gwangju with our lives!"

The rebels drove through the outskirts of the city, where people were anxious to hear about the situation downtown. Many had worried when they heard gunshots and saw tracer rounds light up the night sky. When the demonstrators talked about their victory at the train station, people cheered and agreed to join. Those who couldn't squeeze into the vehicles marched downtown, as public transportation had been shut down since the afternoon of May 20. Demonstrators also appropriated parked cars, some of which were given over voluntarily.

The city was no longer under government control. The people of Gwangju were building a commune, but paid in blood for this new system. The morning of May 21 saw widespread collective action: meals were distributed to the rebels at all the busy intersections; street and market vendors, eyewitnesses to the government's brutality, spontaneously organized this allotment of food. Meanwhile, wealthier residents escaped, leaving their neighborhoods deserted.

Hundreds of housewives from poor backgrounds fed the insurgents on Kŭmnam Avenue. Nobody drank alcohol. These meals came to symbolize the Gwangju commune: those who provided them were excited to contribute to the cause; those who ate resolved to fight for democracy.

Negotiations break down

At 9:50 a.m., the rebels decided to send their representatives to negotiate with Governor Chang. At Province Hall, Kim Pŏm-t'ae, a twenty-seven-year-old Chosun University student, and Chŏn Ch'un-sim, age thirty-one, demanded that Chang provide:

1. An apology from the government for the bloodshed.
2. Accurate publication of fatalities and casualties.
3. A complete withdrawal of martial-law forces by noon.
4. Negotiations between citizen representatives and the regional martial-law commander.

No reply from the governor followed. Rebels fanned out, driving to neighboring





counties and villages. They traveled to two cities and eleven counties, but could not access the expressway north to Seoul. Near the on-ramp stood the heavily secured Gwangju Penitentiary, which held one hundred and seventy political prisoners and two thousand six-hundred other inmates. The army was known to shoot at any vehicle that drove into range.

One rebel bus went to Naju County. Upon arrival, demonstrators climbed onto the roof and chanted. One man stammered through an angry, sorrowful speech. Young men from the county joined them, and they all headed for the city of Mokp'o.

At 10:30 a.m., Governor Chang telephoned the central government from Province Hall to report, "We are now retreating." The line was soon disconnected.

Military choppers began transporting the corpses of demonstrators, antiriot gear, ammunition, and confidential documents from Province Hall to Chosun and Chönnam universities. Many demonstrators believed that the government forces were preparing to withdraw.

Just as on the day before, five separate underground leaflets circulated throughout the city, urging the whole country to rise up in rebellion. But they now argued that the movement should be organized systematically, too. The *Militants' Bulletin* proposed that Chönnam students gather at the Intercity Terminal, Chosun students at Kyörim Elementary School, Polytechnic College students at M.B.C., high school students at Sansu-tong's five-way junction, and other people in their own districts—and then march together to Province Hall. That morning, the sole slogan was, "To Province Hall!"

At 11:00 a.m., Ku Yong-sang, the mayor of the city, was forced to make a speech at the train station, though he was soon shouted down. He ran away, fearing for his life. At 11:15, insurgents raided the prosecution office and the court, then the factories of Lotte Pastry and Coca-Cola to provide bread and drinks to the crowds.

At 11:25, vehicles returned to the city, packed with volunteers from Naju County. Every street leading to Province Hall was now a combat zone, and the military's last cordons were threatened: protesters were angry that their negotiations with the provincial administration had failed. The paratroopers were running out of tear gas. Suddenly, gunshots rang out, and several demonstrators fell. The crowd parted, emptying Kümnam Avenue, while unarmed rebels pressed themselves against building walls and ran to the side streets. A peaceful solution no longer seemed possible; the people's struggle had turned into a civil war.

The second battle of Kümnam Avenue

Authorities knew full well that the brewing catastrophe had made compromise impossible. News of the shooting quickly reached the still-jubilant demonstrators touring the city's outskirts. They tried to acquire firearms, then hurried back to town.

Shocked by the shootings, most demonstrators on Kümnam Avenue hid in





alleyways. But some youth began to take to the sidewalks. In front of the Labor Supervision Office, two hundred hot-blooded high school students threw themselves against the cordons, hurling stones. The military opened fire, and hit seven or eight students in the head and chest. Others screamed, “How could they shoot these kids? Don’t they have their own brothers? We must not let them die! Let us all be killed!”

Those who ran to help the fallen students were themselves shot, one by one. Snipers continued firing blank rounds to scare the demonstrators, but the rebels felt anger most of all. A group of twenty innocent people were shot dead in the street. After ten minutes of gunfire, there was a brief pause; the blood seeping from the bodies reflected sunlight. Paratroopers dragged the corpses by their legs behind the cordons, and rebels stomped their feet, shouting, “Don’t let those bastards take the bodies. We should take our dead brothers out of the street!” A few brave people pulled the critically injured to safety, then drove them to the hospital in a commandeered jeep. One high school student was shot in the thigh, his pants soaked with blood and his face pale. Another’s white shirt, part of his school uniform, was soaked red; his punctured bowels protruded from his wounds and revealed the barley porridge he’d eaten for breakfast. Those gathered around him burst into tears.

At 1:05 p.m., a young man started the engine of a truck parked in front of the Y.M.C.A. and drove it toward the barricades. The military opened fire, shattering the windshield, and the bloodied driver tried unsuccessfully to reverse the vehicle. The dying man murmured: “Kill Chun Doo Hwan! Long live Gwangju!” Two other protesters in the back of the truck were also killed, their hands clutched around rocks.

The paratroopers shot indiscriminately into the crowd, killing dozens. One middle-aged man was hit in the shoulder and thigh but held one arm up until the end. A child whose knee was blown out managed to drag himself away under M-16 fire. When the soldiers finally stopped shooting, an eerie silence fell, broken only by the groans of the injured. Unlike the night before, everyone on the street was now a target.

“Long live Gwangju!”

One of the stolen armored personnel carriers drove down Kŭmnam Avenue to ram the cordons. A young demonstrator wearing a bandanna and waving the national flag stood on top and elicited cheers. When the vehicle reached the Tourist Hotel, it sped up and turned to Province Hall. As it bore down on the fountain, snipers located on the fourth floor of Province Hall shot the boy in the head. The armored vehicle, now carrying his corpse, headed for the Labor Supervision Office.

There, another demonstrator jumped on top of a military truck and shouted, “People, the time to stand back and watch is over. We need a suicide squad to defeat them! I need ten people to join me. Are you ready to fight to the death? Join me!”





Let's take all the oil drums from a gas station. We'll torch them on top of this truck and ram Province Hall!" Several dozen rebels stepped forward. "We don't need this many people," the young man continued. "We just need those who are really ready to die! I'll drive the truck myself, but who will die with me?"

Nobody stepped back. The volunteers hopped on, and the truck headed for a gas station. Rebels drove six or seven unarmed military trucks down Kümnam Avenue. An M-60 machine gun opened fire from the roof of Province Hall, killing all the passengers. The runaway trucks crashed into the fountain, the fence, and the main gate of Province Hall.

Still, many other commandeered cars drove to and from the hall to transport the injured and dead to hospitals. Every hospital and clinic was overwhelmed, and many patients died due to a lack of staff and medication. Doctors and nurses tried their best to save as many lives as possible throughout the uprising.²¹

Women and children flocked to the hospitals to donate blood, as did sex workers. At first, doctors rejected the latter, but later relented on account of the desperate need. The sex workers cried, "Our blood is clean, too!"

Meanwhile, a military helicopter appeared over Kümnam Avenue. It descended and fired machine-gun fire into the crowd at the M.B.C. building. Those roaming the streets near Kümnam Avenue hit the ground or fled into nearby buildings. The massive killing continued.

Between 2:00 and 3:00 p.m., some two hundred demonstrators began a sit-in at Chungang Avenue, six hundred and sixty feet away from Kümnam Avenue. Even those sitting were shot. One man slumped over and was pulled away by protesters ducking into an underground path being built nearby.

A commandeered tear-gas truck drove into the street, carrying thirty carbine rifles—weapons stolen by one of the first group of rebels to leave the city after the shooting. They had raided a military-reserve armory.²²

The thirty rifles and one clip each of ammunition were distributed to the rebels taking cover in the underground path. They became the first militia of the resistance.

Though they were few in number and armed with old-fashioned weapons, they entrenched themselves in nearby buildings, and fired on Province Hall through broken windows. The gun battle intensified on Kümnam Avenue. Now, nobody

21. From a *Gwangju Maeil Daily* interview with An Song-nae, who was a nurse at Gwangju Christian Hospital during the uprising: "Many of the patients who had been stabbed or shot resisted treatment, saying, 'Go and treat the more critically injured first.' ... Even patients whose faces were pale due to internal bleeding gave their turns to other bleeding patients. The doctors and nurses did not sleep for seven days ... We gathered in a prayer room every morning and prayed silently. When someone began to cry, the whole room was quickly cloaked in tears. When the military retook the city, the doctors and nurses had to wage another struggle over their patients ... We gritted our teeth in anger when the soldiers transferred critically injured patients to military hospitals over our protests. Their sole concern was to paint the rebellion as the action of rioting mobs, not to treat the injured ... I recall what I said about the patients to Cardinal Kim Soo Hwan after the uprising: 'Though they were just nameless workers in life, what they showed in face of death was heroic and impressive.'" (*Gwangju Maeil Task Force, Chôngsa O Il P'al* [May 18, an authentic history], vol. 1 [Seoul: Sahoe P'yŏngnon, 1995], (342-46.)

22. In South Korea, in the 1970s, every young man was conscripted for three years of military service. Afterward, they were automatically organized into a reserve army unit by workplace or district. They kept their uniforms at home or at work. The reserve army companies, stationed in large workplaces or districts, had their own armories. The reserve army company commanders were selected from a pool of retired sergeants or noncommissioned officers.



charged the cordons unarmed. Rebel guns decreased the number of fatalities, but demonstrators continued to fall. Many protesters avoided the battle, but the crowd remained in the vicinity, watching anxiously.

Emergence of the militia

By 2:00 p.m., most of the seized vehicles had left the city to scout for firearms. In Hwasun, a coal mining county about ten miles south of Gwangju, locals welcomed the demonstrators. They all headed for the pits. Miners hungry for news asked countless questions and burst into tears at the rebels' response. The miners gave them dynamite and detonators from an explosives-storage facility, and some followed them back to Gwangju. On their way to the city, they raided a police substation and took a few guns.

Meanwhile, women textile workers packed seven buses for the city of Naju. That police station was nearly empty, as most of the cops had already been mobilized and sent to Gwangju. The skeleton crew on site surrendered without violence, as insurgents seized ninety-four carbine rifles, twenty-five handguns, and one hundred and fifty-one pellet guns. They then stormed a police substation, seizing two hundred M-1 rifles, five hundred carbines, and fifty thousand rounds of ammunition. At 3:00 p.m., they stole two boxes of bullets from a police substation in Yöngsanp'o County, and returned to Gwangju by 4:00.

The situation was similar in Changsöng, Yönggwang, and Tamyang counties. The captured firearms were soon distributed to demonstrators downtown. Rebels also seized T.N.T. and detonators from the Gwangju Distribution Office of the Korea Explosive Company.

By 3:20 p.m., hundreds of armed demonstrators had arrived at Province Hall and engaged the troops. The rebels were nicknamed *Simin-gun*, the "citizen army." Downtown, paratroopers assembled around Province Hall, the Tourist Hotel, and the Chönil Building. Militia members hit the ground and fired from the side streets. The skirmish continued until 5:30 p.m., when the paratroopers abandoned Province Hall. Unarmed rebels hid on the side streets. When an armed rebel fell to the ground, another took his place and his rifle. But the poorly organized militia was no match for the government's elite special-warfare troops, nor could their World War II-era weapons keep pace. The militia seized significant loads of firearms and ammunition from reserve army armories in the Honam Electric and Chönnam Textile plants.

Casualties mounted around the four cordons of Province Hall. The dead and wounded were abandoned on the pavement, under a rain of bullets.

Around 4:00 p.m., automobiles packed with armed militia members flocked to Gwangju Park. Some demonstrators had captured vehicles with loudspeakers—military jeeps, patrol cars, and city-owned broadcast trucks—and drove them throughout the city, urging people with access to vehicles to gather at Gwangju Park or Yu-tong





Junction, on the opposite end of Province Hall. A combat leadership began to form.

By 5:00 p.m., hundreds of automobiles and thousands of demonstrators converged on the park. One middle-age commander in the reserves stood up and began to shout, with a gun pointed at his own head. "People, we can't defeat the martial law troops this way," he said, "Please obey my commands! Let's form combat cells!"

The man commanded demonstrators to get off the automobiles, and lined them up in rows and columns of ten. More armed vehicles entered the park, filled with men in their late teens and early twenties, but also in their thirties and forties; pre-adolescents carried firearms. The militia comprised workers from construction sites, small workshops, and shoeshine men; and ragpickers, street vendors, waiters, and menial workers. Middle-age men wearing reserve army uniforms had joined to avenge the deaths of family members.

The leader commanded the young boys to pass their weapons on to the reservists—but some boys resisted. Most of the young rebels had no experience with rifles or grenades.

Some one hundred and twenty people were divided into cells, and each leader instructed his members on their firearms and grenades. In a dangerous imitation of war movies, junior high schoolers safety-pinned grenades to their shirts. The rebels suffered from isolation and exclusion, and listened to the radio for news. There was a shortage of ammunition—one cell of twenty people received a total of only eight clips of ammunition. Their leader said, "We need to wage the final fight tonight. I will command each cell to defend one of seven paths to the city: the roads leading to Hwasun County, Mokp'o, the expressway, the Combined Arms Command (C.A.C.), and the Provincial Thirty-first Division, and the penitentiary. "We must prepare for the worst. They will send in the tanks. Fight to the end!" The cells went to their stations by car or on foot.

A similar scene unfolded at Yu-tong Junction. Dozens of vehicles roamed around. Using a loudspeaker on a patrol car, another middle-age reservist commanded the armed vehicles to gather in front of Asea Cinema. Armed demonstrators were in the middle of the intersection; around Province Hall, gunfire continued. Thousands looked on as the reservist distributed ammunition to the insurgents. Two hundred armed militia members were divided into cells of ten or twenty. The man said, "If there is anyone among you who is afraid of death, leave now before it is too late. We must defeat the brutal paratroopers. Not one of you can run away or retreat! We could all die. The enemy is in the middle of a hard-fought battle with the ally. Informants have told us that the troops from the C.A.C. will invade the city tonight. I believe the Thirty-first Division will also invade tonight. We have three L.M.G. machine guns. Let's install one on the roof of Asea Cinema and the other two behind barricades on the sidewalks. And residents in this area, please stay indoors when it gets dark. Have a quick supper! Turn off all the lights!" He had much-needed military knowledge and was prepared to use it.

The militia members deployed on the road to Hwasun were joined by several other



armed insurgents to help block the highway. Among them were more than ten high school and college students; the rest were office and store clerks, or street vendors. Two or three people secured a three-story building to watch over the street. Only the cell leader could give orders to shoot.

Some forty or fifty armed rebels occupied the streets around Gwangju Christian Hospital and Speer Girls' High. A reservist taught an impromptu class on firearms and grenades in the school's auditorium. Militia members tried unsuccessfully to blow up the Chõnil Building, one of the city's tallest structures, which the paratroopers reportedly used as a watchtower. (The rebels had dynamite, but no detonators.)

The twenty men deployed on the road to Mokp'o stationed themselves around the railroad and expressway. Nearby residents fed them dinner.

Occupation of Province Hall

Meanwhile, the operation to drive paratroopers out of the city was underway by 5:00 p.m. Eleven militia members installed two L.M.G. machine guns on the roof of the twelve-story Chõnnam University Hospital.

Province Hall, headquarters of the martial-law forces' makeshift command, was now within the rebels' firing range. Military choppers hovered. The hospital was less than one thousand feet away from the four-story hall. The militia could attack first, with better weapons and from a superior position. Their L.M.G.s began to roar.²³ A hail of bullets hit the impregnable Province Hall, but the paratroopers could not hold out much longer, as it would soon be dark. An intelligence report informed the paratroopers that the militia was ready to fight to the death, and was now supervised by reservists with military knowledge. A fire truck filled with gasoline drove to the barrier, under militia cover. A rebel victory seemed imminent.

At 5:30 p.m., government forces signaled a retreat. An armored vehicle drove back and forth, firing its machine guns randomly to open an escape route. Those on the street fell under sheets of bullets. A few people were struck while sitting in their homes next to Province Hall. The militia defending the southwest streets was on full alert. Soon, dozens of military trucks drove past, firing on anything in their path, and drawing return fire from the militia. Ten minutes later, a child called out into the street, "Stop shooting, uncles!

23. There are conflicting accounts as to whether the rebels actually fired the machine guns on the roof of the hospital. Now it seems certain that the militia did not fire the L.M.G.s. In his book *Sibilkan ui ch'wijae such' op* (*A reporter's diary of ten days*), Kim Yõng-t'aek, who covered the uprising for Korea's prestigious *Dong A Il Bo*, later wrote: "There were several young men-who appeared to be students-working on something on the top of the twelve-story Chõnnam University Hospital. ... For a while they were busy at work, then the barrels of two L.M.G.s came into view ... The installation of these two machine guns was of great importance. The militia, now armed with automatic weapons, was threatening the soldiers on the roof of Province Hall ... However, the students would not attack soldiers [with machine guns] at the price of the innocent citizens... The machine guns were never fired. Indeed they [the students] were wise ... (Before they finally decided to withdraw from the city, the military considered sending in a strike team to remove the L.M.G.s[from the hospital].)" (Quoted in *O ii p' al ku sam kwa ch'ugum ui kirok* [May 18: the record of life and death] [Seoul: P'ulpit, 1996],(452.) The fact that not a single shot was fired from the hospital roof shows that workers, students, and citizens in Gwangju took up arms in self-defense. They turned to armed struggle because they did not see an alternative. Even with automatic weapons, they showed a great deal of restraint by limiting their use of violence.



The soldiers ran away.” No militia members had been killed, but several civilians had.

The paratroopers retreated toward Chosun University and escaped the city by night. Senior police officials issued a hasty order: “The situation is urgent. Escape at your discretion!” Some jumped over the rear wall of Province Hall, and the few paratroopers at Chönnam and Chosun universities attempted to retreat. The guns firing from Province Hall were quiet now. Two prongs of the militia approached from opposite direction and stormed the Hall with bullets, though it was already deserted. By 8:00 p.m. on May 21, the rebels had finally driven the paratroopers out of the city.

On the fourth day of the uprising, the militia appeared victorious. But young men had vanished into flames atop burning trucks, high school boys had fought machine guns with rocks, and so many had fallen. People remembered the song “Arirang,” which echoed down Kümnam Avenue.

“We won! We won!” Cheers were heard throughout the city, and the militia now turned its attention to defending Gwangju.

Province Hall was a mess. As the paratroopers rushed out, they left antiriot gear, batons, and walkie-talkies scattered about. The scene was similar at Chönnam and Chosun universities; the military had left behind its equipment.

Gunshots could be heard as dusk turned to night. The militia chased the paratroopers into the mountains behind Chosun University. The paratroopers’ first assembly point was Chüngsim Buddhist Temple, which stood on a nearby mountain. In Gwangju, every light was extinguished. Flame tracers launched by machine guns lit up the sky on the edge of town, and militia vehicles shored up the deserted streets. A militia jeep delivered a password throughout the city’s outskirts: that night, “cigarette and smoke.” Residents there also took up arms to defend their districts.

The martial-law command decided to contain Gwangju by sealing off the seven roads to the city. The Twentieth Infantry Division was mobilized. In the dark, it accidentally attacked the retreating paratroopers, killing at least thirty with friendly fire.

Starting at 9:00 that night, every train to Gwangju was stopped at Changsong station; the tunnel was blocked by government troops. But people could still freely move in and out of the city by the next morning.

On May 21, two hundred Americans in Gwangju were evacuated to Seoul by airplane from a nearby U.S. air base in Songjöng-ri. Between 9:00 p.m. and 12:00 a.m., all U.S. aircraft in Songjöng-ri were redeployed to other U.S. air bases in Osan and Kunsan.

The militia captured two thousand two hundred and forty carbine rifles, one thousand two hundred and twenty-five M-1 rifles, twelve .38 revolvers, forty-five military pistols, two L.M.G. machine guns, forty-six thousand four hundred rounds of ammunition, dozens of M-60 machine guns, four boxes of T.N.T., many hand grenades, one hundred detonators, five armored vehicles, and numerous military vehicles, radios, and gas masks.

The May 21 issue of *Dong A Il Bo* ran an article with the headline, “Measures against Gwangju Now Considered.” It relayed the official statement of martial-law command—that the unrest in Gwangju that had begun on May 18 had yet to be settled.



The government claimed that, as of 7:00 a.m. on May 21, five soldiers and one civilian were dead, and thirty soldiers and police officers were injured. But the number of people killed the night of May 20 could not be confirmed, and many were dying in hospitals across the city. The martial-law command accused Kim Dae Jung of engineering the student demonstrations.

Yun Sang-wŏn still led the printing of a daily paper. On the morning of May 21, these underground activists, who would later form the leadership of the uprising, discussed what action to take. Amid gunfire, they gathered again at 4:00 p.m., including Chŏng Sang-yŏng, Yi Yang-hyŏn, Yun Kang-ok, Chŏng Hae-jik, and two others. They concluded that, “the rebellion barely exhibited the characteristics of a political movement. This movement cannot go further as is, and will only be destroyed. Any organization that attempts to lead the movement will be self-constrained.” Because the group could not articulate next steps, the activists decided to escape the city. The uprising was hamstrung by “self-imposed limits.”

The government had decided to retreat for four reasons. First, more repression would only lead to more resistance, and unacceptable numbers of casualties on both sides. Second, the city needed to be cut off from the rest of the country to prevent the uprising from spreading. Third, the unrest in neighboring towns still lacked mass support and could be put down first. Finally, for any crackdown to be successful, the insurgents needed to be demoralized. Machinations, provocations, and counter-operations could cool the fever of revolt.

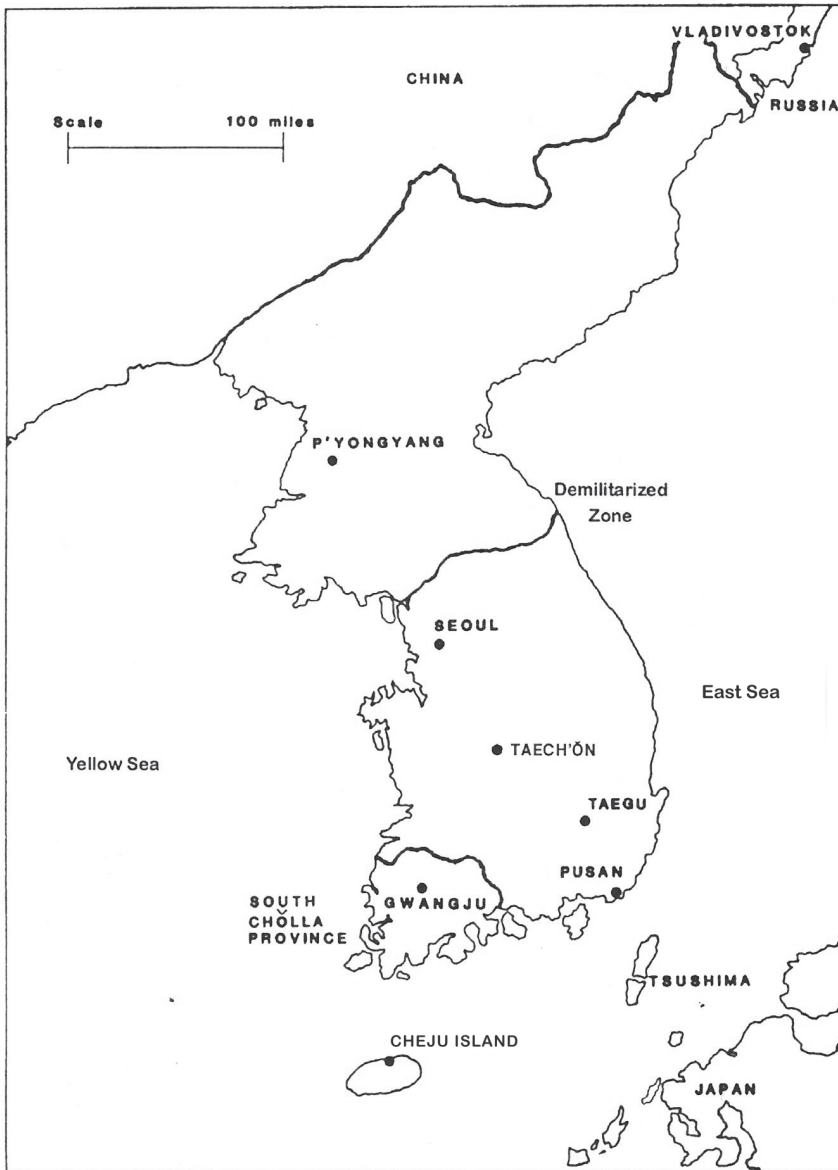
The state also took advantage of Korean biases against South Chŏlla Province. To stem the rebellion’s spread to Seoul and other cities, the government portrayed the militia and other insurgents as a rioting mob. Meanwhile, government forces fortified their positions on the perimeter of Gwangju. They also sent in *agents provocateur* to fuel division.





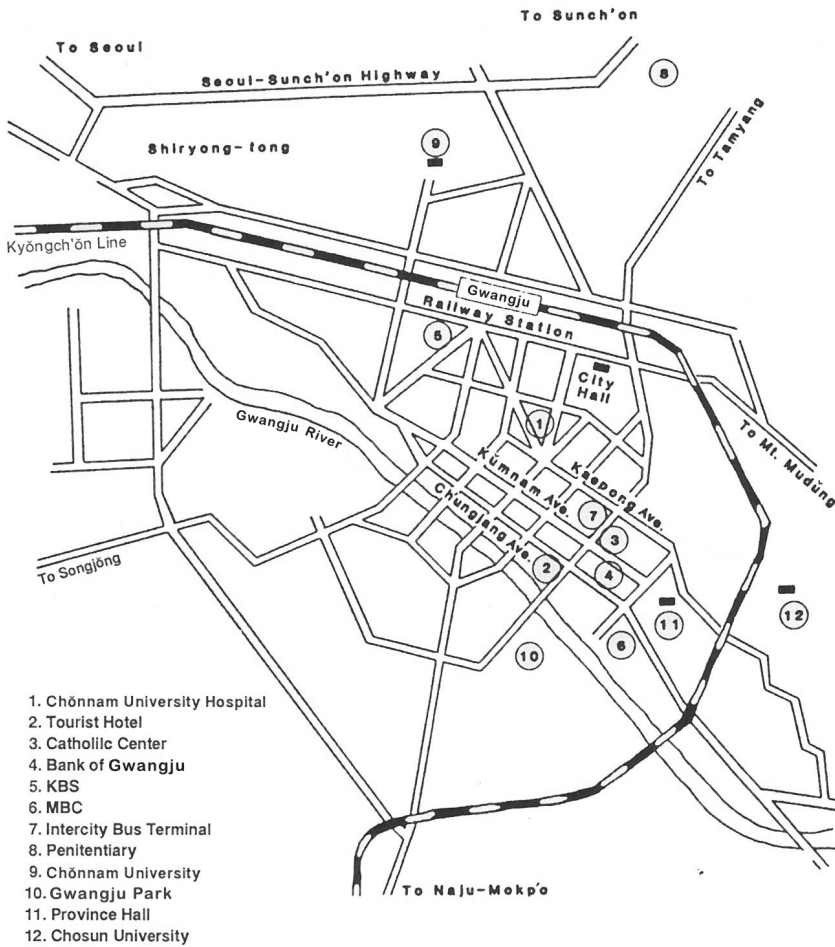


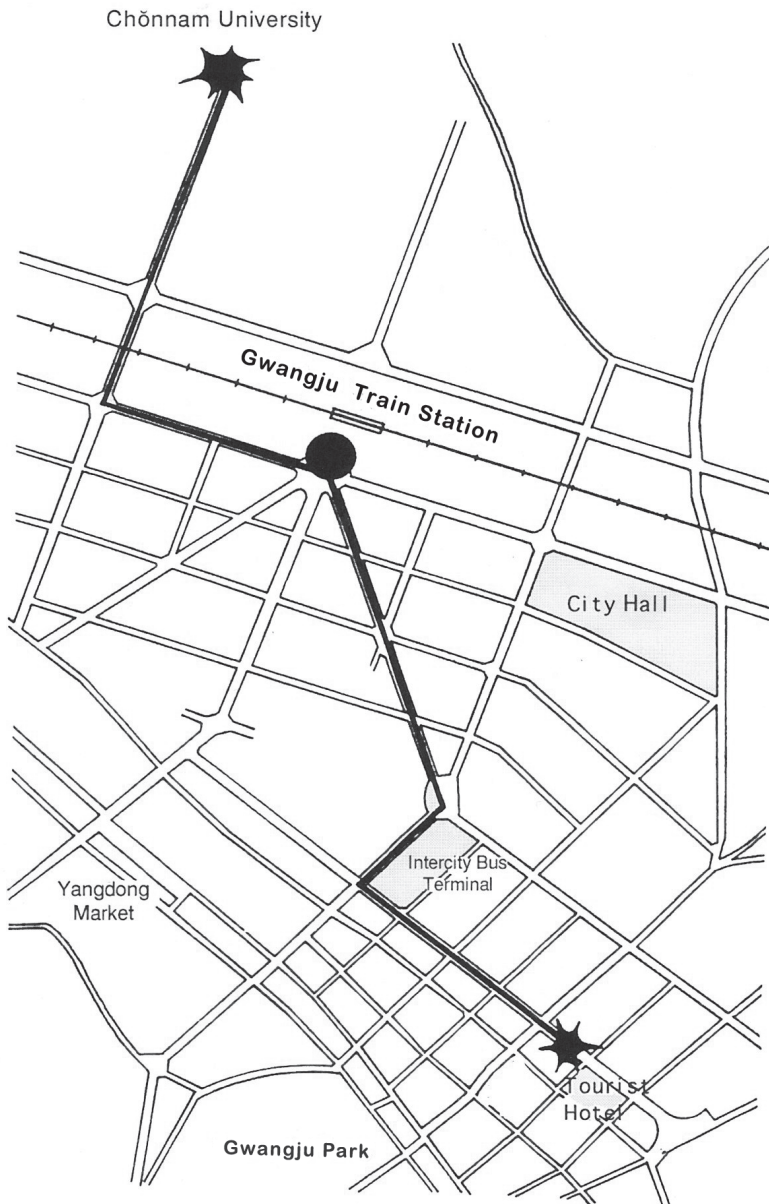
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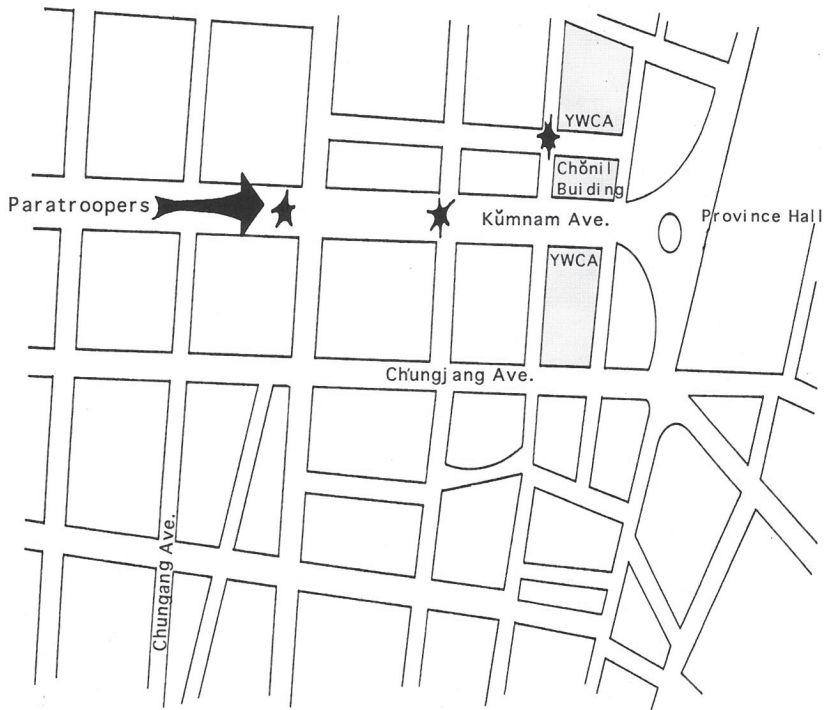




1. Student protesters' march toward downtown from Chönnam University (10:30 p.m. May 18).

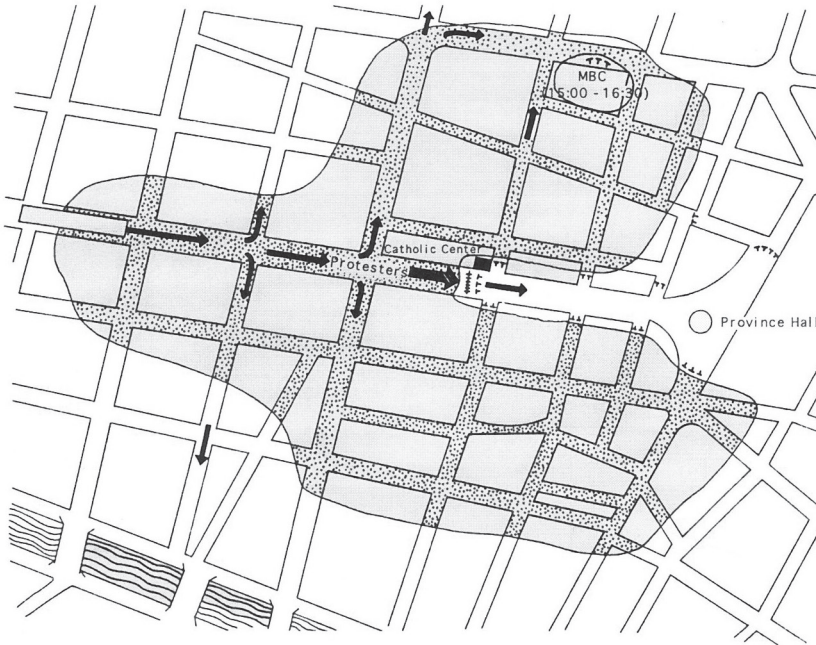
● Protesters' gathering point





2. Clash with paratroopers (10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. May 19).

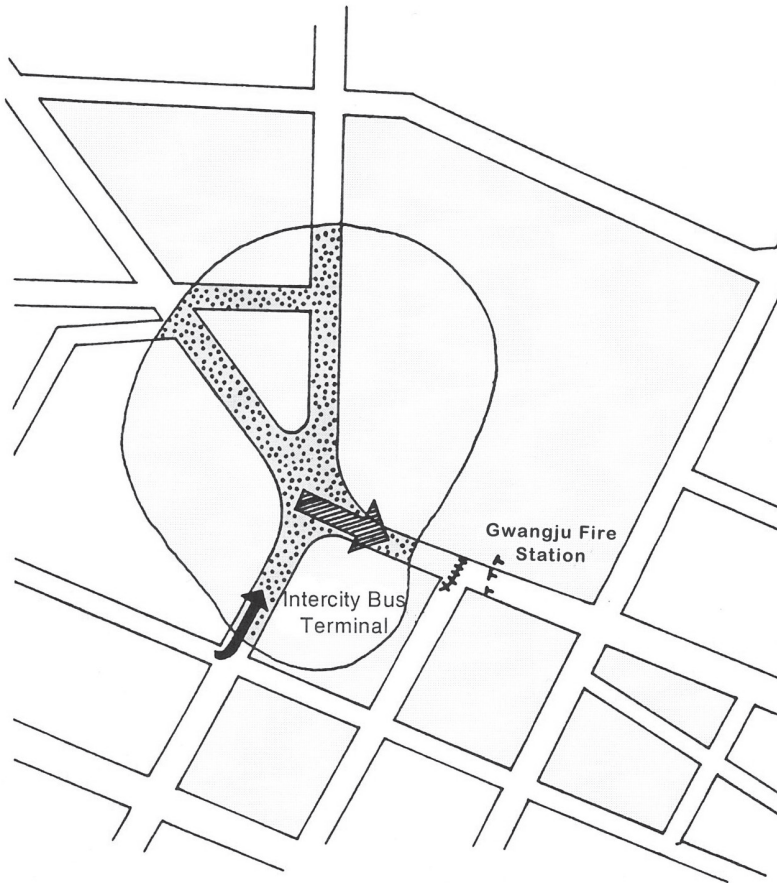









3. Clash in the afternoon of May 19 (2:00 to 4:30 p.m.).

- Military cordon
- Protesters
- ➡ Protesters' offense
- ➡ Paratroopers' offense

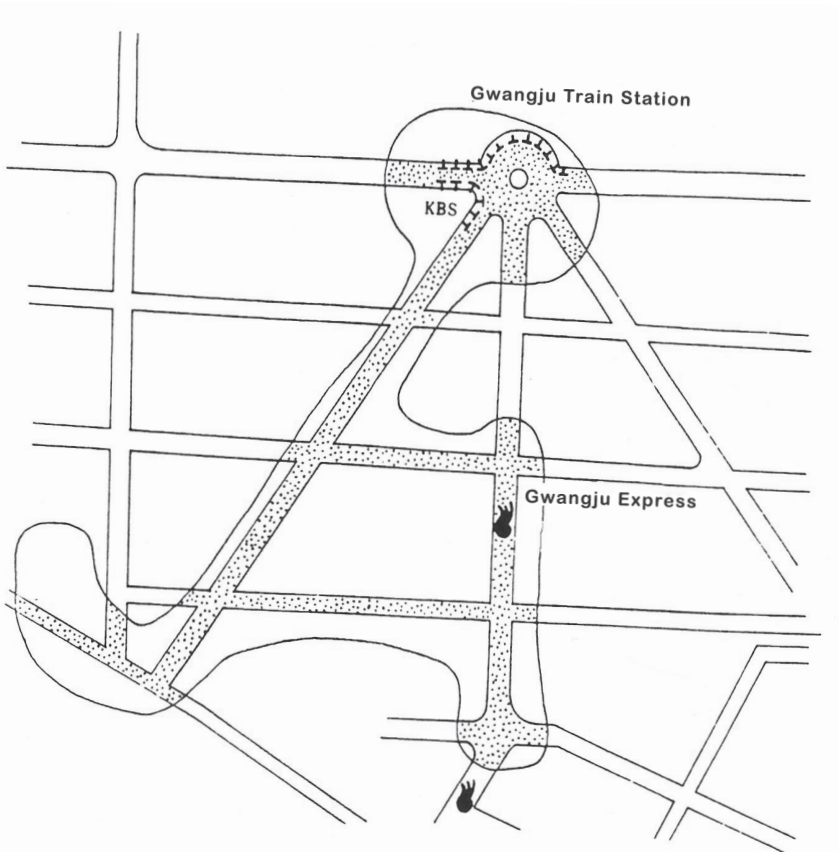




4. Battle at the Intercity Bus Terminal (4:00 to 5:00 p.m. May 19).

-  Protesters
-  Military cordon
-  Rebels' barricade
-  Protesters' offensive
-  Paratroopers' offensive

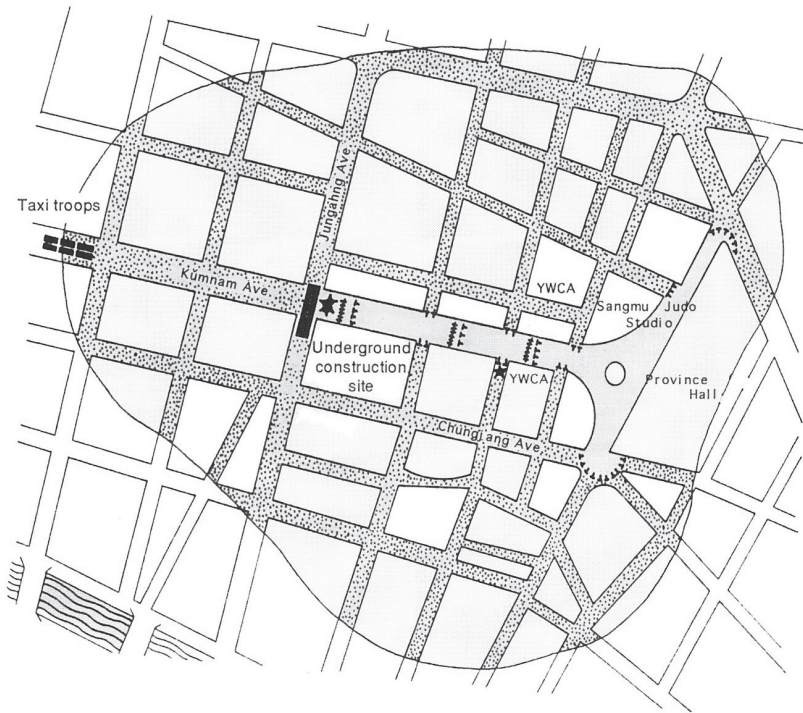




5. Battle at the Gwangju Train Station.

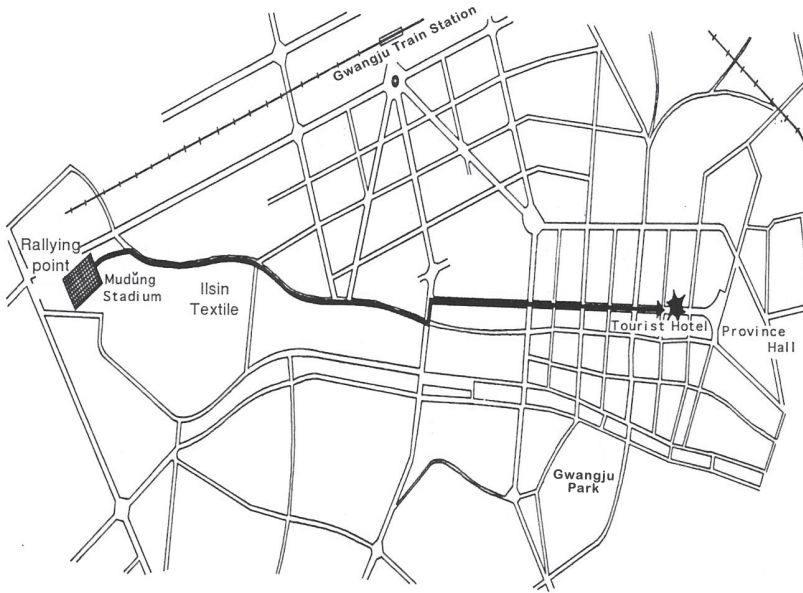
 Arson





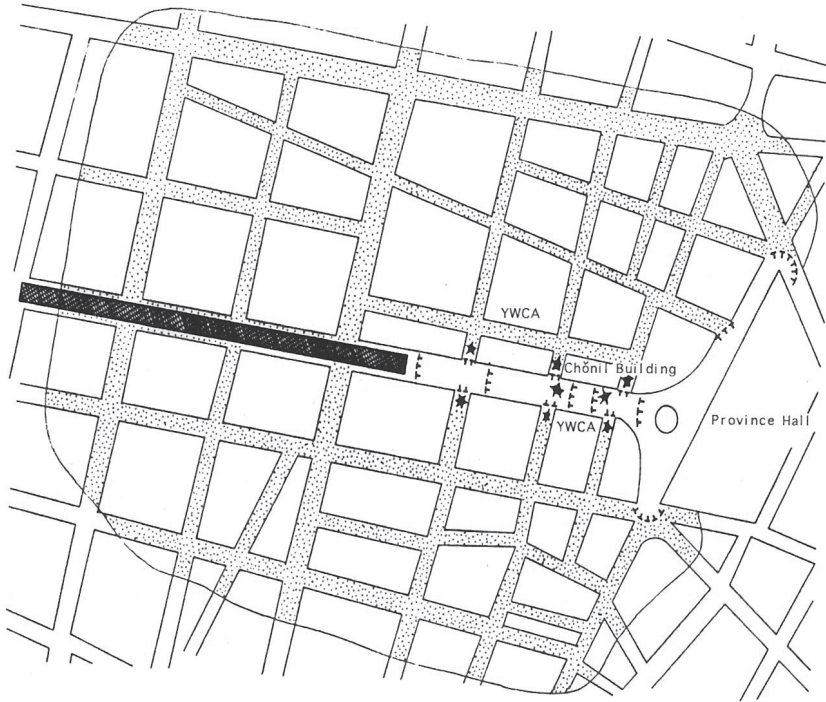
6. Battle at Kŭmnam Avenue (3:00 to 6:00 p.m. May 20).





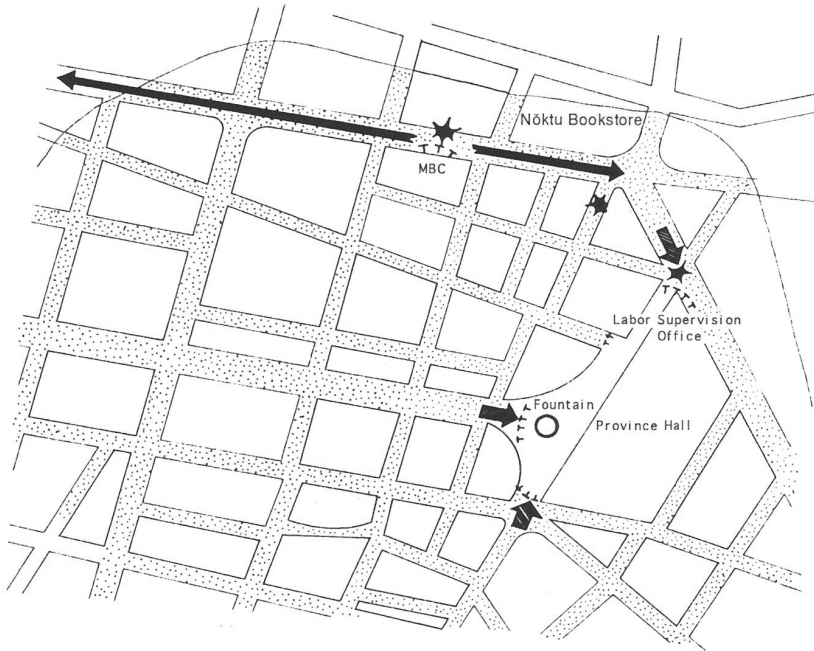
7. Cabbie troops' march (6:00 to 6:30 p.m. May 20).










8. Battle at Kŭmnam Avenue (6:00 to 9:00 p.m. May 20).

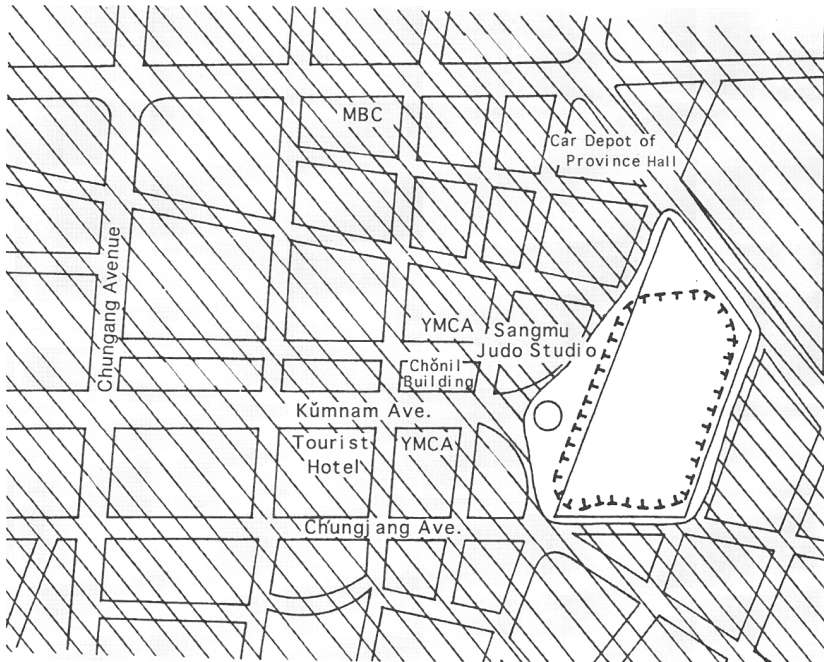




9. Battles at MBC and the Labor Supervision Office (7:30 to 12:00 p.m. May 20).

-  Protesters
-  Protesters' offensive
-  Military cordon
-  Tank
-  Clashes between the military and the demonstrators

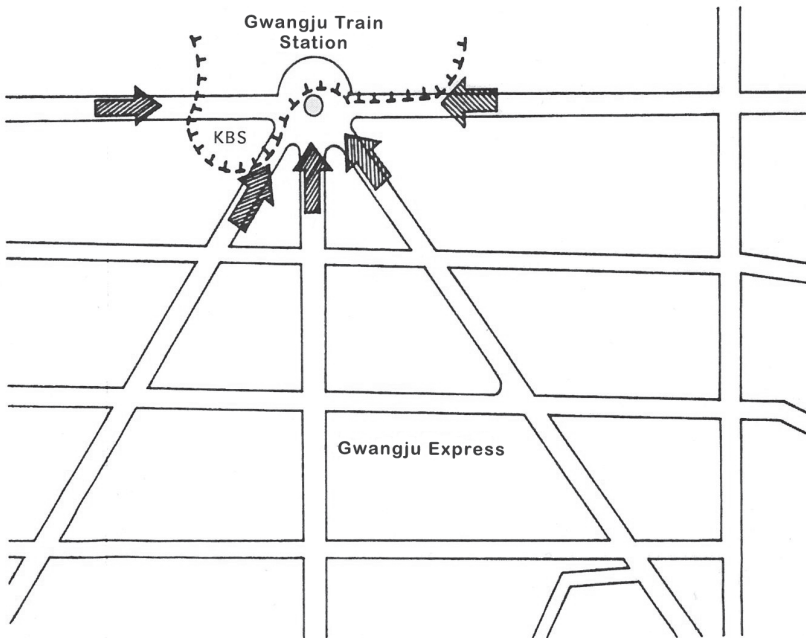






10. The military's final cordons (12:00 p.m. May 20).

- ▨ Protestors
- Military cordons

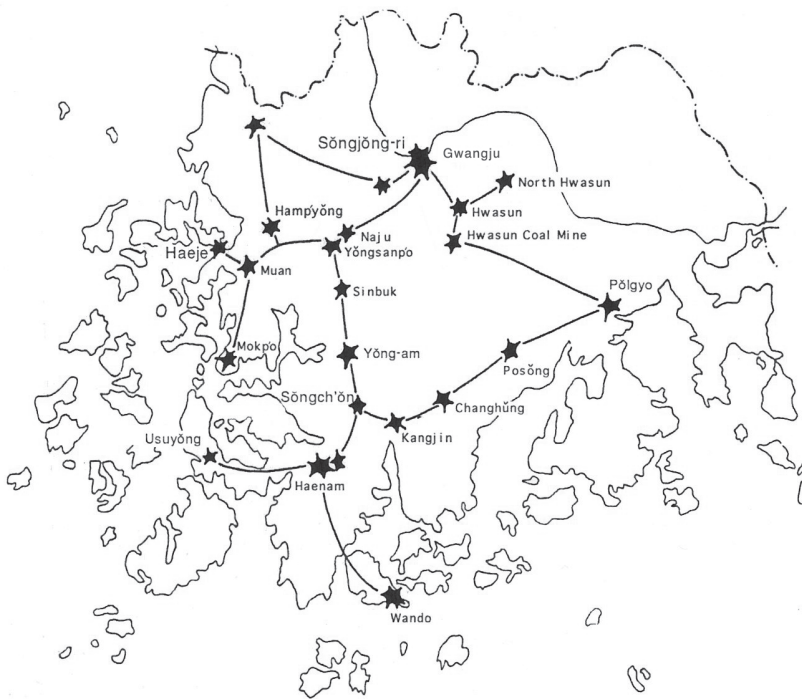




11. Battle at the Train Station (9:00 p.m. May 21 to 4:00 a.m. May 22).

-  Military cordon
-  Protesters' offensive









12. The spread of the uprising.

- ★ New uprisings and demonstrations
- The routes of rebels' armed vehicles

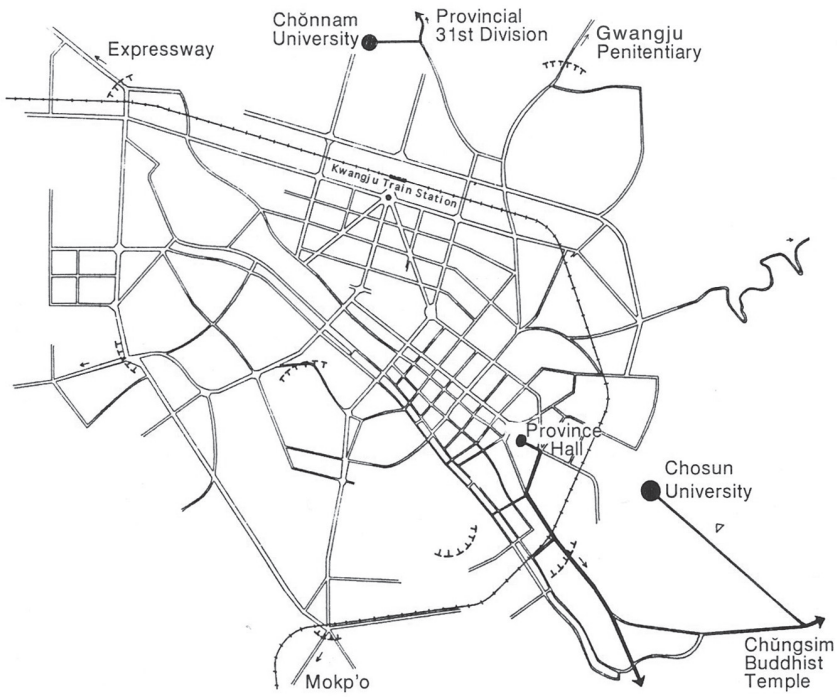




13. The militia charges the final cordons of the military
(3:00 to 5:00 p.m. May 21).

-  Firearm distribution
-  Machine-gun
-  Military cordons
-  Militia's offensive





14. The retreat of the military (7:00 p.m. May 21).





15. The military's retaking of Gwangju (3:30 a.m..May 27).







Chapter III:

Gwangju, Gwangju, Gwangju

Days of liberation I: May 22—Day five of the uprising

Citizen Settlement Committee

On the fifth day of the uprising, a sense of triumph and liberation spread across the city. Those who had threatened the lives of innocents and trampled on human dignity, had been ousted. Gwangju became a haven.

Everyone headed for Province Hall, where so many had died for democracy. People came from every part of the city, marching down Kŭmnam Avenue. The procession seemed endless. In contrast to the state's siege, the four days of rebellion had been a spontaneous response.

The people had fought to survive—and made history in the process. For the first time since the peasant rebellion of 1894,²⁴ citizens had seized a region and were ready to forge a new order. Across the country, people talked about the Gwangju uprising and what they should do now. Kŭmnam Avenue was already cleared of debris and the burnt husks of vehicles. Only the ginkgo trees showed the scars of the battle: the tear gas had defoliated the trees.

Masked militia members drove all over the city, pointing guns out the windows, singing and chanting. Their cars displayed signs written in blood: “End Martial Law!” and “Down with Chun Doo Hwan!” They were like victorious soldiers returning home. The rebels were cheered wherever they went, receiving food and wet towels from housewives, tonic drinks from pharmacists and cigarettes from storeowners. They fielded questions and told war stories. Though some later described the militia and its allies as a drunken mob, nobody was drinking alcohol.

At dawn, militia cells on the outskirts returned to the city after an all-night battle with the paratroopers. They had heard of the government's withdrawal and were now bracing for an imminent invasion by martial-law forces. The cells also had to

24. In 1894, peasants in the Chŏlla region rose in rebellion to oppose corrupt officials. Unlike previous rebellions of the nineteenth century, which attacked the disintegrating Chosun Dynasty (Korea's last), these followers of the national Tonghak religion seized control of Chŏlla Province and attempted to spread the rebellion. They also demanded social reforms and social equality. During the four-month rebellion, the Tonghak peasants formed an autonomous organization, Chipkangso, to punish corrupt officials and to implement their programs. The dynasty managed to crush the rebellion only by bringing in Japanese and Chinese troops.



police the city, and reorganized themselves in front of Gwangju Park. Several young men painted numbers on the commandeered vehicles and began to assign drivers. Small cars were to carry messages; larger ones, people and supplies; jeeps were for reconnaissance, and patrol; and military trucks for combat. Registered drivers were told to encourage other rebels to have their vehicles registered.

The numbered vehicles lined up around the park. Seventy-eight were registered and given specific directives. Numbers one through ten were assigned to the south of Province Hall, eleven through twenty to the west, twenty-one through thirty to the north, thirty-one through forty to patrol the northwest, and forty-one through fifty to head east. The rest were assigned either to liaison work or to transport the wounded within their designated areas.

When the vehicles were first seized, on May 20, they were not under centralized control. Aside from those destroyed during battle, quite a few had been dumped in the river, and the rest were running out of gas. A centralized strategy was vital, as the city's gas stations were also low on fuel.

At the park, some five hundred rebels were reorganized and deployed to key posts downtown. Government forces on the perimeter sealed off the seven roads into the city with tanks and armored personnel carriers. Inside the city, the militia put up barricades made of scorched automobiles, guardrails, lumber, concrete, and flowerboxes every six hundred and fifty feet. Government forces hid in the woods and ambushed passing militia cells, and roamed the edges of town in units of twos and threes. They waylaid lone rebel soldiers and attacked and killed innocent people in their own homes. These murders were blamed on the militia to turn the people against the rebels.

Though exhausted by the five-day uprising, the militia's morale was high. It consisted mainly of working-class men and some members of the underclass who were alienated from the system. Some were students or the family members of those persecuted by martial-law forces. The militia tried to maintain the public's trust. Unwashed and badly sunburned, their faces were soot and smoke, and their eyes were hollow and their faces haggard and pale from malnutrition. They looked like real soldiers.

On Kŭmnam Avenue and Province Hall Square, the crowds sat and waited for leaders to take charge. Militia members operated a checkpoint at the main gate.

Little information was leaving Gwangju. The rebellion had no mechanism of conveying its demands, and it was largely leaderless. Nor was there an organization to carry out political education. The most experienced activists and dissidents, those who cut their teeth during the Yushin period, had been arrested on May 17, or escaped the city and gone into hiding. The next generation of political activists was now underground or scattered amid the crowd. Yun Sang-wŏn retained the small propaganda group that had published a paper and leaflets since the beginning of the insurrection, but it fell far short of being able to organize the populace.





The militia unit inside Province Hall used a first-floor office as an operations room, a sort of headquarters. Gradually, the building assumed order: the militia collected and repurposed the government rifles, gas masks, hand grenades, and maps left behind. In another room, seeds were planted for what would become the Citizen Settlement Committee.²⁵

Students and the other activist youth seized the telephone lines to spread the news of the uprising. The administrative lines were reconnected at 10:00 a.m., after which the young people scavenged for leftover supplies, including five very useful radios. Reservists used these to monitor the movements of the government forces and communicate with the militia units just outside the city. High school girls broadcast updated lists of the dead over Province Hall's public address system. Other students prepared for a mass rally, setting up microphones and amplifiers. Still others climbed to the top of Province Hall's main gate, where they shouted the names of casualties and the army's latest movements.

Anyone caught taking pictures of rebels or carrying walkie-talkies or small radios was handed over to a hastily formed investigations bureau. The militia also made reports about government forces to headquarters. Two students traveled just outside the city with a patrol unit, to give residents the telephone number of the investigations bureau. Now, the squads inside Province Hall could track the status of both their comrades and government troops.

The young men put in charge of the commandeered vehicles provided transportation updates to headquarters. They positioned twenty armed trucks in front of Province Hall as a rapid-response force. Radio operators discovered that troops were passing the valley of Mount Mudŭng; at 11:00 a.m., paratroopers showed up near Chŭngsim Buddhist Temple in the city's southeast end. The area militia called for backup, and twenty trucks immediately set out for the temple. They managed to arrest a paratrooper who'd been caught trying to withdraw from Chosun University at dawn. He quickly confessed and said what he knew about the government's plans.

Next door to the first-floor headquarters, vice-governor Chong Si-ch'ae led a meeting of influential figures. They soon moved the discussion to another office, on the second floor, where they chose representatives and set terms for negotiations with the government. At 12:30 p.m., they formed the Citizen Settlement Committee. It consisted of fifteen clergymen, Catholic priests, lawyers, government officials, and businessmen. Ch'oe Han-yŏng, who had

25. Local officials believed that they needed civilian cooperation to resolve the explosive state of affairs. They called in religious leaders, lawyers, professors, and even some of the senior dissidents to form a Citizen Settlement Committee. Of course, there were among these some political opportunists. The Citizen Settlement Committee sought a safe way to disarm the rebels and surrender to the military. There were two other important organizations during the uprising. They were the Student Settlement Committee and Yun Sang-wŏn's propaganda group. The Student Settlement Committee was originally formed to help solve practical, day-to-day problems that the Citizen Settlement Committee faced, such as organizing funerals and compiling lists of the dead. Many students and workers found a place working for the Student Committee. Yun's propaganda team, which published a daily paper and led citywide rallies, brought together some of the activists in the Student Committee and from the militia to form a group of the fiercest fighters in the uprising.



fought against Japanese colonial rule, headed the committee. They settled on a seven-point presentation to the government:

1. Do not mobilize martial-law forces before negotiations are concluded.
2. Release those arrested during the uprising.
3. Admit that the military used excessive force.
4. Do not retaliate after the settlement.
5. Do not charge people with crimes for actions committed during the uprising.
6. Compensate the families of the dead.
7. The rebels will throw down their arms if these demands are satisfied.

At 1:30 p.m., eight members of the committee visited the local martial-law command to negotiate.

The swelling crowd in front of Province Hall listened carefully to the announcements and awaited next steps. When the list of the dead was announced, the people froze with worry about missing family members. Some wailed after hearing a loved one's name. Militia members were still taking the injured to hospitals, and carrying some fifty unidentified bodies in makeshift coffins to the fountain in Province Hall Square. As ambulances, sirens wailing, entered the square, people flocked around to see if the corpses belonged to people they knew. Bloody limbs jutted out of the poorly-made wooden caskets; many of the dead bodies were burned black or missing limbs, heads, even faces.

A young rebel on the top of the main gate chanted slogans and led a moment of silence, trying to organize the grief-stricken city. Loudspeakers and amplifiers were later installed on the fountain to accommodate the crowd.

Mass rally

The convergence on Province Hall continued throughout the afternoon. A mass rally was needed to discuss problems, maintain unity, and settle on a plan of action. If the rebels' ideas and agendas were implemented democratically, they thought, liberation was possible.

People spontaneously stepped up to the fountain to bear witness. Someone shouted the slogans: "Free Kim Dae Jung! Free the students and the people! Chun Doo Hwan, blow yourself up!" Others tried to analyze the state of affairs, and come up with ways to fight back. The rally became a meandering discussion among thousands, but reflected the true hearts and minds of insurgents. Their opinions were worlds apart from those of the Citizen Settlement Committee.

The fountain was now the center of unity. All walks of life and classes of people spoke—women street vendors, elementary school teachers, followers of various





religions, housewives, college students, high school students, and farmers. Their anger created a common consciousness, a manifestation of the tremendous energy of the uprising. They had forged a sense of solidarity throughout the uprising and were, at least for the moment, united in their cause.

It was almost 5:00 p.m. when the Citizen Settlement Committee held a rally to report back from its opening negotiations with local martial-law command.

The new prime minister, Pak Ch'ung-hun, was to visit Gwangju that afternoon. Some held vague hopes that their protests would finally receive a response from the government. They naively expected that the new prime minister, after visiting the scene, would understand the extent of the paratroopers' violence.

The committee proposed that the prime minister visit hospitals to get a sense of the suffering, but he never entered the city. Instead, he was briefed at the regional Combined Arms Command (C.A.C.), and issued a short statement: "The unrest in Gwangju is now under control thanks to the efforts of the majority. Citizens should not be incited to violence by the extreme minority that makes up the rioting mobs, or taken in by impure elements."

The prime minister spoke on national TV and radio at 7:30 that evening:

Gwangju lacks public order in the absence of government troops. Impure elements raided and torched state offices. Faced with riotous violence, the military was on the verge of acting aggressively, but instead obeyed an order to cease fire and retreat. Nevertheless, I understand that the state of affairs in Gwangju is improving: city hall employees are at work, power and water are still being supplied; no banks were looted.

His lies drew more hatred from the crowd at Province Hall Square. Some shouted, "He's another old bastard, worse than the last! Let's beat them all to death!" They gave up on the negotiations.

Vice-governor Chung chaired the rally. At the podium, the eight negotiators introduced themselves one by one, and presented their opinions. One of them said that the regional martial-law commander had admitted to excessive violence and asked for time to bring the negotiators' demands to his superior. The other negotiators stressed that there should be no more bloodshed, and that public order should be maintained. The crowd applauded in agreement. But then, Chang Hyu-dong, a negotiator and former candidate for the National Assembly during the Yushin era, made an absurd speech: "Given the state we are now in, we will end up as nothing more than a rioting mob. Let's abandon our weapons to martial-law command as soon as possible. Let them take over and restore public order."

His speech infuriated the crowd. A college student jumped on the podium, snatched the microphone, and yelled, "Mr. Chang, though a politician, does not



address the people's position! He represents the opposite. So many people were killed. We should not just discuss a quick settlement. It should be convincing to everyone." The crowd applauded. The student was Kim Chong-bae, who would soon join the new leadership of the uprising.

Some militia members guarding buildings nearby fired their rifles in the air. As the crowd grew increasingly restless, the negotiators stepped down from the podium. The people jeered and chanted, "No humiliating negotiations!" "End martial law!" "Execute Chun Doo Hwan!"

Infighting

The Citizen Settlement Committee decided unilaterally to collect firearms. They persuaded the insurgents at Province Hall and in Gwangju Park, especially students and those less committed to the cause, to abandon their weapons. "Now that a settlement committee has been formed, let's do what they tell us," the thinking went. Workers and members of the underclass, however, refused to give up their guns. Infighting and divisions emerged.

At the rally, Kim Ch'ang-gil, a junior at Chŏnnam University, proposed that a Student Settlement Committee be formed. He believed that, since college students had been the catalysts of the uprising, they should take responsibility for it. Students gathered in front of Namdo Art Hall, and selected five representatives from each university or polytechnic college to form a fifteen-member committee. Along with two professors, Song Ki-suk and Myŏng No-gŭn, they held a 6:00 p.m. meeting at headquarters. At Professor Myŏng's suggestion, Kim Ch'ang-gil headed the committee. Chŏng Hae-min, a senior at Chŏnnam University, was put in charge of general affairs. Yang Wŏn-sik of Chosun University was appointed spokesperson. Hŏ Kyu-jŏng of Chosun University took charge of collecting abandoned weapons. Kim Chong-bae became the vice-chair of the committee and would be responsible for planning a funeral ceremony for all the victims.²⁶ There were also people tasked with vehicle control, maintenance, and repair; maintenance of public order; and medical care.

Two separate entities were now working toward a resolution: the Citizen Settlement Committee and the Student Settlement Committee. The former concentrated on negotiations with the military and tried to dissuade insurgents from further resistance, while the latter focused on organizing and mutual aid. Each committee's structure was limiting, and neither properly understood how such radical change had occurred in Gwangju or what political transformations might be possible. Even

26. The funeral, and the attendant three-to-five-day mourning period, is among the most important rites in Korean culture. The activists wanted to organize a joint funeral ceremony not only to commemorate individual tragedies, but also as a symbol of mass resistance.





the Student Settlement Committee had modest ambitions: to control traffic, conduct outreach to city residents, and hand over their weapons to the military once negotiations were complete—to prevent further bloodshed. Only Kim Chong-bae and Hŏ Kyu-jŏng disagreed. By that evening, about three hundred rifles were left in a pile just outside Province Hall.

Meanwhile, Yun Sang-wŏn and his team of political activists looked to take over headquarters, and try, in the interim, to build direct links with the militia, independent of the Student Settlement Committee. They decided to infiltrate the committee's vehicular section, and spent the night drafting flyers and copies of the *Militants' Bulletin* in a room across the hall from headquarters.

Yun and his group believed that the Citizen Settlement Committee's approach would result in unconditional surrender to the military. The committee would not be able to convince the rebels to accept its negotiated outcome, which would just invite the military in. *The Militants' Bulletin* demanded that the students and militia form "a people's leadership" inside Province Hall.

The rebel headquarters spiraled into chaos as people forced their way in, increasing the potential for government penetration. Two men in their forties, part of the investigations bureau, looked particularly suspicious. Their keen eyes and short haircuts suggested that they might be members of a government intelligence agency. They made random arrests of militia members and subjected them to questioning, contributing to a paranoid atmosphere.

Several students and activists planned to eject the two men before they could accuse anyone else of being North Korean spies. One student entered the room hurriedly, and made a speech along the following lines: "Everybody here must do his best for the security of the people, even though we don't know when martial-law forces might invade again. But government agents are among us, and are exploiting the chaos in this room." He loaded his rifle and picked up a grenade, then said: "From now on, we will restrict access to headquarters. We will issue passes to those who have clear business in the room. We will not allow anyone else in. Please cooperate with us. Otherwise, our triumph will be as fragile as a house of glass. We need to build new leadership. This room is important and must be protected. Please follow our instructions. Anyone who does not want to follow us, step out at once! We are willing to die! Empty this room right now! We will call anyone we need. After restoring order, we will settle things, one by one." Nearly everyone complied with the student's earnest appeal. However, one of the suspicious men began to resist. The student thrust the grenade under the man's nose and asked, "Are you sure you want to blow yourself up with me?"²⁷ The man left the room.

Passes were issued, specifying one's reasons for being in headquarters, and guards made sure that only those authorized could enter. But the chaos continued.

27. This brave student was Lee Jae-eui, the author of this book.





People flooded in during the afternoon, and there was no leadership to regain control.

At 3:00 p.m., two reporters from the *Wall Street Journal Asia* arrived at headquarters to investigate citizen deaths. While they interviewed one of the students in charge, a man ran in, saying that paratroopers had killed his younger brother. Through tears, he vowed to help plan the funeral ceremony.

Even though some vehicles had been registered, many seized cars were still outside central control and being driven all over the city, burning precious fuel.

Chŏn Ch'un-sim and Ch'a Myŏng-suk, two female activists who had been leading marches since the beginning of the uprising, were taking a break after a speech when, suddenly, several large men in their forties ran out of the crowd, shouting, "They're North Korean spies!" They grabbed the two women and disappeared. The men turned out to be government infiltrators, and took the women in for questioning.

On the edges of the city, people were still being killed. Soldiers indiscriminately shot students and young men who approached the military cordons.

At 3:00 p.m. on the 22nd, a minibus attached to the Student Committee, bearing a red cross and a banner reading "Donate blood!" was ambushed. The bus was carrying twenty high school and college students headed for Hwasun County. Soldiers stationed on a hill had fired on the bus, killing all but one passenger, a high school girl. She was carried to a military hospital by helicopter and tried in a military proceeding, during which she exposed this slaughter.

Such atrocities occurred frequently on the edges of the city. In the morning, two corpses were found half-buried in a sack, in the woods behind Chŏnnam University Museum. Bodies turned up everywhere. They had been dumped in wells, sewers, underground corridors, and septic tanks, and buried in the forests. There were also shallow, empty graves—the army had retreated before it could inter all of the dead.

More than thirty bodies were found that morning. Residents on the outskirts formed search teams to find more. During street battles, government soldiers in Sansu-tong killed five young men and tossed their bodies into a truck. They painted their victims' faces white to make them unrecognizable. Corpses were stashed on military bases and left rotting in the Province Hall basement. Others were dumped in the woods outside of town.

That afternoon, workers drew on the reserve-army system to post guards at the Chŏnil Building, post offices, and telecommunications centers. The people thought that public property should be protected. The guards formed spontaneously and dissuaded other rebels from destroying the buildings.

Those on the outskirts also used the reserve-army system to garrison their districts. The militia squads dispatched from Province Hall joined in.

Mun Chang-u, a worker, led twenty-five soldiers from the militia and reserve army to protect a bridge in southwest Gwangju. They searched the forest and ambushed the government forces that had tried to infiltrate the city by night. Mun trained his squad—six five-member units—in marksmanship and the use of hand grenades. They





defended the city until the end, as did other militia members stationed on the outskirts. Neighbors kept them fed.

U.S. approval of a violent crackdown

On May 22, Thomas Ross, spokesperson for the U.S. Defense Department, announced that General John Wickham, U.S. commander in Seoul, had approved a proposal from the South Korean government. Wickham relinquished control of the South Korean troops under his command for use in riot control. Ross added that he had no evidence of North Korean involvement in the uprising in the South.

The United States dispatched two airborne command planes and the aircraft carrier Coral Sea to South Korean waters. The carrier was headed home from duty in the Indian Ocean when it was diverted—as a show of force—during the uprising. It was reported that Washington saw the protection of South Korea against the North as a top priority; South Korea's domestic problems came second. When the rebels heard that a U.S. aircraft carrier would enter the port city of Pusan, they were naively hopeful. "The U.S. is coming to help us," people thought, "If it knows about the massacre, the U.S. government will not forgive Chun Doo Hwan and his clique!"²⁸

The new cabinet formed a Task Force Committee for the Gwangju Affair. The committee assumed power over the military to handle the affair, and had each branch of the Ministry lay out an aid plan for the people of Gwangju.

Militants' Bulletin and the propaganda group

Between May 18 and May 21, three different newspapers and various flyers were published and distributed by different groups of college students, political activists, and workers.

Voice of the University, the underground paper of Chŏnnam University, was the first to circulate information during the uprising. Then there was Yun Sang-wŏn's Wildfire group, and Clown, Pak Hyo-sŏn's guerrilla theatre troupe. On May 21, in a bid to become the people's press, Yun led a merger of the three newspapers into the *Militants' Bulletin*. He said, "The city is now isolated from any information. We need a paper that serves as a guide to action for the people!" Ten workers and college students produced the paper, including Yun, who served as editor; Pak Yong-jun, who handled layout; Kim Song-sŏp, Na Myŏng-gwan, and Yun Sunho, who oversaw printing; and Kim Kyŏng-guk, who was in charge of supplies. *Militants' Bulletin*

28. Chun Doo Hwan and his coup organizers consisted mainly of North Kyŏngsang natives and military academy graduates. Chun and his cronies were the first graduates of the four-year military academy in South Korea. Most of them were also educated in special warfare tactics and skills at Ft. Benning, Georgia, home to the infamous School of the Americas. Chun Doo Hwan was one of the founding members of South Korea's first special warfare corps in June 1960 after six months of ranger training at the U.S. base.





argued for the systematic use of commandeered automobiles—to distribute goods and transport corpses—and coined popular slogans to clarify political aims. It was printed in daily runs of five or six thousand copies on three mimeograph machines. Sympathetic vendors provided paper for free, and the workers and students of Wildfire did most of the distribution. Women workers, who were less likely to be harassed at military checkpoints, hid copies of the paper under their clothes and delivered them to the heart of the city. On May 25, the paper was distributed in bundles by the militia's network of commandeered vehicles. The *Bulletin* moved to the Y.W.C.A., forming a publicity bureau as new leadership captured Province Hall. Insurgents used the center's large printing machine to produce forty thousand copies per day.

On May 26, the ninth issue of *Militants' Bulletin* was renamed *Democratic Citizens' Bulletin*, a change that reflected a turn from mobilization to consciousness-raising. To push the insurrection forward, the new publication sought to explain the rebellion to a larger audience.

The newspaper and propaganda group helped unite the movement by voicing the people's demands. In the absence of an official media, the *Bulletin* did what banners, posters, and street speeches could not; the paper was crucial. Sadly, the military would retake the city before a tenth issue could find distribution.

Days of liberation II: May 23—Day six of the uprising

Battles continue

Beginning May 21, there was a running conflict with the paratroopers camped around Gwangju Penitentiary. That day, as the rebels took multiple vehicles, and the insurrection began to ripple out of the city, the government had set up a kill point at the penitentiary, gunning down any insurgents who tried to take the expressway. At one point, militiamen loaded four trucks with explosives and rushed the prison, but were still overwhelmed by government forces—the prison was secured by ironclad cordons and a helicopter. Neighboring residents reported that soldiers were burying their victims in trenches and in the forest.

At 8:00 a.m. on May 23, soldiers outside Gwangju Penitentiary tried to stop a group of rebels from reaching Tamyang County. From the prison roof, they fired a .50 mm machine gun, killing three militia members and injuring many more. Several skirmishes followed, producing more casualties.²⁹

29. From the kill point, paratroopers out-gunned the militia and stopped them from advancing northward along the expressway. The military feared that the uprising would spread to Seoul and other major cities. The gun battles were later



Meanwhile, sporadic gunfire had rung out the previous night, May 22, on the outskirts of the city. Government troops sealed off the perimeter, and raided and ambushed militia cordons under cover of darkness. A militia cell captured two paratroopers. Plainclothes soldiers tried to infiltrate the militia, but were quickly sniffed out. Militia members searched the forest the next morning and found two military knapsacks and two M-16 rifles. The captives were transferred to Province Hall headquarters.

The government constantly tested the city's limits. At 7:00 a.m., May 23, three paratroopers killed two students and an older woman at Kümho High School, then attempted to frame militia members for the murders.

At 11:00 a.m., four rebel soldiers went to the basement of the taxation office, to inspect a corpse left behind. It was the body of a high school girl whose breasts and genitals had been carved off. Her student ID indicated that she was a sophomore at Chönnam Girls' High. When her parents came to identify the body, they collapsed. Several other charred remains were found; they had been nearly incinerated by a flamethrower.

At 2:00 p.m., the militia cell at Paengwön-tong in the southwest spotted a military chopper on aerial reconnaissance. The rebels targeted the chopper and shot it down. One major, a scout, and the pilot were killed in the crash.

That evening, a military helicopter shot at four rebels heading for Hwasun County in a jeep.

The line of refugees trying to escape Gwangju was getting longer. Meanwhile, many worried parents tried to enter the city to see to their children's safety. They drove through the woods and down side roads, dodging the soldiers' gunfire and government checkpoints. Soldiers nabbed every young man or woman passing by, and shot those who tried to run. Excepting the youth, however, most Gwangju residents were able to leave. Getting in, however, was difficult.

To Province Hall

Amid these clashes, the city celebrated its triumph. The commandeered vehicles that had zigzagged through the city that morning were under control by afternoon, and the hot topic was whether or not to surrender weapons. People gathered in their neighborhoods and marched to Province Hall. By 6:00 a.m., May 23, some seven hundred high school students had cleaned the streets. Vendors and housewives cooked for the militia in makeshift street kitchens. A few stores opened.

By 10:00 a.m., five thousand people filled Province Hall Square, still marching in formation. Commandeered buses brought people from the edges of the city,

cited as evidence of attempts by the armed protesters to free political prisoners and felons from the penitentiary.





and columns of rebels carried banners, chanted, sang, and picked up size, as in the nonviolent student demonstrations on the eve of the uprising.

The fences and the walls around Province Hall were ablaze with red, black, and blue banners and placards created by the propaganda group. They read, “Long live democratic citizens!” “Rip cutthroat Chun Doo Hwan to death!” “Secure workers’ rights!” “End martial law!” “Remains of Yushin, be gone!” “End the school shut-downs!” “Free Kim Dae Jung!” “Bureaucrats of the agricultural cooperative, be gone!” “Fight to the death!” “To victory!”

Lists of the dead and hastily developed black-and-white photos of the carnage were posted on the walls of the Y.W.C.A. and the Namdo Art Hall. People wept over the images.

Dozens of corpses, having been identified by family members, were covered with blood-stained cotton sheets and placed in the Sangmu Judo Studio in Province Hall Square; the rebels had run out of caskets. The bodies were embalmed. An altar was erected, and people lined up to burn incense and pay their respects.

The Settlement Committee collected the names of the missing and checked them against lists of the injured and dead at local hospitals. An endless queue of people, mostly housewives and the elderly, asked after their relatives. Their faces were chiseled with fear and worry.

At the gate of Province Hall, students wearing Settlement Committee sashes checked the entrants’ IDs. They escorted those coming to identify bodies to the yard—a gruesome activity. Most of the dead were beaten beyond recognition; heads were bashed in and detached, bayoneted flesh was swollen, some bodies were dismembered. Loved ones covered their mouths with handkerchiefs and fell to their knees, or wailed and fainted. Any identified corpse was immediately moved to Sangmu Judo Studio.

Kim Chong-bae, the rebel overseeing the citywide funeral, used Settlement Committee funds to buy more than a hundred coffins from funeral homes throughout the city. Citizen negotiators demanded more caskets from the government.

One young woman provided socks for dozens of bodies, and washed the corpses before they were placed in the coffins. She never identified herself; she was a sex worker.

“Should we abandon our weapons?”

While members of the Student Settlement Committee held an all-night discussion, the Citizen Settlement Committee left Province Hall at dusk. There was widespread fear of a sudden military blitz. Older members of the Settlement Committee left in the evening and returned the next morning.

Members of the Student Settlement Committee reached consensus on every issue but one: should they abandon their weapons? The argument was long and





contentious. The committee chair, Kim Ch'ang-gil, wanted to collect guns from the militia and turn them in to the military. Two vice chairs, Kim Chongbae and Hŏ Kyu-jŏng, insisted that the militia remain armed until the government met the rebel demands. Nearly one thousand rifles had already been abandoned, so the committee decided to turn over one hundred of them to the military, to test the government's response. But Kim Ch'ang-gil instead gave up two hundred rifles to the regional martial-law command.

At 10:00 a.m., the two settlement committees reconstituted themselves into a single body. Five members of the fifteen-person Citizen Settlement Committee resigned. The new committee consisted of thirty people: ten prominent citizens, ten Chŏnnam University students, and ten Chosun University students. Roman Catholic Bishop Yun Kong-hŭi headed the committee.

At 1:00 p.m., Kim Ch'ang-gil returned to the city with thirty-four prisoners he'd gotten released in exchange for the rifles. Backed by a majority of the Settlement Committee, Kim said, "The martial law command released some prisoners. If we abandon the weapons, they will give in to our demands. As it stands, another challenge to the army will only end in massive bloodshed." Kim Chong-bae countered: "If we surrender our weapons to the military now, we would be selling out the people of Gwangju and all the blood they shed! Moreover, the militia will not give up its weapons. First, the government must at least admit that we are not just a rioting mob. The people won't be convinced by anything else. All the detainees should be released first, and the government should offer compensation! We should hold a citywide funeral for all the victims!" Prominent figures in the committee made clear their preference for giving up the weapons.

Meanwhile, the activists who'd seized headquarters were busy controlling the commandeered automobiles and organizing the militia. They understood that, unless they prepared a strong defense around the city, Gwangju would be extremely vulnerable to a government raid. They realized how urgent it was to manage the stockpiles of munitions, fuel, and food, and erect anti-tank lines.

The first citywide rally for democracy

If the people could forge a spirit of unity, then a new leadership would naturally arise. To sustain the momentum of the uprising, mass rallies had to be convened, and the newspapers had to convince the public of the direction of the movement. The activists at Province Hall wanted the people's input on the question of weapons. The staff of the *Militants' Bulletin* was also managing expropriated vehicles, organizing militia cells into a rapid-response unit, and distributing food to militia outposts. The military deployed tanks just six hundred and sixty feet away from rebel barricades. In a show of force, the growling tanks advanced one hundred feet,





retreated, then advanced again. Occasionally, skirmishes erupted.

Many activists were suspicious of the few activists inside Province Hall. The office opposite headquarters housed the investigations bureau, which interrogated people arrested by the militia. Some of those taken in were thought to be government agents; others had threatened people with weapons or engaged in theft. The investigations bureau had butted heads with the activists the day before, when headquarters was seized. It was later learned that the state police had infiltrated the bureau.

Black-shirted military agents intermingled with the crowd outside. That afternoon, government agents moved to increase their influence, even assuming important tasks inside headquarters. They arrested the guards and tortured them. Activists began to leave Province Hall.

Students and other political and labor activists met in secret, the first time since May 18, the day of mass arrests. They had demonstrated as individuals, and retained loose, personal links, but resurfaced as a group on May 22, when the militia retook the city. They were frustrated by the top-down Settlement Committee, which seemed to be undermining the popular victory. The leaders gathered in Yun Sang-wŏn's propaganda office, and decided to form a task force to plan mass rallies. The propaganda hung banners on the walls of Province Hall, and distributed black ribbons to commemorate those who had died for democracy.

By 11:00 a.m. on May 23, more than one hundred thousand people crowded into Province Hall Square, to press their demands and hear what the Settlement Committee had decided. But the committee had reached an impasse, and did not know how to advance the insurrection. Its members were reluctant to confront the public and present their own opinions.

The rally was scheduled for 3:00 p.m., but many people arrived hours ahead of time, spontaneously installing loudspeakers on the fountain and preparing their own event. The activists rushed to start the rally early, and were ready by 11:30 a.m., when the crowd had swelled to one hundred and fifty thousand. The first citywide protest for democracy began with a moment of silence, followed by the singing of the national anthem. Workers, farmers, students, teachers, and housewives appealed to the crowd to defend their hard-won liberation.

A list of casualties was presented: six hundred bodies in the city's hospitals, only thirty of which had been identified; more than three thousand injured; and unverified numbers of missing or those under arrest. People wept, even as they cheered and sent boxes of refreshments up to the podium. One speaker proposed a fundraising drive for the citywide funeral, and more than one million won (\$2,000.00) was immediately collected. Afterward, high school girls installed boxes at every junction to collect more money, and sent these "Donations of Love for the Injured" to Province Hall. Charities, churches, and temples organized their own drives.

The rally concluded with three cheers for democracy, and organizers pledged to rally again the next day. People lingered in the square, continuing to chant and sing.





Ten high school boys carried their friend's coffin around the square and belted "Our Wish Is Reunification." The tearful crowd joined in. As they started to leave the area, military choppers dropped flyers marked "WARNING" in red letters. They read: "The disturbance in this city is the work of North Korean spies, impure elements, and hooligans. The violence of rioting mobs that captured firearms and explosives is still intensifying. The military will mop them up." The rebels tore the flyers to shreds, and said to one another, "Are we really all spies and impure elements?"

The citywide rallies and the task force

Rallies were held every day thereafter. On May 24, the activists organized college students into a new militia to guard Province Hall.

The next day, May 25, they condemned the Settlement Committee for sabotaging the rallies and ignoring the popular will, and demanded that the members resign. A rebel read a statement on behalf of the militia titled "Why we took up arms."

On May 26, activists and students formed a new rebel leadership, despite threats of a renewed military offensive. The militia prepared for combat and poured into Province Hall Square. They rallied to demand a new "government of national salvation,"³⁰ and spent the afternoon recruiting youth and workers mobilized through the reserve army.

The citywide rallies strengthened the insurgents' will to fight and laid the groundwork for new leadership. They also employed direct democratic processes.

The most ardent student and political activists had little trouble continuing the struggle, but most people had joined the insurgency out of a sense of justice, not political ideology. It was thus increasingly possible for local bureaucrats and prominent members of the Settlement Committee to distort and undermine the people's demands. The rallies played a unifying role.

Young activists who'd participated from the beginning led the demonstrations. They took part in the reading groups at Nöktu bookstore and the Modern Culture Institute, or were involved with Clown's guerrilla theatre and the Free Gwangju Fine Artists Association. Clown had been established in 1978, along with the People's Culture Institute, after eleven Chönnam professors signed an anti-government petition. It had since become famous for staging plays about workers and farmers' struggles.

In the early days of the uprising, these young activists had partnered with Yun Sang-wön's workers' night school, Wildfire, to publish opposition news. As the rebellion began, Wildfire was still holding classes, and Clown was in rehearsals.

The leaders tried to move the rallies beyond speeches about military brutality,

30. The term "government of national salvation," or "national salvation government," was used by 1970s dissidents to describe an alternative to military rule.



and sought stronger representation from the rest of the population. They wanted to avoid random outbursts—people jumping on stage to yell violent slogans, or collapsing in tears on the podium—so they made time to include speakers from all walks of life. They also expanded the content of the rallies to include poetry, songs, and short plays, as well as the theatrical burning of government officials in effigy.

Resist or surrender

On the evening of May 23, the crowd dispersed. The militia lined the perimeter of the city overnight. There was, in effect, a blackout: with the exception of Province Hall, lights were turned off all over Gwangju, out of fears of a military raid. Intermittent gunfire echoed from the outskirts.

Members of the propaganda group and other activists held a meeting at the Y.W.C.A. They discussed logistics and evaluated the public response to the rallies. It became more and more clear that the Settlement Committee was incapable of handling the situation, and that they should prioritize building links with other regions, establishing central control of the militia, and using the reserve-army system to manage food, fuel, power, and water. The leaders agreed to supplant the Settlement Committee, which seemed unequal to the task of planning a basic funeral. The state of the corpses was such that a citywide funeral would have to take place soon.

Just as on the previous night, members of the Citizen Settlement Committee left Province Hall at dusk. Only student members remained behind. Kim Ch'ang-gil, the student chair, introduced one man as an explosives expert—he had deactivated all the dynamite in the basement of Province Hall, Kim said. It was later learned that this expert was a military agent who had infiltrated with Kim Ch'ang-gil's help.

The martial-law command issued a self-serving statement on its actions in Gwangju. It had maintained order, guarded key installations, and arrested violent demonstrators. It had proceeded peacefully, and worked on changing hearts and minds, the statement said.

Two thousand five hundred carbines, M-16s, and handguns were abandoned on May 23, as were half of some five thousand four hundred rifles, severely reducing the power of the militia. Worse still, Kim's "explosives expert" had ruined the supply of dynamite. The Settlement Committee focused on collecting still more firearms, persuading militia cells to give up their weapons in exchange for food and drink.

Mayor Ku issued an appeal to the citizens of Gwangju: "Another unfortunate conflict must not occur. We must not sacrifice any more innocent lives. All citizens should do what they can to prevent it."

Earlier that day, May 23, William Gleysteen, the U.S. ambassador to Seoul, had lunch with eight members of the National Assembly—a body that had already been





dissolved by the military. An assembly member expressed gratitude for America's role in maintaining South Korean national security, and relayed concerns about the unrest in Gwangju. The ambassador reassured the group that South Korea was a greater priority for the Carter Administration than even Iran and Afghanistan, and that the U.S. had delivered this message to North Korea.

Days of liberation III: May 24—Day seven of the uprising

The second citywide rally

The military made an announcement at 8:00 a.m., on K.B.S. radio: "If you surrender your weapons at a military hospital or police station, the martial-law command will not bring charges against you."

In rebel communities, anguish set in. What if new atrocities occurred? How might the government retaliate? Would the people of Seoul and other cities betray Gwangju? Would the uprising end in defeat?

Those on the perimeter felt similarly. Could they repel the military with their forces cut in half? Even if they survived an invasion, there would be nowhere to hide. They would have to retreat to the mountains. Militia members lacking a political commitment turned over their guns.

The frenzied mood of liberation and triumph was evaporating, as was the people's resolve.

Province Hall was plastered with images and posters criticizing the Settlement Committee. A photo of the first citywide rally, from the Japanese daily, *Mainichi Shimbun*, was also on display.

People were open to the foreign press, but distrusted Korean newspapers, which were censored and biased against the insurgency. South Korean reporters were practically banned from Province Hall.

In Sangmu Judo Studio, burning incense could not quell the nauseating stench of rotting corpses, which wafted onto the streets. A long visit to that ersatz morgue was enough to cause a nosebleed; still, visitors stood in a long line to burn incense at the makeshift altar.

In the morning, the Settlement Committee distributed an eight-point follow-up to its negotiations with the military:

1. There will be no army presence in the city.
2. The military admits to excessive use of force.
3. All but seventy-nine of the nine hundred and twenty-seven people arrested





will be released.

4. The government has made plans for compensation and medical treatment.
5. The military will make efforts to encourage objective news coverage.
6. The military will not use terms like “impure elements” or “rioting mobs” to describe the people of Gwangju.
7. The military will allow unarmed civilians to enter and leave the city.
8. The military promises that there will be no further retaliation.

This outcome only fed the people’s resentment toward the Settlement Committee.

They expressed their grievances at the second citywide rally that afternoon, May 24. At 2:30 p.m., more than one hundred thousand people gathered in Province Hall Square. The task force and propaganda group had trouble installing loudspeakers and microphones on the fountain, and the Settlement Committee certainly did not help. Activists and students tried to obtain amplifiers from schools and radio shops throughout the city, but *agents provocateur* had already destroyed or seized the existing equipment. They’d also slashed the tires of school buses to prevent the militia from using them.

The task force managed to get a hold of speakers, but the Settlement Committee cut off the electricity and prevented organizers from using the Province Hall public address system. The activists resorted to a loudspeaker mounted on a tear-gas truck, and said, “The Settlement Committee is conspiring with the military for an unconditional surrender. We must stop this and demand compensation for our blood!”

The crowd cheered. One electrician removed the battery from a car to power an amplifier. People continued to demand punishment and compensation for the murders and attacks, and called on the Settlement Committee to reveal details of its negotiations with the military. Cowed by the crowd, a lawyer from the committee merely repeated the eight-point agreement from the podium. He was mercilessly booed.

A sudden downpour scattered the crowd; people rushed for their umbrellas and took shelter under the eaves. They regrouped and continued protesting through the downpour after an organizer compared the rain to “the grievous tears of those who died.”

An effigy of Chun Doo Hwan, the chief of the massacre, was presented to the square. A moderator read from a statement entitled, “Appeal to democratic citizens across the nation,” which raised the rebels’ anger to a high pitch. They stoned the dummy, stomping and yelling, “Burn it now! What are you waiting for? Kill him now!” The stand-in for Chun burst into flames. When a high school girl with a shaky voice recited her own “Homage to democracy,” the people repeated her poem’s refrain. The U.S. TV network N.B.C. taped the rally from beginning to end.

The rain drove many militia members from their outposts, and the Settlement





Committee coaxed away their weapons. K.B.S. news continued to portray the crowd in Province Hall Square as a rioting mob.

New leadership emerges

The rally ended at 6:00 p.m. in the heavy rain. Twenty-five political activists, students, and workers who had led the rally, distributed the *Militants' Bulletin*, and participated in the militia convened at the Y.W.C.A. Chŏng Sang-yŏng and Yi Yang-hyŏn, who had fled to the countryside after a previous underground meeting, slipped back into the city and attended the meeting, after walking along side streets for two days.

The two led a discussion that honed in on several goals. First, they would recruit older dissidents to the uprising; second, they would mobilize as many people as possible to the next rally; finally, they would move Province Hall in a more popular, hard-line direction. For this they would need to form a united front with other members of the Student Settlement Committee.

After this resolution was adopted, Yun Sang-wŏn brought Chŏng Sang-yŏng and two activists who'd remained in the city after May 21, Kim Yŏngch'ŏl and Chŏng Hae-jik, to a Student Settlement Committee meeting at Province Hall. The activists criticized the committee's defeatism, and opposed any abandonment of weapons. Suddenly, one committee member picked up his rifle and shouted, "This is suspicious! They may be North Korean spies!" The activists left the meeting, realizing that words would not change the committee's soft line. The investigations bureau of Province Hall was already occupied by military and police agents. A stray remark or action could provoke an interrogation.

Nevertheless, the Settlement Committee felt the pressure of the mass rallies. Despite its attempts at sabotage, one hundred thousand people had gathered in the square. Kim Ch'ang-gil from the Student Settlement Committee demanded that Chŏng Sang-Yŏng and other activists stop holding these events. Kim had already promised the military that he would contain the situation and give the militia's weapons to the regional martial-law command. Chŏng emphatically rejected: "The people don't want your negotiation with the military. Rallies let us figure out the level of popular support, and gain power at the bargaining table. If you don't have the people's confidence, you should resign."

Activists at the Y.W.C.A. meeting formed an ad hoc board to carry out their resolution, supplanting the Province Hall leadership. They decided to groom college students to take over, and had them meet at the Y.W.C.A. the following day.





Discord in the Student Settlement Committee

Before the May 24 rally, Kim Ch'ang-gil chaired a 1:00 p.m. meeting of the Student Settlement Committee. Kim Chong-bae and Hŏ Kyu-jŏng stressed that the government should publicly apologize for labeling Gwangju residents "rioting mobs," and admit that the uprising was the people's will. They raised three additional demands: for a citywide funeral, the release of arrestees, and compensation for property damage.

At 3:00 p.m., Kim brought these demands to the Citizen Committee, in the name of the Student Settlement Committee, but the two groups could not reach an agreement. Meanwhile, the force of the rally shook the walls of Province Hall.

Yun Sang-wŏn, who had tried to connect headquarters, rally organizers, and leading activists, detected the discord inside the Settlement Committee. Yun approached Kim Chong-bae and argued for the need to organize—he convinced Kim to assemble hundreds of college students. At 9:00 p.m., the Student Committee had another meeting in which the dispute between hard-liners and soft-liners became acute. Kim Ch'ang-gil said, "The military officially said that, if we don't surrender our weapons, they will use force. If the army comes back to Gwangju, the city will be annihilated! There will be a sea of blood. Let's turn in our weapons as soon as possible."

Kim Chong-bae responded angrily. "They haven't satisfied any of our demands! If we surrender the weapons now, we will sell out our people. We must not give up our guns," he said. After most of the committee agreed to abandon the weapons, Pak Nam-sŏn, a worker, threw a chair and shouted, "If you continue to talk about giving up our guns, I'll blow myself up and take Province Hall with me!"

The meeting continued past midnight. At 1:00 a.m., several committee members resigned, exhausted by the incessant squabbling. The Student Committee decided to appoint some workers and activists as leaders: the uprising had well exceeded the capability of college students. Pak Nam-sŏn, Hwang Kŭm-sŏn, and Kim Hwa-song joined the committee. Hard-liners were given key posts: Hŏ Kyu-jŏng took over the publicity bureau, and Pak Nam-sŏn took over headquarters.

"Why should we fight?"

After the meeting, the new leadership had a three-hour debate with students who supported the conservative stance in Province Hall. Their dialogue went something like this:

Activist (A): What do you think about the current situation?

Student (S): No more blood should be shed, at any cost.





A: We agree. But what happens if we just drop our weapons and surrender?

S: We have no other choice than to trust the military. And we can still negotiate future measures with the government.

A: Don't you know the military? Didn't they massacre us "criminals" just days ago? Why should we surrender, when our demands haven't been met? Many people died for this. Our demands are stained with blood. If we surrender now, we'll have sold out all those who rose up and sacrificed their lives. If we quit, there's a good chance that there will be another slaughter. Do you really want to give them another chance, after throwing away your weapons, your fellow insurgents, and the cause?

S: We know our demands haven't been met, but we don't want any more bloodshed. Is there any chance we'll win this fight? If so, I will fight and continue.

A: There are many kinds of triumph. Those who laid down their lives understood this very well. Do you want to win? Then let's unite and fight, and make triumph possible. There's international attention on Gwangju. Those who've snuck in from Seoul report that the world has denounced Chun Doo Hwan. Even U.S. public opinion is on our side. The U.S. believes that our country's democratic reforms are in its own interest. It is skeptical of the military's iron fist. The Choi Kyu Ha interim government is in a quandary. Supporters of democracy all over the country are against it. Some in the military sympathize with our insurrection. We've seen it in the Provincial Thirty-first Division. Other divisions will also sympathize, if they hear about Gwangju. We have to stop the murderers from a power-grab at the very least.

The international community may well impose an economic blockade on South Korea. Our country's economic structure is very vulnerable. If sanctions are imposed, the government won't last. Workers won't tolerate a deteriorating economy. Other worker rebellions, like the one in Sabuk mining county, will begin!³¹

If we push through another week, the uprising will spread beyond Chŏlla Province. People don't know what's happening in Gwangju. If they knew about the massacre and the uprising, they wouldn't just sit there. Imagine

31. In Sabuk, a coal-mining county, a corrupt union leader handpicked by management enjoyed a life of luxury. He drove an imported Japanese sedan while the thirty-five thousand coal miners he represented worked twelve hours a day,





if another uprising takes place in another town! The military has no solid base. It would be finished. If the military falls, the U.S. can't just abstain. The Korean peninsula is key to the U.S. Pacific strategy. The U.S. would rather eliminate the military clique and support pro-democracy civilians. Even if everything we just said is wrong, we still have to hang on! Chun Doo Hwan wants to assume power, just like Park Chung Hee did in 1961. His people know that they can't keep killing indefinitely. We should use this as leverage in our negotiations. If we surrender now, all we get is another futile sacrifice. We should keep our weapons! We should organize the insurgents! We have to defend ourselves against the military!

During this debate, a middle-age man introduced himself. He claimed to need ammunition and rifles to defend the Chõnil Building. The activists said "no," but offered to send a militia cell to the Chõnil Building instead. The man quickly ran off, and became evidence of more concerted military penetration.

Days of liberation IV: May 25—Day eight of the uprising

On May 25, at 8:00 a.m., Chang Kye-bõm ran into an office of Province Hall and fell to the floor, grabbing his shoulder. He yelled, "I've been hit by a poisonous dart!" Such weapons were thought to be used only by North Korean agents. A militia soldier rushed over to check Chang's shoulder, only to be brushed off. Pointing to a different rebel, Chang said, "I don't need you! Chõng Han-gyu, come here!" Chõng pretended to suck the poison out of Chang's shoulder, then took him to Chõnnam University Hospital. The witnesses were stunned. The Settlement Committee had already been compromised by infighting and now seemed on the verge of collapse. Rumors about North Korean spies traveled fast, accelerated by state agents; the entire incident seemed to have been orchestrated.

To calm the turmoil in Province Hall, Kim Chong-bae had six militia members investigate the case. When they arrived at the hospital, Chang was already gone. They did nab Chõng, and transferred him to the investigations bureau. Chõng confessed to having a female contact in Province Hall and communicating with the military. He had also used the militia's radio to send in intelligence reports on Province Hall. (Later,

six days a week, and earned just \$320 per month. On April 16, 1980, after the union boss unilaterally entered into a new contract with the company, thirty miners occupied his office. They demanded the resignation of trade union leadership and new contracts with management, but had their occupation curtailed by riot police. Two days later, the workers went on strike. In an attempt to put down the picket, the local police chief rammed his car into three workers before driving off. The peaceful protest turned into a revolt. Thirty-five thousand miners and their families raided the mining office and a police station. They seized dynamite from the pits and firearms from the reserve-army stockpile. They resisted police for four days. Management, afraid to enter the town, hired a helicopter to drop a new draft contract over the area. The thirty workers who triggered the revolt were at a loss. They did not know their actions would attract such wide support. But they were not in control of the situation either. Under threat of arrest, they went into hiding after hasty negotiations with management. After the Sabuk revolt, a string of unofficial strikes—often suppressed by the police—hit South Korea. These actions helped prompt the events of May, though most workers did not join the student protests for democratic reforms.



when the leaders of the uprising were tortured in military prison after the May 28 crackdown, Chang Kye-bôm was there. He wore a mask, smoked a cigarette, and told the interrogators all about the militants' role in the uprising.)

Confidence of the insurgents

The liberation entered its fourth day, and a semblance of order returned. Markets and stores reopened; tractors hauled fresh vegetables into Gwangju; orphanages and other welfare facilities were restocked with food, with the help of city employees. To prevent shortages, sellers and buyers restrained themselves—the purchase limit was one pack of cigarettes per person.

Local hospitals had been inundated by waves of casualties and a blood shortage in the first few days of the uprising. Many subsequently flocked to donate blood, filling reserves. Power, water, and city telephone lines operated normally; there was no looting, no bank robberies, and low rates of crime. The militia patrol unit diligently referred suspects to the investigation bureau.

In the absence of an administrative state, people relied on one another. They knew, after all, the price of their freedom. Foreign correspondents seemed surprised by Gwangju's orderly condition.³² Donations poured in to the Settlement Committee and the Y.W.C.A., now an activist stronghold—from religious groups and ordinary residents. At first, people had spontaneously mobilized to feed four hundred militia members and rebel leaders inside Province Hall. As the uprising dragged on, each district contributed to this effort.

Though fewer in number than before, forty to fifty militia soldiers in each outlying district still guarded the edges of the city. In time, others donned their reserve-army uniforms and organized their own units on the outskirts. They chose their own commanders and assignments, and took firearms from underage militia members.

Still, the Settlement Committee tried to persuade militia cells in the outposts to surrender their firearms. In many places, the rebels quarreled, some aiming their rifles at the military cordons. But after May 25, no more insurgents turned in their weapons, and the Settlement Committee finally discontinued its campaign.

Meeting of the senior dissidents

32. The South Korean military and U.S. State Department officials expected the uprising to descend into random violence or succumb to the tyranny of firebrand radicals. Secretary of State Edmund Muskie wrote, in a secret May 25 cable, to Richard C. Holbrooke, the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs: "The moderate citizens committee has lost control of the situation and the radicals appear to be in charge. People's courts have been set up and some executions have taken place. Student demonstrators have been largely replaced by unidentified armed radicals who are talking of setting up a revolutionary government." Two days later, however, Muskie had to retract some of his earlier remarks, writing in a follow-up cable: "An earlier report that the insurgents had set up people's courts and had carried out executions had not been fully confirmed and should be treated with caution." (See "Gwangju Diary: The View from Washington," by Tim Shorrock, in this volume.)





Under pressure, the activists worked through the night to plan for new leadership and hand out new assignments. They distributed the *Democratic Citizens' Bulletin*, and covered the city with posters and signs. Traveling on a Chönnam University school bus mounted with loudspeakers, they announced that high school students should assemble at Namdo Art Hall, and college students at the Y.W.C.A.

The citywide funeral was still on hold, despite the fast decay of corpses in the sweltering heat of early summer. Several bereaved families held their own ceremonies, with simple coffins covered with a white sheet, free of biers or hearses. Province Hall Square echoed with the wails of grieving families.

Activists prepared for a 10:00 a.m. meeting of at the Y.W.C.A., where older political activists would set objectives. These dissidents belonged to the Settlement Committee or the Student Settlement Committee, or had observed the evolving political situation. In attendance were two human rights lawyers, Hong Nam-sun and Yi Ki-hong; two Christian leaders, Yi Söng-hak, Yun Yöng-gyu; two professors, Song Ki-suk and Myöng No-gün; two Y.W.C.A. leaders, Cho A-ra and Yi Ae-sin; and two high school teachers, Pak Söng-mu and Yun Kwang-jang. Yun Sangwön and Chöng Sang-yong were there on behalf of the activists.

Professor Myöng presented a new seven-point resolution of the Settlement Committee, which argued for surrendering weapons. Unlike other members of the committee, who sought a return to the status quo, Myöng was close to the movement and genuinely worried about further casualties.

The activists nonetheless opposed him: "The committee's demand that we abandon our weapons unconditionally will resolve nothing. All the committee does is negotiate with the military, sabotage the citywide rallies, and ignore majority opinion. We activists can gain an advantage in bargaining by continuing to hold rallies. Support and join us!" The activists saw an opportunity to win democracy for the whole nation. They appealed to the older dissidents to form a new negotiations committee, while youth led the armed insurgents. Only the two Christian leaders supported this strategy. None of the senior dissidents agreed to read out their statements at the next rally.

After the meeting, Professor Song Ki-suk, several dissidents, and two Catholic priests, Kim Söng-nyong and Cho Pi-ho, held a discussion at Namdong Cathedral. They debated the revised strategy and decided not to sign on, but at 5:00 p.m., a few of them attended the Settlement Committee meeting. Father Kim proposed a new four-point statement, an "appeal to President Choi":

- The government must admit its wrongdoing in the current political situation.
- The government must issue a public apology and seek forgiveness.
- The government must pay compensation for all damage caused.
- There must be no retaliation.





Twenty-five members of the committee endorsed the resolution. Finally, there was an official demand for a public apology and full compensation.

Retaking headquarters

At an all-night meeting, Kim Ch'ang-gil of the Student Settlement Committee made the unilateral decision to surrender weapons to the military, and then evacuate from Province Hall. Kim Chong-bae resisted, backed up by supporters such as Pak Nam-sŏn, the transport worker. Pak was known for his organizational skills and passion, and was originally tasked with ferrying bodies from the Red Cross Hospital to Province Hall. Kim Chong-bae asked him to take over headquarters, which had come under the control of soft-liners and police agents. Pak moved in quickly, rallying militia members behind him.

Upon taking over headquarters, Pak called on dozens of college students from the Y.W.C.A. to replace the guards outside Province Hall and secure the armories. Pak also assigned two guards to protect Kim Chong-bae, the most outspoken hard-liner, against assassination attempts by soft-liners.

Yun Sang-wŏn briefed Pak Nam-sŏn on the overall situation. Yun argued against the surrender of weapons and pushed to reorganize the militia into a solid defense system. Pak agreed completely. Yun also asked for Pak's cooperation in a plan to replace the leaders of the Settlement Committee with rebel activists. He also proposed that Kim Chong-bae and Hŏ Kyu-jŏng take on a leadership role after that afternoon's citywide rally.

College students gathered at the Y.W.C.A., where activists split them into groups of ten. The first fifty students entered Province Hall to take over office work, compile lists of the dead, and manage the morgue and altar.

The third citywide rally

The rally began in the square at 3:00 p.m., with a far-reduced crowd of fifty thousand people. Though smaller in number, they were well organized. At the rally, a "resolution of Gwangju citizens" was passed, and an updated list of casualties announced: five hundred and twenty were critically injured, and one thousand two hundred and seventy suffered minor injuries. Of the corpses, one hundred and sixty-nine bodies had been identified, while forty had decomposed unrecognizably. Twenty-three bodies had been found in the Chungjang underground mall, and more than two thousand people were still missing.³³

33. Even though Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo were convicted of killing Gwangju rebels, there was no systematic investigation to find those who "disappeared" during the uprising. Many advocacy groups in Gwangju believe that majority of the missing were killed and quickly buried. In an interview for the award-winning documentary *Yun Sang-wŏn*,





People from the outskirts of Gwangju had been tracking the military's movements, and asked that the organizers send one or two activists to tend to local problems. Many had taken refuge in the city, to escape skirmishes, and been separated from their loved ones.

Hard-line leadership

At 7:00 p.m., Yun Sang-wŏn, Chong Sang-yŏng, Yi Yang-hyŏn, Chŏng Hae-jik, and Pak Hyo-sŏn went to Province Hall to meet with Kim Chong-bae and Hŏ Kyu-jŏng, the hard-liners from the Student Settlement Committee. There, they finalized plans to seize the leadership and overtake the circle. The activists brought thirty college students to an office at Province Hall. Later, Kim Ch'ang-gil showed up and shouted, "What the hell are you guys going to do? You will drown Gwangju in a sea of blood!"

After an agonizing argument, Kim recognized that he had no support, and resigned as chair of the Student Settlement Committee. The 7:00 K.B.S. evening news announced that Province Hall had fallen into the hands of hard-liners.

Hundreds of college students gathered at the Y.W.C.A. after the day's rally. Every I.D. was checked, and non-students were turned away. The activists quickly debriefed their followers.

The college students were in a somewhat delicate position. Because members of the militia hailed from the underclass or were extremely young, the public tended worry that they would succumb to mindless violence, and thus preferred the undergraduates. Meanwhile, the militia distrusted the college students, whom they saw as shying away from necessary force and willing to surrender their weapons.

The hard-liners never turned their backs on the militia, but they found it more effective to use college students to prevent a vacuum of leadership and thwart police agents—and build public trust. By incorporating students into the militia, the leadership also gained greater control in an evolving political situation. It was crucial to maintain unity.

The students were divided into ten-member cells, led by the individual who best understood the political situation. After the cells were formed, everyone received an instant military education. Only ten students had finished compulsory military service; the rest had barely held a real rifle in military-education class.

There were fifty female rebels at the Y.W.C.A., including high school girls, workers, teachers, and members of White Pine Tree, made up of the wives of political prisoners.

the Militia (produced by M.B.C. Gwangju in May 1996), Terry Anderson of the Associated Press said, "My primary job was to find out how many people died. And I spent an entire day traveling around the city, counting bodies. In high schools, in gymnasiums, in churches, in every place they gathered the bodies. I counted one hundred and seventy-nine bodies in one day—[I] physically counted them: one, two, three. Whole bodies, parts of bodies, damaged bodies. The smell! It was hot at that time." But even Anderson, a foreign correspondent who had much more leeway than the Korean press, did not have complete knowledge of military activities. The South Korean government put the official civilian death toll at one hundred and ninety-three, but agreed to compensate two hundred and eighty-eight victims. The army officers who led the killings and organized the burials remain silent.



The workers belonged to independent unions, such as the one at Honam Electricity, or were members of the J.O.C. (*Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne*, or the Young Christian Workers). These women prepared meals for the militia in Province Hall, operated the public-address system, and did office work. They also organized the rallies, and called themselves the Women's Bureau.

After Kim Ch'ang-gil resigned, most of his followers in the Student Settlement Committee went with him, as did twenty high school girls who had worked in the Province Hall kitchen.

By 10:00 p.m. on May 25, the new leadership of the uprising was formed:

- Chair: Kim Chong-bae, 25, junior at Chosun University
- Vice chair and internal secretary: Hŏ Kyu-jŏng, 26, sophomore at Chosun University
- Vice chair and external secretary: Chŏng Sang-yŏng, 30, activist
- Spokesperson: Yun Sang-wŏn, 29, activist
- Director of headquarters: Pak Nam-sŏn, 26, truck driver
- Planning director: Kim Yŏng-ch'ŏl, 30, urban poor people's activist
- Assistant planning director: Yi Yang-hyŏn, 32, labor activist
- Assistant planning director: Yun Kang-ok, 28, senior at Chŏnnam University
- Publicity bureau director: Pak Hyo-sŏn, 31, teacher and theatrical activist
- Civil affairs secretary: Chŏng Hae-jik, 29, teacher
- Investigations bureau: Kim Chun-bong, 21, clerical worker and militia member
- Distribution secretary: Ku Sŏng-ju, 25, worker

The officers decided to rename the group the Committee to Fight for Democracy, and appointed Chŏng Sang-yŏng to lead it.

They then summoned the college students who were waiting at the Y.W.C.A. Yun Sang-wŏn explained the new plan, and Father Kim Sŏng-nyong, a senior dissident who'd joined the Settlement Committee, encouraged the students with a short speech. Yun instructed the college students to replace the militia members guarding Province Hall; he suggested a gentle approach: "Why don't I take your place, so you can get some sleep?" A few leaders showed up at Province Hall to reemphasize this point. Each student received a carbine rifle and fifteen bullets.

New leadership's plans

Women from the Y.W.C.A. took over the kitchen at 11:00 p.m., replacing the high school girls who'd left when the Student Settlement Committee disbanded. These workers and members of White Pine Tree worked three shifts, one for each meal of the day.

The new leadership held an all-night meeting. Some felt that they had acted too





late—the many abandoned weapons that had piled up in Province Hall needed to be redistributed, lest the city end up defenseless. To fortify defensive lines on the outskirts of Gwangju, the leaders planned to mobilize the reserve army and create a self-defense unit in each district.

They also reviewed a plan to leverage the dynamite in Province Hall's makeshift armory. During negotiations, they would stall a military invasion by threatening to use this stockpile, which Hwasun miners had seized and donated to the insurgents. There was enough dynamite to wipe out half of Gwangju. But the leadership was not aware that a military spy had already defused all the detonators.

Even as the standoff continued, the leaders wanted the daily life of Gwangju to return to normal. They chose to concentrate on:

1. Restoring city bus schedules.
2. Getting civil servants and police back to work, though the police would be disarmed.
3. Persuading shop owners to reopen for business.
4. Cataloging the damage done by the military.
5. Distributing the city's rice reserves.
6. Restarting local newspapers.
7. Rationing the remaining fuel.
8. Reconnecting long-distance telephone lines.
9. Forming mobile patrol units.

They also decided to hold a press conference for foreign correspondents.

That evening, President Choi visited the regional Combined Arms Command (C.A.C.) to be briefed by So Chun-yŏl, the new commander, and by governor Chang Hyŏng-t'ae. The K.B.S. television and radio networks aired Choi's statement three times, but only in Gwangju. At 9:00, 10:00, and 10:30 p.m., his voice filled the airwaves: "The youth who took up arms in anger and excitement should surrender their weapons and go home, before it's too late. Since we are all brethren of the same nation, there are no problems that can't be settled through dialogue.... We should not forget the plain fact that the Communists in the North will exploit this standoff."

Choi also spoke to the soldiers mobilized for the invasion: "I appreciate your service, effort, and sacrifice—against all odds—in handling the Gwangju incident. You should always minimize the loss of life when dealing with a disturbance. Though their actions are not right, they are our people and brothers."





Days of Liberation V: May 26—Day nine of the uprising

A threatened city

At 5:00 a.m., the militia guarding the Korea Electricity and Power Co. reported that a tank column was headed toward Gwangju. The news reached the heart of the city via a commandeered radio. Province Hall went on full alert, and every militia member was mobilized and ready. The senior dissidents of the Settlement Committee went to the power plant and lay down on the road. They called out to the tanks, “If you’re coming for the city, you’ll have to run over us and kill us first!”

The tanks crushed the militia’s barricades and traveled half a mile to secure Korea Electricity and Power. One government commander threatened, “Remove the impure elements and instigators at any cost! Surrender your weapons and disperse! Otherwise, the military will not be responsible for what happens!” The leadership of the uprising analyzed the government’s movements: the tanks, by occupying the road to the expressway, had secured a transportation route for an all-out invasion. They also cut off the rebels’ fuel supply by blocking the reserves at Asia Motor.

As news of the attack spread, people gathered once again at Province Hall. By 10:00 a.m., tens of thousands of people had rallied. Angry citizens condemned the military, and a statement titled “To the national army” was read from the podium. One rebel wearing a reserve-army uniform made a fiery speech: “All members of the reserve army, rise up!” he urged. After the rally, thousands of high school students led a march around the city, chanting, “We will never surrender! Give up our weapons? No way! Rip the butcher Chun Doo Hwan to pieces!”

Activities of the new leadership

On the morning of May 26, the new leaders got to work. But in the flurry of activity after the military raid, they did not have the chance to build their organization.

The planning bureau restricted access to Province Hall, to keep the militia under control. It issued fuel coupons for registered vehicles, to ration fuel consumption, and used donated funds to requisition goods. It also managed and coordinated the general affairs of the Committee to Fight for Democracy.

The civil affairs bureau updated the list of casualties and handled the bodies in Sangmu Judo Studio. It also tried to fulfill some local administrative functions, and took down crime reports for referral to the investigations bureau.

That bureau, which had been so vulnerable to police infiltration, was reinforced





with activists. Anyone who looked suspicious was immediately thrown out. The militia patrol would typically catch and release people suspected of minor crimes, while suspected *agents provocateur* were transferred to the planning bureau.

The publicity bureau organized another mass rally, and tried to operate a local radio station and a local newspaper. The distribution bureau prepared funeral services and negotiated for food with province administrators. Yun Sang-wŏn, the group's spokesperson, worked with the press to build public support for the new leadership. In a bid to publicize the uprising, Yun held a press conference for domestic and foreign reporters. Many showed up: *Le Monde*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Baltimore Sun*, N.B.C., C.B.S., U.P.I., the A.P., Britain's *Sunday Times*, Japan's *Asahi*, N.H.K., and several others. Three South Korean papers, *Dong A*, *Kyonghyang*, and *Chonnam Daily* also participated. A Korean N.H.K. employee translated the hourlong event into English. Yun used flip-charts to explain the new leadership's plan and answer questions from the floor.³⁴

Pak Nam-sŏn, director of headquarters, helped establish the new mobile unit. Nineteen-year-old Yun Sŏkchu headed up the unit, and Yi Chae-ho, 33, became the assistant commander. There were thirteen cells of five or six militia members—each cell was armed with carbine rifles and issued a jeep and a radio. The cells patrolled the streets, performed reconnaissance, arrested suspects, and liaised with the militia throughout the city.

Pak Nam-sŏn developed a new deployment plan to thwart infiltrators and opponents. The director of headquarters would now take charge of the militia. Kim Chong-bae, Hŏ Kyu-jŏng, and Chŏng Sang-yong, the chair and vice chairs of the new leadership, attended the Settlement Committee's negotiations with province administrators. The talks were already underway. The activists demanded that the administration:

1. Provide the committee members with food and fuel.
2. Send forty coffins to Province Hall.
3. Supply ambulances for the city.
4. Normalize the flow of basic supplies.
5. Reorganize the police to handle minor criminals.
6. Restore the city bus schedule.
7. Organize a province-wide funeral.

34. Bradley Martin, who attended the press conference for *The Baltimore Sun*, recalled of Yun Sang-wŏn: "I was sitting directly across a coffee table from him... I was thinking that this man will be dead soon. His eyes were directly on mine, and I was thinking that he himself knew that he would be dead soon ... I looked at him, at his frizzy hair, unusual for a Korean, at the calm way about him that contrasted with the near hysteria of his armed, posturing, probably much younger comrades, and I had a clear sensation that he would die. The spokesman would not give his name. He said that was the policy of the student militants, although he was sure the army knew who he was. I looked at him and could not escape the knowledge of the future I saw in those eyes ... Finally, I asked him the question that was bothering me. It was obvious to any outsider, I said, that the army had overwhelming power to call upon whenever it might choose to strike and retake the city. Were the poorly armed student militants prepared to die in resisting or would they surrender? He replied calmly, his eyes gently insisting that the words be believed: 'We'll fight back to the last man.'" (Bradley Martin, *Yun Sang Wŏn: The Knowledge in Those Eyes*. This material previously appeared on the website www.ik.co.kr/kcs.book/yun.htm. It has since been removed and will soon be published as a book.)





The administration accepted most of these demands. Both sides agreed to hold a funeral on May 29, rebel leaders believing that the military would not invade before then. Vice-governor Chong Si-ch'ae ordered the rebels to surrender their weapons; they refused and demanded instead that the current government resign, or face the rebels' withdrawal from the negotiations. They read a seven-point people's resolution:

1. The Choi Kyu Ha interim government holds full responsibility for the current situation, and should resign after paying full reparations to the people of Gwangju.
2. Martial law, which justifies violence against the people, must be lifted immediately.
3. Execute the butcher Chun Doo Hwan for the sake of the nation.
4. Release dissident leaders and incorporate them into a national salvation government.³⁵
5. Stop putting out fake news to distort the uprising.
6. Our fundamental demand is not merely the unconditional release of arrestees and full compensation, but a truly democratic government.
7. We will fight to the death if our demands are not met.

The final rally

The fifth citywide rally for democracy was held at 3:00 p.m. Many in the crowd wore bandanas reading, "Lift martial law" or "Release the arrested." Rebel leaders announced the reserve-army mobilization plan. The people cheered.

One Buddhist monk—who'd be killed in the crackdown of May 27— made a moving speech. In quiet tones, he explained why, despite being pacifistic, he believed it was necessary to fight.

One man criticized the media: "Normally, felonies are widespread in the city. But in last ten days, how many have taken place? Two, maybe three. Isn't that important enough for the media to report? Five thousand rifles are out on the streets. Have the banks been robbed? The jewelry stores looted? I feel proud, grateful, and safe among the people of Gwangju. We did not disgrace the freedom that we paid for with our blood!"³⁶

The crowd applauded. During the rally, the fundraising drive continued. Four

35. The formation of a national salvation government, which would include representatives from all social groups and classes, with the exception of prominent capitalists and the military, was one of the main demands of South Korean activists in 1980. By making the same demand, the rebel leadership implied that the uprising had entered a new stage. They wanted to translate the spontaneous uprising into a more substantial political agenda.

36. Jean W. Underwood, an American missionary based in Gwangju in 1980, said of the uprising: "We heard of no violent or riot-type demonstrations before reports of airborne unit troops' attacks upon students. We heard of no non-violent demonstrations after reports began to circulate. Again, we heard of no violent or riot-type activities after the withdrawal of the forces of law and order from the city... There was definitely, absolutely no looting." (Underwood, J. "An American Missionary's View," in Kyung Moon Hwang & Gi-wook Shin (eds.), *Contentious Gwangju*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield



Christian leaders announced a push for ten million won (\$20,000), and gave the first one million won (\$2,000) to the new leadership.

Three times that morning, the martial-law command issued an ultimatum from vice-governor Chong. At 9:00 a.m., negotiators from the Settlement Committee had gone to the command to continue talks. The military once again demanded that the rebels give up their weapons, and promised to use cops instead of soldiers to retake the city. The military responded, alluding to an inevitable crackdown, "You have until 6:00 p.m. to give up your guns. This is all we have to say." Informants later reported that soldiers at the C.A.C. were treated to pork barbecue.

At 5:00 p.m., the military announced, "We cannot wait any longer!" The leadership hesitated to report this threat to the rest of Gwangju, but they believed in working on a solution democratically.

At the end of the rally, leaders announced that the military might well invade that night. The high spirits of the crowd dissipated, and the square sank into a grim silence; no one could bring herself to make eye contact. When the rally came to an end, everyone stayed put. It would be impossible to repel the military a second time, even with brilliant leadership. So many weapons had been abandoned, and the militia had shrunk in half.

As day turned to night, a high school girl began to sing sweetly from one corner of the square. The song was "Our Wish is Reunification:"

Our wish is reunification.

Even in our dreams, our wish is reunification.

With all our hearts, reunification.

Let's bring about reunification.

The crowd joined in to sing:

Reunification that revives this nation,

Reunification that revives this country,

Reunification, come true soon.

Reunification, come true.³⁷

Every last man and woman in the square started to march. Though many had already left, six thousand strong marched toward the military cordons surrounding the Korea Electricity and Power plant; by the time they approached, their number had swelled to more than thirty thousand. They stopped three hundred and thirty

(2003)).

37. This short but solemn song sums up South Korean feelings about reunification, which was not just about becoming one with the North. Because the military dictatorship had used North Korean aggression as a justification for crushing popular opposition, South Koreans saw national division as a barrier to achieving democracy. When Gwangju protesters sang this song during the uprising, they expressed hope for freedom.





feet from the cordons, and chanted, “Martial-law army, go away!” “Fight to the last!” and “Defend Gwangju!” The procession then looped back to the square; come nightfall, only one hundred and fifty people remained in the square.

A rally organizer shouted, “Leave the square, unless you are ready to die! We’ll fight to the death when the military invades tonight! We may all be killed!” But the small crowd stood still.

Just then, two ousted soft-liners, Kim Ch’ang-gil and Hwang Kŭmsŏn, arrived at Province Hall with some of their followers. They grabbed whomever they could, and exclaimed, “The martial-law army is coming! Get out of here quickly!” Kim Chong-bae and Yun Sang-wŏn tried to stop them. Director of headquarters, Pak Nam-sŏn, fired his forty-five-caliber pistol into the air and shouted, “Why are you selling us out to the military? Who wants to give up their guns? We are not going to put down our weapons!” A soft-liner snuck inside and began to speak through the public-address system. Pak rushed over, snatched the microphone, and yelled, “Does anyone care to surrender? Go ahead, I’ll kill you! Anyone saying we should abandon our weapons is a military agent!” Pak drew his gun on the intruders, who slipped away—but not before taking one hundred and fifty militia members with them. Those remaining at Province Hall had to choose between death and life. Someone raised his head and said, “Of course, we will be defeated. We could all be killed. The last days of the uprising were too solemn. We can’t just drop our weapons and let the military come in, without any resistance. To see this through, someone has to defend Province Hall with his life!”

They thought the uprising was finished. Protesters left the rally for Province Hall, but Yun Sang-wŏn instructed them to wait at the Y.W.C.A. The Settlement Committee fled. Vice-governor Chong said to Kim Chong-bae, “The students should not be killed. I will tell you when I am informed of the invasion. You students, just sneak out of Province Hall!” Kim Chong-bae replied bitterly, “So it’s okay for the militia to be killed while the students just run away?”

Military tactics and operations

The military had retreated from the city on May 21, after two days of battling a formidable resistance. But the decision was also tactical. The military had employed significant counter-operations to retake the city, instigating division and distrust among the insurgents—a kind of psychological warfare.

During the five-day liberation:

1. The military isolated Gwangju from the rest of the country, to contain the uprising. The government portrayed the city as being awash in anarchy; the media under its sway claimed that people were hoarding. In one case, the





government cited a recent triple murder as evidence of the militias' brutality—even though the homicides had in fact resulted from a family dispute, and the crime rate during liberation was lower than under government rule. In a more absurd attempt at isolation, the government claimed to have captured a North Korean spy in Seoul, on May 23. The spy was said to have been smuggling large amounts of hallucinogenic drugs into Gwangju.

2. The military cut off access to supplies: fuel, ammunition, and manpower. Using helicopters and ground troops, state forces ambushed armed demonstrators trying to enter the city. Soldiers were assigned to every hill looking over Gwangju, and armed demonstrators from Hwasun and Yŏng-gwang counties were gunned down. On May 21, thirty armed protesters who'd left the city could not get back in; the road was blocked. The rebels dropped their weapons, believing that the military would then let them reenter. But they were immediately arrested and transferred to the C.A.C.
3. *Agents provocateur* instigated widespread division. Military agents in black shirts mingled with the crowds outside Province Hall, radioing in intelligence. The investigations bureau arrested a man and a woman who claimed to be civil servants coming to the city for medical tests; when a mini tape recorder and a camera were found in their possession, the rebels concluded that they were central-government agents. Many police officers infiltrated the investigations bureau before the activists and hard-liners seized control. At Province Hall, they captured and tortured rebels. The poison-dart incident was a major attempt to break the leadership, and in another such attempt, an *agent provocateur* produced shell casings from lead bullets to suggest that North Korean spies were in the militia, stoking fears at headquarters.
4. Agents sabotaged militia facilities and vehicles. They defused the detonators from dynamite, punctured tires, and removed key components from rebel amplifiers. They also disconnected long-distance telephone lines.

Despite these assaults by the military, Gwangju had five days of liberation. The insurgent regime was stable, governed by radical new leaders. The military—in the face of international condemnation, the spread of the uprising, and a deepening economic crisis—would resort to yet another brutal crackdown.





Chapter IV: The End of the Uprising

May 27 — The final battle

There was a drizzle the evening of May 26, when the rally concluded and only those willing to fight to the death remained. Organizers focused on recruiting military veterans for this final push: of the one hundred and fifty people who agreed to stay, eighty had completed compulsory military service, ten were female, and the rest were high school students. They gathered in the auditorium of the Y.M.C.A. to form combat cells. When the women's bureau brought them food, they joked that it was their Last Supper. Women in the rebellion took up various tasks: some formed a medical squad, some patrolled the city, and some demanded weapons for battle. Those with military experience were deployed to the blocks surrounding Province Hall; others were placed inside the hall and at the Y.M.C.A.

After forming the cells, Yun Sang-wŏn, Pak Nam-sŏn, Kim Chong-bae, Chŏng Sang-yong, and the rest of the leadership met to strategize. Meanwhile, a retired lieutenant and a reserve-army commander ran new militia members through shooting drills.

Seventy members of the women's bureau stayed on at the Y.M.C.A., including the wives of rebel leaders, reporters for the *Democratic Citizens' Bulletin*, cooks, and guards. Some of them took sanctuary at a nearby church after confirming the government's imminent attack.

- At Province Hall, Pak Nam-sŏn, commander of the rebel forces, led the deployment of the militia and prepared for battle. Troops reported to their stations, as follows, by 11:00 p.m.:
- Kyerim Elementary School: thirty people dispatched from Province Hall;
- Yu-tong Junction: ten from headquarters;
- Tngnim Mountain: twenty (with an additional fifty to two hundred army reservists who spontaneously formed a line of defense);
- Chŏnil Building: forty (with access to a light machine gun);
- Chŏnnam University Hospital: unknown number (with access to a light machine gun);
- Sŏbang Market: unknown number;
- Hak-tong, Chiwŏn-tong, and Hagwŏn-tong: thirty reservists led by Mun Chang-ho.



In addition, an impromptu line of defense circled Gwangju Park and the outskirts of the city, while two to five hundred people remained at Province Hall.

Casualty numbers are impossible to determine. Some estimates put three or four hundred people in the hall earlier in the day, and one hundred and fifty fewer at night; others point to the three hundred and fifty people captured and detained by the military after battle, to say that at least one hundred and fifty died. Still others maintain that a sizeable group fled with Kim Ch'ang-gil, the soft-line rebel leader, and that the three hundred and fifty military prisoners included those captured just outside the city.

The forces in front of Province Hall were tightly arranged into two- and three-person teams situated every few yards. Only forty people were stationed in the annex, toward the rear of the building; the rest of the cells manned the civil-service building, the basement armory, the first-floor kitchen, and the third-floor mess hall. Fifty were deployed to the second floor with additional weapons and dynamite. Mobile units went on reconnaissance patrols throughout the city, reporting on the movement of government troops and sporadic skirmishes.

Between life and death

The leaders of the uprising had gone without sleep, and with very little food, for days. They were nourished, it seemed, by their commitment to the cause.

Around sunset, the screams of a teenage boy rung out in the streets—paratroopers had murdered his sister. He ran to Province Hall, yelling, “Give me a gun. I can fight, too!” But by later that night, he, too, would be shot dead by the government army.

A rebel leader came across two young men—a freshman at Chŏnnam University and a young man studying for his college-entrance exams—in the Province Hall yard at 7:00 p.m. They had joined the demonstrations on May 18, but subsequently been forced into hiding by their parents. Now, they’d returned to battle, moved by the murder of three friends and news of the imminent invasion. They attended the final rally and joined a combat cell; they did not survive.

The students assembled at Province Hall were required to inform their parents of their involvement. Mothers and fathers begged the youth not to throw their lives away, and some relented. Families all over Gwangju called Province Hall to ask about their children.

At 10:00 p.m., one leader said goodbye to his wife, a fellow rebel who was going home to their children. “If nothing happens tonight,” he told her, “please help prepare meals for tomorrow. If the children want to see me, bring them tomorrow. Pray for our safe reunion.” His wife sobbed quietly, in her husband’s arms. After she left, he resumed his work in the hall.

Pak Yong-jun, an orphan and shoeshine worker, would die defending the





Y.W.C.A. In a moving note, he wrote:³⁸

If you want our blood, my Lord, I will dedicate this small body of mine to You. Lord, what am I? I am a feeble being, a man trapped in a miserable existence. Lord, I have tried to live without shame or guilt. Please pour more pain, more agony, and more hardship on me, to give me the power and wisdom to overcome this world. The people spit upon us orphans, the scum of the earth. My brothers, my young brothers—is there nothing I can do for them? Will they live and die as trash, ever more burdened, after my death? Lord, what should I do? What is conscience? Why do you put me under such a heavy yoke? Must I beg you for the strength to serve? Then, I will do it Lord. Help me, and forgive us all in Your name—and mercy and love for the world.

The rebels fell asleep in their chairs and on top of desks, cradling their guns. It had been just two days since they'd seized power. Even though they would never get to put their plans into action, they had no regrets.

“Emergency! Emergency!”

It was May 27, the tenth and final day of the uprising. The operations room stirred, and every light in Province Hall was turned out. In the darkness, the stench of rotting corpses mingled with spiced incense wafting through the building. Militia cells watching over the empty streets realized that they had never encountered the smell of death.

At 11:50 p.m., the rebels tapped a special administrative phone line to place a call to the capital:

- “This is Gwangju Provincial Hall. Are government forces on their way?”
- “I’m not sure. But as far as I know, there are no plans for tonight.”
- “If they invade, don’t think we won’t do it. We will blow ourselves up with dynamite.”

The long-distance lines were subsequently disconnected—a prelude to the invasion. The publicity bureau decided, spur of the moment, to broadcast a public message. Pak Yong-sun, a twenty-one-year-old at Songwŏn Polytechnic College, drove through the city until 3:00 a.m., shouting over and over: “Citizens, government troops are

38. Pak was a student in Yun Sang-Wŏn’s Wildfire school, and played a key role in laying out the *Militants’ Bulletin*. His friends persuaded him to leave Province Hall before the military attacked, but he went on to defend the nearby Y.W.C.A., a rebel meeting place during the uprising.





invading. Their guns and swords will kill our beloved brothers and sisters. The time has come! Rise up and fight! We will defend Gwangju to the death. Do not forget us.”

Most residents could not sleep, though the city was quiet. The young woman’s words were seared into their memories.

Reserve troops surrounding the Y.M.C.A. took up their positions, as did the thirty men stationed at Kyerim Elementary School. There, they entrenched themselves behind the school’s fence and around an overpass, in anticipation of government soldiers coming in from the Gwangju Penitentiary and the Provincial Thirty-first Division command.

At 2:00 a.m., fifty women at the Y.W.C.A. fled to a nearby church. Twenty men, but only ten guns, were left behind—so the remainder sought rifles at Province Hall. Yun Sang-won had them line up, single file, in front of the armory—a crash course in military training. To screen the young men, he ordered them to sit, then stand at attention, dozens of times. They all passed the test.

At 2:30, all of Province Hall was on full alert. The exhausted rebels assumed their posts, and leaders Yun Sangwŏn, Kim Yong-ch’ol, and Yi Yang-hyŏn held hands in farewell. “We will meet again in the next world,” they said to one another. Pak Nam-sŏn, commander of headquarters, gave final orders. *Do not shoot first; there isn’t enough ammunition. Don’t fire until you’re told and at close range.*

Allies on the outskirts of Gwangju called rebel headquarters with step-by-step reports on the progress of government troops. Mobile units radioed in additional information. The artillery fire roared like thunder, and flare bombs and tracers lit up the sky with moments of daylight. At first, state forces shot their M-16s indiscriminately, at any sign of life, even in residential areas.

The mobile unit reported that a group of tanks had simultaneously raided the entrances of Chiwŏn-tong, Sŏbang, and the Korea Electricity and Power plant simultaneously. The military invaded by the following routes:

- Chiwŏn-tong — Gwangju River — south flank of Province Hall (Twentieth Division);
- Chiwŏn-tong — Hak-tong — Chŏnnam University Hospital — rear of Province Hall;
- Paengwŏn-tong — Hanil Bank — front gate of Province Hall;
- Hwach’ong-tong — Yangdong — Yu-tong Junction Road — Kŭmnam Avenue — front gate of Province Hall;
- Sŏbang — Kyerim Elementary School — City Hall — north flank of Province Hall (Thirty-first Division).

The Seventh Special Warfare Brigade raided Gwangju Park, the Third raided Province Hall, and the Eleventh took the Tourist Hotel and the Chŏnil Building. All four battles were bloody.





Here is the sequence of events, based on reports made by the invading troops to Capital Defense Corps headquarters in Seoul:

- 3:30 a.m. – Operation begins.
- 4:10 a.m. – First raid on Province Hall.
- 4:11 a.m. – Third Special Warfare Brigade raids Province Hall.
- 4:30 a.m. – Seventh Special Warfare Brigade raids Gwangju Park.
- 4:40 a.m. – Eleventh Special Warfare Brigade raids Tourist Hotel and Chõnil Building.
- 4:53 a.m. – Mob resistance countered with support of Sixty-first Regiment.
- 4:55 a.m. – Province Hall recaptured.
- 5:04 a.m. – Deployment around Gwangju Infantry School completed.
- 5:05 a.m. – Gwangju Park secured.
- 5:10 a.m. – Sixty-second Regiment deployed as backup at Province Hall.
- 5:20 a.m. – Second battalion, Sixty-first Regiment enters Gwangju Police Station.
- 5:22 a.m. – Mop-up of rebel remnants completed.

The end

At 3:40 a.m., at the overpass near Kyerim Elementary School, a thirty-man militia cell led by a reserve-army commander faced off against state forces. During the ten-minute offensive, government soldiers managed to jump the fence separating the Kyerim and Sansu elementary schools, and overwhelm the rebels. The commander signaled for a retreat and, with twenty remaining men, ran toward Kyerim's main entrance. They scaled a seven-foot-tall fence to gain a superior position, but faced a counterattack from the rear of nearby Gwangju High School. The insurgents became trapped along the northern fence; their commander escaped into a private home. As the gunfire receded, he saw that he had been shot in the thigh. He had no idea what had happened to his fellow rebels, but assumed that most had been killed.

Shots were heard around 3:30 a.m. at Province Hall. Young men trying to reach the building were apprehended and arrested in the hundreds; anyone who attempted to flee was shot. Inside headquarters, the leaders discussed whether to blow themselves up with hand grenades. One young man stepped forward and gave a tearful speech: "All high-school students should surrender," he said. "They must survive to be witnesses to history. For the sake of national reunification and democracy, we can't let this uprising end in self-defeat. High-school students, leave first."

By 4:00 a.m., a street battle had erupted along Kūmnam Avenue, and Province Hall was surrounded by tanks. As a searchlight shined on the hall, the government issued its ultimatum: "This will be your only warning. Your mob is completely surrounded. Give up your weapons and surrender."

The rebels responded by shooting out the searchlight. In the darkness that



followed, government troops fired their M-16s, jumped into clusters of insurgents, and drew forty rebels from the back of Province Hall. Paratroopers shot at random, and rebels fell in ones and twos, as the sun began to rise.

Yun Sang-wŏn was among the fifty insurgents on the second floor of the civil-service building, which was being used as a mess hall. They fired on invading troops, and dodged bullets coming from below. A high schooler screamed and collapsed onto the floor. Yun crawled over to him, and tried to shake him back into consciousness. “Hey, wake up!” he yelled. But when Yun lifted the boy up, his head fell back—he was already dead.

As Yun ran back to his position, a bullet tore through him. “Brother Yun!” the other rebels shouted. Yun did not respond, and dark blood oozed from his side. His body was covered with a blanket.

Shortly thereafter, someone screamed, “No bullets, no ammunition!” and the few remaining survivors retreated to a nearby room. Paratroopers fired through the hallway windows; the rebels shot back, grabbing bullets from the bodies of the dead, and tried to duck under the line of fire. When all the ammunition was spent, they declared defeat.

“Give us your weapons,” the military demanded. “Point it at yourself and slide it through the window.” The soldiers rushed in with guns and grenades, calling for surrender. In one room, three rebels crawled out from behind a file cabinet; a total of ten survivors were forced face-down to the steps, their hands tied behind their backs.

In one case, a paratrooper pointed both his M-16 and a confiscated M-2 carbine at a captive’s head. When the rebel tried to run, the soldier shot him dead. He then turned the carbine onto eight insurgents whose hands were raised in surrender. As they approached the yard, he mowed them down, and joked to a rebel underfoot, “How was that? Was it like a movie?”

Ten out of forty rebels on the second floor were captured. Later, survivors would testify that at least thirty were killed. There was no place to hide.

Meanwhile, the two paratroopers who’d shot their way through Province Hall ran up to the second floor. Mimicking the insurgents, they fired into the yard—and convinced more than one dying militia member that he’d been killed by his own men. As more paratroopers stormed the second floor, the rebels ran, barricading doors with desks and file cabinets.

Two rebels, trapped inside a room, waited with their guns pointed at the door. They had a few bullets left. “We are going to die. Let’s kill as many as we can,” one man said. The other shook his head: “No. We might be executed after a military trial. It would be better to speak, to make a statement before we die.” They heard screams next door.

In another room, three rebels blocked the door with a file cabinet and waited for the soldiers to approach. They heard a knock on the door—it was a high-school





student. Just then, a soldier shouted, “Bastards, drop your weapons. Come out before I count to seven, or I’ll throw a grenade!” The screams outside continued. “If we surrender, we can live,” one man said, and gave up their guns.

Many rebels were captured—tied up and held face-down, and shot for so much as a stray look. As morning broke, corpses were pulled out of rooms, and survivors cried out in pain: one man’s arm was nearly severed by bullets. Each rebel was forced to point his gun at himself in surrender; government forces seized the men’s weapons, and beat them viciously, kicking them in the back and the head. The paratroopers labeled their captives with a permanent marker: “Extremely violent,” “10 bullets,” “handgun,” etc.

The survivors—smeared with blood, blinded by broken glass—were forced to crawl down the steps, and were kicked along the way. They were loaded onto military vehicles. The foreign reporters who’d interviewed the rebels just a day earlier were now witnesses to their defeat.³⁹

The attack on the Y.W.C.A. began at dawn. Propaganda teams, high school students, and workers were defending it. Government troops peppered the area with machine-gun fire before moving in from the front and back. A building employee yelled, “We are unarmed! Please let us live!” The soldiers shouted for the rebels to evacuate, and the rebels obeyed. But as they began to walk out, undressed and with their hands in the air, the troops shot them dead.

Pak Yong-jun was killed by paratroopers behind the main entrance of the Y.W.C.A. The reading-club office on the second floor was coated in blood, the books turned to confetti. Across the street, in the Chõnil Building, every single rebel fought to the death.

Come morning, the last remaining insurgent walked through a maze of bodies to surrender. The injured, and more than a hundred and fifty dead, were transported out of Gwangju. Survivors were assigned to various military prisons, according to their alleged deeds: “loitering around Province Hall,” “possessing weapons,” or “being a special member of the mob.” As they were bound and loaded into government trucks, they pictured their fallen comrades. The days and nights of Gwangju were seared into their memories, and would haunt them forever.

39. The foreign correspondents stayed at the Tourist Hotel. Terry Anderson remembers that night: “As light grew, I saw two paratroopers on the top of the building [Province Hall] just fifteen or twenty yards away [from the hotel]. Taking my camera, I cautiously crouched at the window, trying to take a picture. [Two] men spotted me, then opened up with their M-16s. The first bullet struck inches from my ear, and I threw myself into a corner... When the soldiers began shooting through the thin, lath-and-plaster wall, we dove frantically out of the room into the hallway. We had believed the government knew this hotel was occupied by foreign press, but either no one had told the soldiers or they didn’t care... The attack on the headquarters was the end of the battle, though occasional gunfire continued for an hour or so. As the foreign press—including one camera crew—emerged from the hotel, we encountered a senior army sergeant seated and trembling from adrenaline. He pointed his rifle at us and shouted in Korean. We waved our press passes, but he refused to allow us to pass. Just then, a colonel drove up in a jeep. We pushed past the sergeant and called out to him, ‘Colonel, how many casualties?’ The officer, who had the name Kim sewn above his shirt pocket, responded, ‘two rebels and one soldier were killed,’ then strode away. In a small group, we walked through the fence around the provincial building and counted seventeen bodies. One was the rebels’ press spokesman [Yun Sang-won], his body partially burned and the magazine of a .45 caliber pistol lying near his hand.” (T. Anderson, *Remembering Gwangju*.)







Gwangju Diary: The View from Washington

By Tim Shorrock

A look back

As I revise this essay, in May 2017, South Korea prepares for a Presidential election, following the historic impeachment of Park Geun-hye. For many Koreans, it's an exciting time that marks a new stage in the country's long march toward democracy. The mass candlelight movement that led to the impeachment feels especially poignant from my desk in Gwangju, the cradle of the revolution. I am here this spring, working with the city's 5.18 Archives to investigate decisions made by the U.S., in May 1980, to put down the citizen rebellion with military force.

In recent months, new questions have been raised about those decisions made so long ago. On May 21, 1980, the day now known for the "Gwangju Massacre," Korean military helicopters fired on at least one building in downtown Gwangju. Since this fact was confirmed, earlier this year, the city has asked for a national investigation into that action and who gave the orders to shoot. The documents I obtained over a period of years, which are described in this chapter, don't provide any answers. But in reading through "The View from Washington" years after writing it, I was struck by the fact that May 21 was a turning point for the Carter administration and the Pentagon, as they watched the events unfold. What happened that day likely convinced the U.S. to rely on the Korean military to restore "law and order," in the words of U.S. officials.

By the afternoon of May 21, Gwangju had experienced three days of violence at the hands of Korean paratroopers. Citizens had tried to fight back, using taxis, buses, and weapons against the soldiers, and angering military commanders in the process. At 1 p.m. that day, the martial-law forces suddenly opened fire on thousands gathered in the streets. Some of the volleys came from the rooftops, where military snipers had set up their weapons. When the shooting stopped, more than fifty people were dead, and hundreds more had serious injuries. Believing that their lives were at risk, students and workers raided police stations in nearby towns, armed





themselves with carbines and other weapons, and began firing back. By day's end, the Gwangju citizen army had pushed the martial-law forces of Chun Doo Hwan out of the city. May 21 is still celebrated as "citizens' day"—marking Gwangju's liberation from Chun's marauding troops. But it wasn't seen that way in Washington.

Reports from the city began to sound increasingly dire. William Gleysteen, then U.S. ambassador to Korea, sent a cable to Washington: "The massive insurrection in Gwangju," he wrote, is "out of control and poses an alarming situation for the R.O.K. military who have not faced a similar internal threat for at least two decades." The fact that this "threat" was, in reality, a response to murderous state troops apparently did not matter to the U.S. government. Within a matter of hours—at the White House meeting documented in my story below—the Carter administration would decide on a course of action leading to the dispatch of Korean troops, under the Combined Forces Command, to "retake" Gwangju from the rebels. In the context of the helicopter revelations, these events and decisions demand further investigation and accountability from both Korean and U.S. authorities.

In reviewing my FOIA documents for possible updates, however, I found very little to add to my original piece. A few years ago, the State Department agreed to fully declassify some of the cable traffic between Gleysteen and his superiors in Washington. These new documents shows that Gleysteen, as I describe below, did in fact warn Chun about a military overreaction on May 9, 1980, as the late ambassador often claimed. However, he never backed off his original guarantees that Washington would "not oppose" Chun's contingency plan: to end the worker- and student-led "democratic spring" of 1980 with military help. The U.S. remains complicit with Chun in these decisions; history has not changed that judgment.

Gwangju, therefore, continues to represent one of the most important rebellions of the Cold War, and one of the only times in the twentieth century that a people's movement stood up to a superpower—in this case, the U.S. and its military ally—and prevailed, at least for a time. I continue to be amazed by the spirit of 5.18 and the people of Gwangju. As an honorary citizen, I stand with the city in its search for truth.

Gwangju Diary: the view from Washington

On May 21, 1980, the international media and human-rights groups in Asia began broadcasting news of a terrible event that had taken place in Gwangju, South Korea. After a group of army officers, led by Lieutenant General Chun Doo Hwan, declared martial law and seized control of the government, paratroopers wearing black berets had massacred protesters. Students and youth had been shot in cold blood, and others had been torn apart with bayonets; scores, possibly hundreds, were dead. Desperate messages streamed out of Gwangju and Seoul, pleading for outside intervention and help from the U.S., whose President, Jimmy Carter, had





promised, in 1976, to make human rights the cornerstone of his foreign policy.

But the citizens of South Korea, like those in the Philippines and Indonesia, learned that President Carter had no desire to offend a friendly dictator at the height of the Cold War. Early in the morning of May 27, with approval from the U.S. commander of the joint U.S.-South Korean military command, the Twentieth Division of the Korean Army invaded Gwangju's city center, and crushed a ragtag army of young students and workers who had taken up arms. As the press flashed images of dead or shackled rebels being dragged through the streets, Carter's military and security advisers, led by Richard Holbrooke, Assistant Secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, coldly explained that they had instructed U.S. commanders to release Korean troops from the joint command to restore "stability" in South Korea and "maintain the national interests of the United States." They conveyed the message, well understood in Korea since the 1940s, that American officials viewed the peninsula as a problem child of U.S. foreign policy; the Korean people and their democratic notions were no more than an annoyance amid global tensions.

This tone was set by President Carter himself, on June 1, 1980, in a nationally televised interview on CNN. After admitting that "there is no doubt... democratization has been given a setback" in Korea, he was asked by journalist Daniel Schorr if U.S. policy there reflected the conflict between human rights and national security then raging within his administration. "There is no incompatibility" between the two concepts, Carter snapped. In his judgment, he told Schorr, South Korea in 1980 typified a situation where "the maintenance of a nation's security from Communist subversion or aggression is a prerequisite to the honoring of human rights and the establishment of democratic processes." While he of course preferred to see "every nation on earth democratic," he continued, the U.S. "can't sever our relationships with our allies and friends and trading partners and turn them all over to Soviet influence, and perhaps even subversion and takeover, simply because they don't measure up to our standards of human rights." The arrogance of his statement was stunning—to dismiss mass murder as not measuring up to "our standards"—as was his reasoning: the uprising and anguish in Gwangju had been reduced to another global Communist plot. It was one more nagging dilemma for American diplomats fighting in the trenches of the Cold War.

The national security mentality was personified by Holbrooke, who had worked his way up the State Department ladder by dutifully serving United States interests in Vietnam and the Philippines before being named Assistant Secretary for East Asia and the Pacific by Carter. As Bruce Cumings reminds us in his penetrating introduction to this book, Holbrooke suggested to Congress during the crisis that Americans were paying far too much "attention to Kwangjoo" without proper consideration of the "broad questions" of Korean and U.S. security interests. General John A. Wickham, Jr., the U.S. military commander in Korea who signaled U.S. support for Chun in an infamous interview with the Associated Press in August





1980, later suggested that Koreans were “lemmings” who would follow anybody with a military uniform. And who can forget that, eight months later, Chun Doo Hwan, the man responsible for the carnage in Gwangju, was walking the corridors of the White House as an honored guest of President Reagan?

The book in your hands, *Gwangju Diary*, reminds us of the vast distance between the official American view of Korea and the perceptions and experiences of Koreans themselves. It is the story of how students, workers, and residents came together in anger, sorrow, and hope to fight an army trained to kill North Koreans and backed by the most powerful country in the world. Against these great odds, the Gwangju citizen army liberated the city and much of the surrounding area. The diary is filled with compelling and sometimes haunting images that express the humanity of this proud city: a sex worker washing the feet of dead comrades; a revolt by taxi drivers sickened to see youth killed by their own countrymen; elders protecting students and paying with their lives; young workers and members of a theatre troupe rousing the crowds; and the piercing voice of a twenty-one-year-old woman rebel just before the dawn raid, on May 27, that would take her life.

Only after years of further democratic struggle, as recounted in Lee Jae-eui's preface to this translation, was the diary published and read by Koreans. In 1987, after nationwide protests had forced Chun to step aside and made way for the first-ever open presidential elections, the Korean parliament opened an investigation into the massacre. But the U.S. government offered little help. The Bush I Administration refused to allow either former ambassador Gleysteen or General Wickham, the top U.S. officials in Korea in 1980, to testify at the hearings. But in response to a parliamentary request, the State Department did compile a detailed white paper on Gwangju. The report blamed the entire episode on Chun, and concluded that the U.S. had no warning that special forces would take part in the crackdown on May 17, 1980. United States officials “were alarmed by reports of plans to use military units to back up the police in dealing with student demonstrations” and “had neither authority over nor prior knowledge of the movement of the Special Warfare Command units to Gwangju,” it stated.

As a journalist who followed the events in Gwangju from the beginning, I had a hard time believing the official story. In 1991, I filed the first of many requests under the Freedom of Information Act (F.O.I.A.) for all U.S. government documents relating to Gwangju and U.S. policy in South Korea in 1979 and 1980. It took several years, but I finally obtained most of what I was looking for by late 1995. My stories based on the materials were published in February 1996, a few days before Chun Doo Hwan went on trial for his crimes in Gwangju. In contrast to the portrait of the befuddled, detached U.S. diplomats portrayed in the white paper, U.S. officials, from the embassy to military headquarters, were deeply involved with Chun and the Korean military in cracking down on those demonstrating in the streets, universities, and factories in the spring of 1980. It is now clear that U.S. officials were



aware of the key role being played by Chun's special forces in Gwangju.

On May 9, 1980, government cables showed, Gleysteen met with Chun to discuss how to handle the student protests planned for the next few days. These street actions were organized after Chun, who'd shot his way to control of the military on December 12, 1979, appointed himself head of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (K.C.I.A.) in April. Chun and Gleysteen had clashed frequently and bitterly over human rights (Gleysteen told me in an interview that Chun once referred to him as "governor-general," the title of the colonial overseers during Japanese colonialism). But in this meeting, Gleysteen and Chun set aside their differences and agreed on a common policy. With the approval of Warren Christopher, then Carter's deputy secretary of state, Gleysteen told Chun that the U.S. would not oppose the Korean military's "contingency plans to maintain law and order, if absolutely necessary, by reinforcing the police with the army." While those communications were not a green light for mass murder, they were clearly intended to signal that a military crackdown on civil unrest was an acceptable, if not desirable, strategy in Washington.⁴⁰

In another damning cable, dated May 8, the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency reported to the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Pentagon that Korean special forces were on nationwide alert. It also noted that the Seventh Special Forces Brigade (which, as recounted in the diary, was responsible for the worst brutalities in Gwangju) "was probably targeted against unrest" at local universities. The cable also noted that special forces "had been receiving extensive training in riot control," and had been "ready and willing to break heads" in the riots that shook the port city of Busan a week before Park was shot dead by the head of the K.C.I.A., in October. Gleysteen also reported the deployment of special forces in the week leading up to May 17 in his cables to Washington. In other words, while encouraging "moderation," U.S. officials knew very well that soldiers trained to fight behind the lines in a future war with North Korea were being deployed against South Korean citizens fighting for democracy.

These revelations hit South Korea like a time bomb. I broke the story in the *Journal of Commerce* on February 27, 1996, and the next day, after it was picked up by every major Korean newspaper, students chanting "Kick out the Americans!"

40. In his book on Gwangju, *Massive Entanglement, Marginal Influence*, Gleysteen criticized me for using his words "out of context to insinuate that I effectively endorsed the Korean mind-set and military deployments that led to the Gwangju killings." Pointing specifically to my *Journal of Commerce* articles, he added that, "having spent so much of my time in Seoul counseling restraint and moderation, I find such accusations offensive." But a summary of Gleysteen's meeting with Choi Kwang Soo, then an official at the Blue House, leaves little doubt about his stance. The memo of that meeting, which was fully declassified in 2005, repeats Gleysteen's expression of understanding "about the need to maintain law and order" and the Carter administration's pledge that, "we would not obstruct development of military contingency plans." However, as Gleysteen claims in his book, the memo also shows that he "emphasized the importance of trying not to help student ringleaders by actions that would appear excessive to moderate students and the man in the street." As Gleysteen told his superiors in Washington, "I was pleased to hear that President Choi and General Chun were so reluctant to use the military because of the dangers of killings and a rapid erosion of public support. I urged that the greatest care be used in dealing with ringleaders or politicians who were suspected of being unhelpful." These were hollow promises. Yet the truth remains: the U.S. government "would not obstruct" Chun's plans for a military solution to the crisis, in effect siding with the generals against the Korean people. I took nothing out of context.





threw eggs at the U.S. Embassy in Seoul, and demanded an apology from Ambassador James Laney. In Gwangju, more than five hundred students faced off with riot police in front of the U.S. Cultural Center. The next month, the Korean government obtained a full set of my F.O.I.A. documents from the State Department and turned them over to prosecutors in the Chun trial. *Hankyoreh*, a Seoul newspaper founded by journalists purged during the Park and Chun eras, kept the controversy alive by publishing full translations of the documents in a series that ran for weeks. But while the story was a sensation in Seoul, it received virtually no coverage in the U.S. media—with the exception of a detailed story in *The Washington Post*. *The New York Times*, which provided some of the best coverage of the Gwangju uprising and its aftermath, never mentioned the new information in relation to the Chun trial or Kim Dae Jung's rise to power.⁴¹

So what was America's Korea policy in 1980? Government records and the many interviews I have conducted about Gwangju lead me to conclude that the events of that year were the logical result of a covert policy, hatched in the days following the assassination of Park Chung Hee. The policy was to preserve the remnants of Park's military-industrial security state, and pressure Korean opposition groups to moderate demands for a complete break with Korea's dictatorial past—a position U.S. officials considered "extremist." In classic Cold War fashion, the Carter administration tried to create a third force of Park holdovers, friendly generals, and malleable politicians as an alternative to Chun's military hard-liners or opposition leaders such as Kim Dae Jung. Kim was reviled by the Korean military and, as U.S. officials frequently noted in their cables, would be blocked from taking power, even if elected president.

The tendency to see Korean friction as occurring between right and left "extremes," and not between a military-industrial elite and popular democratic forces, was best summed up by Gleysteen, who carried out U.S. policy in Korea that spring. In a 1996 interview, he seemed genuinely pained by what had happened under his watch. I asked why he had supported the U.S. decision to use force in Gwangju, when he knew that the uprising was triggered by the murderous rampage of Chun's special forces. "The point is, law and order was gone; it was chaos," Gleysteen replied. "Both sides at that point were rather equivalent." It is striking that, sixteen years later, he still believed that the Gwangju rebels and the Korean military units sent to kill them were morally "equivalent." I explore such contradictions in this essay.

41. I later learned why. In 1996, the same year my *Journal of Commerce* stories were published, I spent a few months working at my newspaper's Tokyo bureau, and met some *The New York Times* staffers there. One of them told me that his bureau chief, Nicholas Kristof, who won a Pulitzer for his coverage of China's Tiananmen massacre, contacted the U.S. Embassy when he learned of my new documents. The embassy, my *Times* source told me, informed Kristof that my documents were "an old story" that didn't shed any new light on what had happened in Gwangju. So Kristof didn't write anything on the revelations, even as the *Times* was covering Chun Doo Hwan's trial. A few years later, I heard a nearly identical story from Teresa Watanabe, who was then a reporter for *The Los Angeles Times* in Tokyo. In a conversation in 2000, she told me that her bureau chief got the same advice from the embassy—and followed it. What a pathetic commentary on our "independent" press.





Korean democracy vs. Cold War politics

One of the most poignant, and ultimately tragic, beliefs held by Korean dissidents in the 1980s, was the belief that the United States would side with the democracy movement over military dictators. As Lee Jai-eui movingly recalls at the beginning of his book, when the people of Gwangju heard that the U.S. aircraft carrier Coral Sea was being diverted to the Korean peninsula during the uprising, “the insurgents were naively hopeful. ‘The U.S. is coming to help us,’ people thought. ‘If it knows about the massacre, the U.S. government will not forgive Chun Doo Hwan and his clique!’” But behind this conviction, which was reinforced by President Carter’s stated commitment to human rights, Korean activists also understood that the U.S. was motivated by broader concerns with regional security and the preservation of its interests in Asia. This line of thinking emerged on May 16, as students debated their choices on the eve of Chun’s military coup.

“The dominant opinion” during the meeting “held that in principle, the U.S. is the world leader of neoimperialism and is responsible for holding back the national reunification of Korea,” Lee wrote. “Nevertheless, at this stage, democratic reforms in South Korea were in Washington’s interest. The U.S. would not want radicals to incite anti-American feelings as part of the resistance against military rule. The students imagined that the United States would welcome reforms as long as those reforms did not run counter to its interests in the region. If the pro-democracy movement intensified, the U.S., to avoid another Iran-style fiasco, would cooperate in transferring political power from the military to a civilian parliament. For the activists, the most important task was leading the movement to the point where the U.S. would intervene on the side of democracy.”

In fact, this analysis was amazingly close to the truth, and reveals how attuned Koreans were to the true nature of U.S. policy. Conversely, it also showed how estranged U.S. decision-makers were from the goals of the Korean democracy movement. As Holbrooke wrote in a secret cable to Gleysteen, shortly after Park’s assassination, the overriding concern in Washington was to keep South Korea from turning into “another Iran,” meaning any “action which would in any way appear to unravel a situation and lead to chaos or instability in a key American ally.”

Recall for a moment the context of that movement, in 1979 and 1980. The political unrest that erupted in Korea, in the fall of 1979, and the shocking assassination of Park at the hands of his intelligence director, on October 26, 1979, created a sense of panic within the Carter administration. At a time of rising tensions with Iran and the Soviet Union, Holbrooke and other officials feared that a political confrontation in South Korea could spark a revolution similar to that which toppled the dictator Syngman Rhee, in 1960. The Korean military thus became the most critical





component of U.S. policy in South Korea, as Gleysteen perhaps unwittingly revealed in a secret cable: “We are faced with a new situation in Korea whose hallmark will be uncertainty,” Gleysteen wrote, just two days after the assassination. “The key players are still the previous establishment forces—above all, the military who, even if we can encourage them toward more liberal directions, have not changed their spots and comfort in working within an authoritarian political structure.”

“We must avoid conveying the impression that we would be happy with a military takeover, but we must also work with the military who will be a very influential factor,” Gleysteen continued. “While we intend to continue to press for liberal treatment for political activists, we must avoid early pressures for any dramatic steps of liberalization. Finally, we should keep in mind that the Korea of 1979 is not the Korea of the early sixties, when we were able to bully the early Park regime into constitutional reforms. We could face an extremely unhealthy anti-American reaction should we press too hard and too crassly to bring about structural change.”

A month later, Gleysteen expanded upon his analysis. “Thoughtful Koreans”—by which he presumably meant the embassy’s “moderate” contacts—“have been quick to grasp the central issue facing them: how to liberalize the political structure fast enough to satisfy popular expectations but steadily enough to avoid the danger of overreaching themselves or scaring military elements into a military takeover,” he wrote. “Although warning signs are beginning to appear... the military have displayed considerable statesmanship in playing a stabilizing role and going out of their way to give the appearance of deferring to civilian leadership; martial law has been conducted with skill and a fairly light touch.”

“Yet, there have also been ample reminders that this society of garlic and pepper eating combatants has not changed its basic nature,” he wrote.⁴² “Dissident elements and some of the political opposition, grooved over decades into extremist patterns by confrontation with authority, have rejected the acting government’s proposed scenario for reform and reiterated their extremist demands for immediate dismantlement of the Yushin system.”

Reading Gleysteen’s memo, one is struck by how well Gwangju dissidents comprehended the workings of U.S. policy. But the memo, and many others like it, also show how close U.S. officials were to the men of the Yushin system. These relationships, in my view, were a key factor in the eventual outcome in Gwangju.

America’s friends in Seoul

There are deep, lasting ties between the U.S. diplomatic, military, and intelligence corps in South Korea and their Korean counterparts. Since the late 1940s,

42. This disparaging reference to Korean eating habits enraged readers of my articles in *Sisa Journal*, the newspaper’s editors told me.





their personal and professional relationships have created a cadre of officials and operatives, within the U.S. and Korean power structures, who share common beliefs and commitments, and, in times of crisis, influence U.S. policy.

In the months leading up to Park's assassination, Gleysteen and Donald Gregg, the C.I.A. station chief in Seoul and a future ambassador to Korea, were in close contact with Kim Chae-gyu, the intelligence chief who would carry out that assassination. As President Park became increasingly isolated, Kim was seen by the Carter Administration as one of the regime's few voices of reason and moderation. Kim Chaegyū "was a man I admired very much," Gregg told me in an interview. He described the K.C.I.A. director as "quite a moderate" and "very open."

As tensions mounted in Seoul following the "Y.H. incident" (described in Bruce Cumings's introduction), Kim became the primary contact within the Park government. According to Gleysteen, Kim often met with Gregg and was viewed by the U.S. Embassy as "relatively liberal." Kim "seemed to understand the need for moderation," he said.

Kim was also on the receiving end of U.S. criticism. In March 1979, for example, Kim met with Richard Holbrooke, who, according to a Gleysteen cable, told Kim that South Korea was "strong enough to survive" without the restrictions on political freedom imposed by Park's emergency laws. Kim told Holbrooke that, from his perspective, the "threat was not just from the North, but from a home-grown subversive element which threatened the security of the nation." Gleysteen wrote, "He was convinced that the answer to this was not to put people in prison but to employ the laws in an intelligent and moderate way. He stated that he could promise that the government would continue its efforts to provide the utmost in political rights to the people commensurate to maintaining domestic tranquility and national security." Both Gleysteen and Holbrooke seemed to take these comments to heart.

In the days after Park's death, however, Kim Chae-gyu's friendships became a serious political problem. South Koreans and Americans, as well as the Soviets and North Koreans, openly speculated about the implications of Kim's close relationship with the embassy and the U.S. intelligence community. "Suspicion of U.S. complicity in the death of President Park persists in Korea, especially on the left and right flanks of the political scene and may complicate our lives for some time," Gleysteen cabled Washington a few weeks after the assassination. "Some dissidents and church groups believe, in some cases approvingly, that we were part of Kim Chae-gyu's conspiracy, at least to the point of having given a signal." Gleysteen added that he had checked with a previous U.S. ambassador, and "can state flatly that neither of us ever signaled to Kim Chae-gyu or any other Korean that we thought the Park government's days were numbered or that we would condone Park's removal from office. I would never have been so reckless as to touch on the tricky subject of President Park's prospective tenure."

Gleysteen told me that, during President Park's funeral, he had an unpleasant



encounter with a U.S. congressman who loudly accused him of “having blood on my hands.” That exchange, he said, was one of the reasons that he, with Holbrooke and others in the State Department, successfully persuaded the Carter administration to block a congressional hearing on Korea that had been scheduled for shortly after the assassination. “There were gaping minds ready to believe anything in Korea,” Gleysteen said.

But with Park’s death, Gleysteen and his intelligence and military colleagues had to find other “moderates” who, like Kim Chae-gyu, could speak candidly with U.S. officials. Based on interviews and the documents, I identified three key Koreans that the U.S. Embassy and military heavily relied on during the crisis of 1979–80: General Lew Pyong-hyon, deputy to General John Wickham at the U.S.-Korea Combined Forces Command and future chairman of the Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff; Prime Minister Shin Hyon Hwack; and Foreign Minister Park Tong-jin.

General Lew Pyong-hyon. Lew was of particular value to the U.S. mission, and was described by Gleysteen as a “key liaison” between the U.S. government and the Korean military. According to the materials I obtained, it was from Lew that U.S. officials first learned that President Park had been “incapacitated,” several hours before the news was announced on Korean radio (5:00 a.m., October 27). In an urgent cable to Washington, Gleysteen said that Lew had “emphasized that these events were not a military coup and that regrettably the military was placed in a position of having to take charge of events.” The cables also show that Lew, through Gleysteen, asked the United States to make “a reassuring public statement” and take “precautionary military measures” after the assassination; those measures, of course, included sending an aircraft carrier and surveillance aircraft to the Korean peninsula, along with a blunt warning that a North Korean intervention would mean war. Lew also was a key source during the December 12 incident described in the introduction to this book. According to Gleysteen, Lew provided most of the information about military movements that night. He and Gleysteen were with Wickham at the United Nations command bunker as Chun and Roh moved troops from the D.M.Z. and attacked the Seoul garrison to arrest the martial-law commander. Lew was also an important link between U.S. officials and Chun Doo Hwan in the months preceding the May 17 coup, and officially informed the U.S. command of the imminent invasion of Gwangju on May 27.⁴³

Prime Minister Shin Hyon Hwack. The U.S. mission also had a close relationship with Shin, who was viewed (and hated) by Koreans dissidents as a collaborator who sought to put a respectable face on the military regime. But to Gleysteen and others, Shin represented a reasonable alternative to the military; someone

43. Earlier this year, I located a declassified cable in the C.I.A. archives, dated May 21, 1980, that reveals more about Lew and his relationship with General Wickham. The cable, sent to Wickham from the U.S. Pacific Command headquarters in Hawaii, thanks him for his “comprehensive report on the situation in Gwangju.” It adds: “Your support of Lew’s moderate approach to the situation seems to be the best course, certainly at this point.” The date of the cable is significant: one day later, at the White House, the final decision was made to use military force in Gwangju.



who might dissuade the Koreans from using guns and clubs on protesters. As a result, he was often counted on to express U.S. disagreement with Korean policy. After the December 12 incident, for example, Gleysteen warned Shin that negative consequences could result from violation of the U.S.-Korea command structure. South Korea “could not survive in its present form without ties to the outer world,” Gleysteen told Shin. “If the U.S. military, who were angry and disturbed over what happened ceased supporting the R.O.K. military the result would be devastating. Perhaps more pertinent to the Prime Minister with his special responsibilities, South Korea could not survive without the confidence of foreign traders, investors, and bankers.”⁴⁴ In any case, Gleysteen felt confident enough about Shin to assure his superiors in Washington that the Prime Minister “looks like the strongest man in a frail civilian government.” And he was so impressed by Shin, in the spring of 1980, that he favorably discussed the possibility of Shin running for President.

Foreign Minister Park Tong-jin. Park was another important source and confidant to Gleysteen. In a private luncheon on November 28, 1979, Gleysteen reported that he and Park shared their “mutual concern that impatient protest actions by political dissidents and students threatened the prospect for political relaxation.” On May 22, at the height of the Gwangju uprising, Park “urgently” asked Gleysteen to review the seriousness of recent events. According to that secret cable, Gleysteen told Park that the U.S. supported the Korean Army’s “efforts to restore order in Gwangju and deter trouble elsewhere,” but sought Park’s help in communicating with the military. “I then encouraged the [Foreign Minister] as a recently reappointed cabinet member who ‘understood Americans’ to use his influence in trying to talk to the military leaders in an attempt to stop them from magnifying their problems,” Gleysteen wrote.

With friends and contacts like these, it is not hard to imagine why U.S. officials in Korea would have a one-sided, distorted view of the crisis that developed in the winter and spring of 1980.

U.S. approval of Korean military preparations, May 1980

When Chun seized control of the military, on December 12, 1979, it was clear to many Koreans that they were facing yet another dictatorship. These fears deepened in April, when Chun appointed himself head of the K.C.I.A., the first military man to hold that post. In response, students organized mass demonstrations and demanded democratic reforms. Workers, meanwhile, agitated for democratic unionism and other rights stolen from them during the eighteen-year reign of Park Chung Hee. The movement for change reached a climax in April, when coal miners seized the town

44. Imagine if such stiff resolve had been voiced about Gwangju; the outcome might have been completely different.





of Sabuk to protest their working conditions and the corrupt relationship between their pro-government company union and their employer. In response, Chun sent special forces to the mountains and began talks with the U.S. military and embassy.

Korean dissidents concluded that another coup was imminent. But the Carter administration seemed convinced that the situation was under control. After an April meeting with Foreign Minister Park, who was much admired by Holbrooke and other diplomats, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance sent a cable expressing his “great satisfaction over the many positive developments” since his visit to Seoul six months earlier, for Park’s funeral. “Noting that General Wickham and Ambassador Gleysteen have instructed their people in Korea to maintain very good relations with their counterparts, including the R.O.K. military, [Vance] expressed the hope that similar guidance is in effect on the Korean side and that there will be the fullest confidence and mutual cooperation.”

As political tensions mounted and hundreds of thousands of students demonstrated for an end to martial law, Chun Doo Hwan and acting Korean President Choi Kyu Ha discussed the need to deploy troops from the U.S.-Korea joint command with Gleysteen and Wickham. “Chun was saying he was going to behave, but he had to have contingencies if things got out of control,” Gleysteen told me. It was in this context that the United States approved the contingency plan to use military force. “There was a certain amount of contradiction in it,” he said. “We recognized he couldn’t lose control of law and order in society. On the other hand, using soldiers was very dangerous, and if there was any shooting, that would bring the house of cards down.”

With that understanding, Gleysteen met on May 9 with Chun and Choi Kwang Soo, a senior aide to President Choi. The cables I obtained included this bombshell (italics mine): “*In none of our discussions,*” Gleysteen assured Washington, “*will we in any way suggest that the [U.S. government] opposes [the Korean government’s] contingency plans to maintain law and order, if absolutely necessary, by reinforcing the police with the army.*” If I were to suggest any complaint of this score I believe we would lose all our friends within the civilian and military leadership.” Warren Christopher, then deputy secretary of state, cabled back: “We agree that we should not oppose R.O.K. contingency plans to maintain law and order, but you should remind Chun and Choi of the danger of escalation if law enforcement responsibilities are not carried out with care and restraint.” With that, the die was cast.⁴⁵

When I originally obtained these cables, the State Department strenuously argued that U.S. officials, particularly Gleysteen, had no knowledge that special forces were to be deployed in Gwangju as part of the general crackdown approved by the United States. But I asked a State Department spokesman—an old “Korea hand” who, in 1996, held a senior position in the U.S. Embassy in Seoul—why the

45. Gleysteen’s emphasis on “restraint” (from his previously censored comments described above) did not make any appreciable difference to the generals.



Carter Administration did not anticipate serious violence when it knew how harshly protesters had previously been handled by Chun and Park. His answer provides a glimpse of the American view of Korea, from 1945 to the present. “*The way they handled law and order was rough*,” he told me. “*But we had a way of tolerating it by that time. This was not an aberration or a sudden departure from the norm. It was the norm.*” (My emphasis.)

However, according to this official, nobody in the Carter administration could have anticipated that such actions would lead to the horrible brutality in Gwangju. “That was an unspeakable tragedy that nobody expected to happen,” he said. “When all the dust settles, Koreans killed Koreans, and the Americans didn’t know what was going on, and certainly didn’t approve it.” The State Department continues to believe that the United States “has no moral responsibility for what happened in Gwangju,” he concluded.

Gleysteen, who died in 2002, said that the United States approved the Korean contingency plans to use military force because South Korea would have faced “total chaos” without it. He also denied any knowledge that Korean special forces were to be used against student demonstrators.

“The U.S. understood at the time that no government would allow law and order to break down,” he said during our interview in New York. “But we added that how this was done was critically important.” In any case, the special forces responsible for the rampage in Gwangju were “employed without the knowledge of the United States,” he added. “I had no idea whatsoever they were being used for the suppression of student demonstrations.”

But as the documents show, U.S. officials in the State Department and the Pentagon had extensive knowledge that Chun’s paratroopers would see action in the crackdown.

The movements of the paratroopers

According to *Gwangju Diary*, on the afternoon of May 17, “nearly one thousand paratroopers awaited instructions from the Combined Arms Command (C.A.C.) in Gwangju.” As student-led demonstrations spread throughout the city, twenty trucks “filled with paratroopers” gathered at an elementary school near the city bus terminal. They watched as students fought running battles with the local police. Then, around 5:00 p.m., the troops were released and began viciously attacking the students. “They would crack open his head, stomp on his back, and kick him in the face. When the soldiers were done, he looked like piles of rags drenched in blood.”

Particularly vicious were the Seventh Special Warfare Corps, “which was especially prepared to act as Chun Doo private army, and acted with particular cruelty from the very beginning. These were the same soldiers who had crushed revolts in





Pusan and Masan the year before.”

Were Korean students better informed than the U.S. military or the State Department about the movement of special-forces troops, men trained to fight behind enemy lines in North Korea? This is essentially the claim made by the United States.

Under the U.S.-Korea Combined Forces Command structure created in 1978, Korean special forces did not need U.S. approval to be moved. But it was customary for Korean military leaders to inform the command of any unusual troop deployment. In addition, the materials I obtained from the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (D.I.A.) show that U.S. liaison officers with the Korean special forces had precise, extensive information about their deployment, training regimen, and past experience.

In February 1980, for example, a D.I.A. officer sent a secret report to the Pentagon describing the paratroopers as “one of the forces Chun... relies upon to maintain his power base.” On May 8, just nine days before Chun’s crackdown, the D.I.A. reported that all special forces “are on alert,” and noted that the Thirteenth Brigade had been moved to the Seoul area on May 6, and the Sixty-second Battalion of the Eleventh Brigade, on May 7. The Sixty-second Battalion, the cable noted, was the last part of the Eleventh Brigade to move to Seoul, and had earlier been assigned to the Wonju area, “where they had been on a standby status due to the miners’ riots” in Sabuk.

“Only the Seventh Brigade remained away from the Seoul area,” the D.I.A. cable states. It “was probably targeted against unrest at Chonju and Gwangju universities.” A Korean military source told the D.I.A. that, in their riot-control training, special forces commanders had stressed “in particular the employment of C.S. gas,” a noxious substance that is considered by some as a chemical weapon.⁴⁶

In addition, this U.S. D.I.A. observer, like the Gwangju students, recalled the conduct of the special forces in the October 1979 uprising that preceded Park’s assassination. “During the Oct. 79 Pusan/Masan riots, the officers and men sent from SF were ready and willing to break heads,” he stated in his cable.

Gleysteen, despite denying knowledge of the movement of special forces, had apparently been briefed about their deployment. On May 7, he cabled Washington to report that Korean military officers had informed U.S. commanders in South Korea that they were moving two special forces brigades to Seoul and the area around Kimpo Airport “for contingency purposes” and “to cope with possible student demonstrations.” On May 8, the Thirteenth Special Forces Brigade, “now in the combined field army (CPA) area, will be moved to the Special Warfare Center southeast of Seoul for temporary duty,” he said. The Eleventh Brigade was moved from the First R.O.K. Army to the Kimpo Peninsula, “and co-located for temporary

46. In 1993, C.S. gas was used by the F.B.I., during a liberal Democratic administration, in its attempt to force David Koresh and his band of Branch Davidians out of their compound in Waco, Texas. Critics of that tragic operation contend that this gas crippled children and others inside, and then exploded when it combined with a separate chemical agent used to disperse the C.S. gas. The resulting fire killed nearly everyone inside.



duty with the First Special Forces Brigade,” he added.

Significantly, he noted that the special forces brigades were “being moved to the Seoul area to cope with possible student demonstrations.... Clearly R.O.K. military is taking seriously students’ statements that they will rally off campus on May 15 if martial law is not lifted before that date.”

None of these documents suggest that U.S. officials anticipated the reign of terror in Gwangju. But they do flatly contradict official assertions that the Carter administration was *unaware* that paratroopers would be used by Chun in May. It is important to note that an interagency group that reviewed my F.O.I.A. requests has refused, on national security grounds, to release, in any form, any relevant communications between General Wickham and his Korean counterparts or the U.S. government.⁴⁷

U.S. distortions of the Gwangju uprising

Given the close ties between U.S. and Korean officials, it is not surprising that Gleysteen and others saw the mass protests that erupted in the spring of 1980 as a threat that had to be handled with force. But it is still shocking how quickly the State Department came to regard the people of Gwangju as a wild “mob” that deserved to be treated as a mortal enemy.

The State Department’s reports on Gwangju were based almost solely on the observations of David Miller, a U.S. Embassy information officer who was hiding in the Tourist Hotel, in the heart of the city. His first “situation report” was filed on May 19; the last, on May 26. What follows is a synopsis of those reports from the first three days of the uprising. They are best understood when read against the timeline in Lee’s diary. It is also important to remember that the Carter Administration made its final decision to release troops from the Combined Arms Command to Gwangju on May 22.

May 19. “Rumors reaching Seoul of Gwangju rioting say Special Forces used fixed bayonets and inflicted many casualties on students,” Gleysteen wrote. “Some in Gwangju are reported to have said that troops are being more ruthless than North Koreans ever were... Substantial numbers of ordinary citizens joining students... Police will neither confirm nor deny brutality rumors... Greater trouble in Gwangju probably reflects fact that this is Kim Dae Jung territory... Later report from Defense Security Command is that numbers involved in Gwangju much smaller than rumors would suggest and that, in fact, casualties have not occurred.”

47. In March 2017, I filed a F.O.I.A. request for many of these documents. It’s clear to me now, particularly in light of the C.I.A. documents concerning the redeployment of South Korean paratroopers to Gwangju in 1982, that the U.S. Army under Wickham saw the uprising as essentially a military problem, to be resolved with counterinsurgency tactics.



May 20. “All areas outside Seoul report calm except for Gwangju, where forceful measures used by troops to impose order have apparently aroused considerable resentment... As of 16:45 May 20, B.P.A.O. Gwangju (Smith) reports a crowd of several thousand citizens, including students, gathering around the provincial government building [Province Hall]... The army units involved in yesterday’s alleged brutality are reportedly in a holding area away from the main part of town.”

May 21—first report. According to the diary, this was the day of the first mass shooting and massacre; it was also the day that Gwangju rebels drove the paratroopers out of town. The tone of Gleysteen’s reports begin to shift noticeably, with the word “mob” sprinkled throughout: “A crowd estimated at 80,000 to 100,000 gathered in the center of Gwangju May 20 and since about 7 p.m. that day has been attacking security forces and public buildings... As of late morning May 21, a U.S. military observer in Gwangju reported that troops were holding their fire, also that the crowd appeared to be in control of much of the city... Communications with Gwangju are difficult and most reports are imperfectly verified. Unquestionably though a large mob has gained temporary run of the city and the authorities face series of very difficult options... The Gwangju mob has attacked and seriously damaged two industrial plants.”

May 21—second report. A few hours later, Gleysteen tried to analyze the situation for his superiors in Washington. Note that a military solution is a foregone solution. “While military will probably restore order using considerable force, sufficient damage has been done to create scars which will last for years... Why has this southern city fallen into serious rioting and a very great loss of the government’s ability to maintain public order? It is probable that regionalism is playing significant role in the intensity of the riot... Police and troops responded with special degree of severity, partly because of the spirit of the challenge, but possibly because that was how they felt they should treat Chōlla people ... Reportedly the rioters are linking the U.S. to support of the R.O.K. military and thus, in some way, to responsibility for events now taking place. This propensity to seek an outside villain may well cause us further trouble in the future.”

May 21—third and final report. “The massive insurrection in Gwangju is still out of control and poses an alarming situation for the R.O.K. military who have not faced a similar internal threat for at least two decades... By now almost all elements of the population seem to be engaged in a violent, provincial free-for-all reflecting deep-seated historical, provincial antagonisms. At least 150,000 people are involved. There has been great destruction and our most recent information is that the rioters have broken into armories and seized weapons, live ammunition





and demolitions... [The Korean military] is concentrating defense on two military installations and a prison containing 2,000 leftists. The December 12 generals obviously feel threatened by the whole affair. General Wickham has agreed to a high internal alert status against infiltration and he has informally taken some measures associated with Defcon 3.”

May 22. If Gleysteen was angry about the paratroopers’ behavior in Gwangju, he did not express it during a meeting with the Korean foreign minister, Park Tong-jin. Instead, according to a cable summarizing the meeting, Gleysteen explained that U.S. forces were cooperating with the Korean Army’s “efforts to restore order in Gwangju and deter trouble elsewhere,” but made clear that the United States “had not and did not intend to publicize our actions because we feared we would be charged with colluding with the martial law authorities and risk fanning anti-American sentiment in the Gwangju area.”

May 23. By this time, Gleysteen was convinced that the situation in Gwangju had reached a point of no return. In a cable sent at 10:00 p.m., Korea time, he reported that the Gwangju “rioters” had increased to 150,000 and were seizing hundreds of vehicles and thousands of firearms. “If peaceful methods fail” to end the disturbance, he concluded, the “government has the twentieth Infantry Division, plus airborne and special forces units, on alert in Chölla Namdo.”

According to the diary, the paratroopers were finally driven out of the city on the night of May 21. The next day, with armed rebels in control of the city center, two reporters from the *Wall Street Journal* were invited into the provincial capital building [Province Hall] to investigate the many deaths that had taken place up to that point. But on the borders of Gwangju, the killing continued; just as the *Journal* reporters arrived in the capital, a minibus carrying twenty students was ambushed on a nearby provincial highway, killing all but one passenger.

“Such atrocities occurred frequently on the edges of the city,” Lee wrote. “Bodies turned up everywhere. They had been dumped in the wells, sewers, underground corridors, and septic tanks and buried in the forests. There were also shallow, empty graves—the army had retreated before it could inter all of the dead.”

But on May 23, as the citizens of Gwangju gathered in the city center to count the dead and celebrate the liberation of the city from the paratroopers, the best minds of the Carter administration were gathering at the White House for a crucial meeting on the Korean situation.





Meeting at the White House

The participants in this extraordinary gathering, according to minutes obtained from the National Security Council, included Secretary of State Edmund Muskie; his deputy, Warren Christopher; Holbrooke; Brzezinski; C.I.A. director Admiral Stansfield Turner; Donald Gregg, the N.S.C.'s top intelligence official for Asia; and U.S. Defense Secretary Harold Brown.

After a full discussion of the situation, "there was general agreement that the first priority is the restoration of order in Gwangju by the Korean authorities with the minimum use of force necessary without laying the seeds for wide disorders later," the minutes state. "Once order is restored, it was agreed we must press the Korean government, and the military in particular, to allow a greater degree of political freedom to evolve." The U.S. position was summed up by Brzezinski: "in the short term support, in the longer term pressure for political evolution."

This was the White House response just one day after Korean authorities massacred dozens of people downtown. Carter's national security team was unfazed. As for the situation in Gwangju, the officials decided that, "we have counseled moderation, but have not ruled out the use of force, should the Koreans need to employ it to restore order." If recapturing the city meant "little loss of life," "we can move quietly to apply pressure for more political evolution," the officials decided.

Back in Seoul, a few hours after the White House meeting, Gleysteen paid another visit to the foreign minister to communicate the U.S. position. In that discussion, Gleysteen recalled, "I said that the policy decisions of May 17 had staggered us." However, the two officials "agreed that firm anti-riot measures were necessary, but the accompanying political crackdown was political folly and clearly had contributed to the serious breakdown of order in Gwangju."

Gleysteen told Park that the United States was "doing all we can to contribute to the restoration of order," and cited the official statements issued in Washington the day before and "our affirmative replies when asked to 'chop' C.F.C. [Combined Forces Command] forces to Korean command for use in Gwangju."

Over the next few days, Gleysteen told me, he tried to seek a compromise by urging "restraint" on the part of the people of Gwangju, and asking the government to apologize for the killing that took place after May 18. But Gleysteen said that he grew alarmed by the turn of events inside Gwangju, particularly when citizens seized arms and tried to empty one of the local prisons (which, he blithely noted in a cable, held "2,000 leftists"). He told me that "law and order was gone," and "both sides at that point were rather equivalent."





But someone in the U.S. Embassy or military was passing serious disinformation back to Washington, according to a May 25 cable signed by Muskie, Carter's Secretary of State. "The situation in Gwangju has taken a rather grim turn," Muskie wrote in a secret cable to Holbrooke, who was in Geneva at the time. According to Muskie's source, "the moderate citizens committee has lost control of the situation and the radicals appear to be in charge. People's courts have been set up and some executions have taken place. Student demonstrators have been largely replaced by unidentified armed radicals who are talking of setting up a revolutionary government."

Two days later, however, Muskie had to retract those statements. In a follow-up cable to Holbrooke, he reported that, "the situation in Gwangju remains quiet but tense. An earlier report that the insurgents had set up people's courts and had carried out executions had not been fully confirmed and should be treated with caution."⁴⁸

This may explain why Gleysteen refused to act when he received a last-minute request, from a U.S. reporter on the scene, to mediate in Gwangju. Asked why he ignored the request, Gleysteen told me that the Twentieth Division had already been deployed when the call came in. In addition, Gleysteen said that he could not verify the identity of the group seeking the mediation. "I grant it was the controversial decision, but it was the correct one," he said. "Do I regret it? I don't think so." The official explanation at the time came from a State Department official quoted in *The Washington Post*. The request for mediation was ignored, the spokesman said, because it was "not a human rights issue... It [was] a question of the national interest of the U.S. in achieving and maintaining stability in Northeast Asia."

The only honest government answer I heard on this point came from a C.I.A. officer sitting in on a U.S.-Korea relations forum at an Association of Asian Studies meeting, in 1984. Bruce Cumings and I were panelists at the session, which focused largely on U.S. economic and military support for the Chun Doo Hwan regime. Apparently taken aback by our harsh critique of U.S. policy, the C.I.A. agent, who was identified as Robert Muldoon, explained that he had been in South Korea in the summer of 1980, and, like other U.S. officials, had grown increasingly alarmed over the power struggle that took place after Park's assassination.

While he was "deeply moved" and "personally torn" by the reaction of Koreans to the events in Gwangju, Muldoon explained that Carter had no choice but to back the military. "We looked at this as a situation in which there was a political vacuum, there was a struggle for power among Korean factions, and I think the conclusion that we came to was that the strongest political force in South Korea these days is the Korean Army," he said. "I don't know what we're expected to do about this." Muldoon added that the "very critical point came when the president himself made his statement saying that, yes, we support political development and democratic rights, but the priority was on stability."⁴⁹

48. This raises an important question: who planted this rumor? A Korean military source? The Pentagon's "observer" on the ground? We may never know.

49. Gleysteen confirmed that Muldoon was in Korea at the time.





Conclusions

To this day, the United States has never apologized, or even expressed regret, for its role in Chun's May 17 crackdown on Gwangju. When a South Korean court convicted Chun for murder and treason, in 1996, Nicholas Burns, a State Department spokesman, said that the events of 1980 were "an obvious tragedy for the individuals involved, and it's obviously an internal matter for the people of the Republic of Korea."

Worse, in the hundreds of cables I obtained, and the many interviews I have conducted since 1980, I have found no evidence that the U.S. ever raised the issue of culpability for the Gwangju massacre in its meetings with Chun and his government.

That isn't the view of the officials involved. Gleysteen and other diplomats have complained that my articles leave the impression that they were silent after the events of May 1980. But from the president on down, they assured me, U.S. officials made their unhappiness known. This is not borne out in the cables, however. The materials show that Gleysteen and others bitterly criticized Chun and his cohorts for the rupture of the alliance structure on December 12, and, on May 17 and 18, for overstepping the bounds of the agreement to use force. But they never criticized Chun's decision to crack down on the opposition.

On May 18, for example, hours after the crackdown was launched and just as the situation in Gwangju was heating up, Gleysteen called on the martial-law commander, General Lee Hui-Sung. The cable describing that meeting (which was heavily censored, or "redacted," by the State Department) shows that Gleysteen asked about "reported arrests of major political figures" and sought to find out who was "really in charge" of the government. Gleysteen also reported that he told General Lee that, "we had a national interest in preventing war on the Korean peninsula requiring a large U.S. security presence here. This in turn led to our concern with political stability... Our concern was solely that the government behave in a manner that accorded with the desires of the Korean people. In this regard we were not as sure as General Lee was that it had done so."

But Gleysteen's anger must have been well contained. A few days later, according to testimony General Lee gave a Korean parliamentary inquiry into Gwangju, Lee postponed the final assault on Gwangju until after May 24, "because the U.S. authorities requested him to do so for them to secure time to redeploy their air and naval forces in preparation for a possible attack by North Korea." (This was reported in a *Yonhap* dispatch of November 18, 1988.) Despite U.S. anger over the events of May 17 and 18, U.S. Embassy and military officials were also cooperating closely with the planners of the coup.

On May 23, when people in Seoul and elsewhere became increasingly





disapproving of the U.S. decision to release troops in Gwangju, Gleysteen issued a directive to all U.S. mission and military personnel to be “extremely cautious” in their comments about the events of the past week. “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,” he wrote.

A few days later, when Chun told a group of Korean editors (accurately, it turns out) that the U.S. had been informed in advance of the actions on May 17, Gleysteen ordered his press attaché to call those editors and tell them that Chun’s representations were “a serious distortion” of what had actually occurred. But he told his superiors that, “because we do not wish to get into a public squabble with Chun or even to go too far in correcting the record, we made the message oral and did not leave any written record.” A cover-up of sorts had begun.

“Gwangju” was not even mentioned in documents describing preparations for a May 29 White House meeting on Korea. Relations with Seoul were to be “cool and polite” with a case-by-case review by visiting U.S. officials. But no information about Gwangju was sought—not from Carter, Holbrooke, Christopher, or Gleysteen. On June 24, Christopher testified before a House committee that the U.S. “had no advance knowledge of the Special Forces deployments” to Gwangju. With what we know from the cables, this statement was at best evasive, and, at worst, perjury.

By that time, the administration had decided that the loss of life in Gwangju should not undercut tacit support for Chun and his government. Christopher laid out the policy in early June, in a secret cable to Holbrooke and Gleysteen, cleared by the Pentagon and the N.S.C. “Having concluded that General Chun Doo Hwan and his colleagues have successfully established military control of the Korean government and that the Army is presently united behind the measures being taken, we have determined that we must at the present stage focus our influence on moderating the regime’s unacceptable behavior and moving it toward constitutional government, a reduction of military involvement in politics and administration, implementation of sensible economic policies and restraint in dealing with political opponents,” Christopher wrote. “Simultaneously, we seek to avoid over-identification with the present Korean regime and its excesses and indicate that we are waiting to see whether its actions will warrant a fully normal U.S.-R.O.K. relationship.” Again, there were no instructions to seek answers about Gwangju. And while the Administration did keep its distance from Chun—it refused to send an official delegation to Chun’s presidential inauguration in August—it never sought to clarify who was responsible for the slaughter.

What is particularly galling about this “see no evil” attitude was the fact that, by mid-June, the State Department had collected enough information from U.S. residents of Gwangju, including missionaries and Peace Corps volunteers, to understand the enormity of what had occurred. Among my F.O.I.A. documents was a





long report written by an anonymous Presbyterian missionary who had remained in Gwangju during the uprising.⁵⁰ The report, which the U.S. Embassy sent to the State Department, described the violence perpetrated by the special forces, and flatly contradicted Gleysteen's description of a mob running amok. During the citizen takeover of Gwangju, the missionary wrote, there was "absolutely no looting" or "wanton damage," as had occurred in U.S. riots in Miami and elsewhere. "I liken [Gwangju] to the Boston Tea Party," the missionary wrote: "lawless, emotional, but spontaneous combustion when freeborn citizens suddenly refused to be trampled upon any longer."

Later that summer, John Monjo, Gleysteen's deputy, took over the embassy while Gleysteen scurried around New York, trying to convince Chase Manhattan and other banks to continue lending to Seoul. In a July 31 report from Gwangju, Monjo wrote that "no one is exempt from a pervasive sense of horror" about what had happened. In Gwangju, he said, "Chun is a hated and feared man." But by August, the administration had decided that Chun was capable of running the country and making it attractive to U.S. investors once more.

Testifying before Congress, Holbrooke argued that, contrary to the views of many U.S. lawmakers, Chun had popular support in South Korea. "There are elements within the business community, within the bureaucracy, and within the rural and urban sectors which find this government preferable to previous governments," he said. "I think we'd be deluding ourselves if we thought this was just two or three people." When some congressmen urged the administration to suspend U.S. Export-Import Bank loans to Seoul, to signal displeasure, Holbrooke reprimanded them. "To affect the Exim loan procedures to Korea with the almost certain multiplier effect it would have on private lending institutions in New York and elsewhere would have an overall adverse effect on the economy of Korea," he said. Holbrooke, who later went to work on Wall Street for Crédit Suisse First Boston, did not add that the primary recipient of Exim Bank loans that year were Bechtel and Westinghouse, the primary contractors for South Korea's nuclear-power-development program.

By December, Holbrooke and the incoming Reagan administration had cut a deal to persuade Chun to spare Kim Dae Jung's life in exchange for a state visit to Washington. Despite public outcry in Korea, the visit took place, and Chun stayed in power for another eight years.⁵¹

But the most damning evidence of the American refusal to understand Gwangju and the people of South Chŏlla Province is in a secret D.I.A. cable from 1982 that I obtained from a source within U.S. intelligence. The document, dated July 23, 1982, described a relocation of two special forces brigades from the D.M.Z. region to Chongju and Gwangju. The unit sent to Gwangju, in 1982, was the same Eleventh

50. I knew who wrote it; I had met the missionary on a visit to Gwangju, in 1981.

51. In 1997, Holbrooke took to the pages of *The New York Times* to remind the public of his role in this deal—a characteristically self-aggrandizing move that Christopher Hitchens, a columnist for *The Nation*, rightly described as a desperate attempt to get an invitation to Kim Dae Jung's inaugural festivities, in January 1998.



Special Warfare Command Brigade that had been sent to quell the miners' uprising in Sabuk, in April 1980, and to put down the antigovernment demonstrations in Gwangju, on May 19 and 20.

The document is interesting for two reasons: first, it explains that the brigades' wartime mission would be to "be inserted into the far northern provinces of North Korea near the Manchurian border," with the Eleventh assigned to the East and the Thirteenth to the West. By moving them from the D.M.Z. border area to Chongju and Gwangju, where airbases were located, they would also be available "for the defense of these airbases against North Korean ranger or commando attacks." In other words, their primary "enemy" was North Korea.

But "in addition," the D.I.A. said, "the assignment of the 11th S.W.C. Brigade fulfills a perceived need for a trained, riot-control element in the politically volatile Chōlla Namdo Province. The Eleventh Brigade was one of two such units sent to Gwangju to quell the May 1980 riots." After noting that the brigades had been receiving additional riot-control training in the spring of 1982, the document stated, "thus far, the 11th Brigade, already unpopular in Chōlla Namdo Province, is being moved without the public's awareness. When the move is discovered, the residents will probably react with extreme resentment." In addition, the D.I.A. said, the relocation will "increase the likelihood of the units being used during internal civil disorder... By shifting the Eleventh and Thirteenth SWC brigades south, the problems associated with transporting these units if they are needed for internal political reasons are greatly simplified."

In other words, two years after Gwangju, the U.S. military was more than happy to use the same troops, in the same area, to carry out the same basic mission: to protect the military government in Seoul from its own citizens. This shows utter contempt for the people of South Korea, and underscores the moral chasm between U.S. policymakers and the democratic impulses of both the American and Korean people.

Adding to this moral turpitude, until the Korean parliament raised the issue of Gwangju after Chun's departure, the United States never gave a second thought to its responsibilities there. And when that opportunity finally came, the result—the so-called "white paper"—was in many ways a whitewash and, in some sections, a flat-out lie.

The players in this tragedy, however, are still around. Jimmy Carter continues to press his agenda of human rights by observing elections overseas and working with Habitat for Humanity. In 1993, he played a key role in averting what could have been a catastrophic U.S. military attack on a North Korean nuclear site by sensibly going to Pyongyang and meeting directly with Kim Il Sung. (I have often wondered if Carter's intervention was a way of atoning for what happened in South Korea, in 1980.) Gleysteen wrote a book giving his side of the Gwangju story, and died a few years later. Holbrooke, of course, served as President Clinton's ambassador to the



United Nations, and was widely seen as a leading contender for Secretary of State when he died, suddenly, in 2010.

Because of Holbrooke's critical role in the events of 1980, I tried to interview him several times. But I was always rebuffed by his press secretary at Crédit Suisse First Boston, the Wall Street firm where he worked for many years. I finally cornered him one morning, in 1997, after a symposium at the Brookings Institution in Washington. He was cranky because, a few days earlier, Norman Thorpe, *The Wall Street Journal* reporter who had been in Gwangju, had written an opinion piece quoting some of my cables. The documents showed Holbrooke asking Gleysteen, in the fall of 1979, to conduct a "delicate operation" in Seoul, "designed to use American influence to reduce the chances of confrontation and to make clear to the generals" that the Carter administration was "in fact trying to be helpful to them provided they in turn carry out their commitments to liberalization." He also instructed Gleysteen to warn Korean Christian dissidents—who were courageously violating martial-law edicts by holding political gatherings—that they would soon lose U.S. support, unless they stopped their "divisive tactics." (To his credit, Gleysteen told me that he rejected this entreaty as "armchair advice" from Washington, and never delivered the message.)

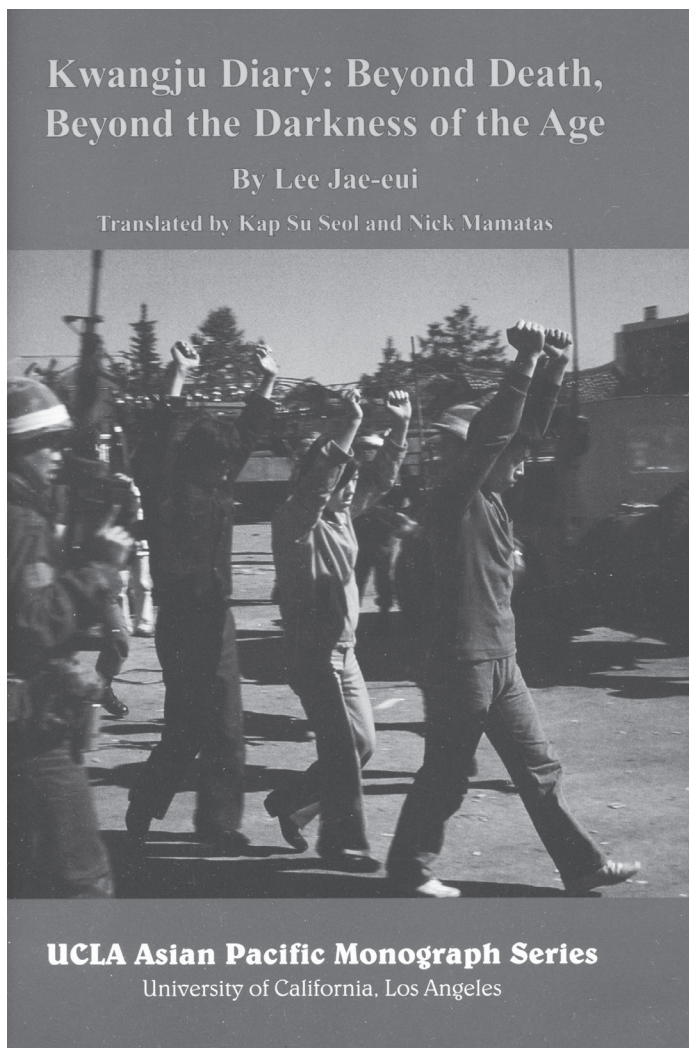
When I asked Holbrooke about this cable, he exploded. "The idea, the absolute idea that you would take a document and try to prove that I would actively conspire with the Korean generals in a massacre of students is frankly bizarre," he said. "It's obscene and counter to every political value that the Carter administration and we articulated. It was an explosively dangerous situation, the outcome was tragic, but the long-term results for Korea are democracy, economic stability"—this was before the Asian financial crisis hit— "and there's still a problem with North Korea." Between 1977 and 1980, he said, "we managed a policy that kept strategic stability, encouraged democracy without losing economic growth. It was an astonishing achievement."

Astonishing, perhaps, to a wealthy Wall Street investor, but not to the hundreds of people who died in Gwangju, seeking democracy. Until people like Holbrooke are brought to account for their crimes and misdeeds, the Cold War will never be over—and the stain on U.S.-Korean relations stemming from the Gwangju massacre will never disappear.

– Tim Shorrock
March, 2017







The first edition of the book, published in 1999.





Biographical Notes

Bruce Cumings is the Norman and Edna Freehling Professor of International History and East Asian Political Economy at the University of Chicago. He is the author or coauthor of eight books, including the two-volume study, *Origins of the Korean War* (Princeton University Press 1981, 1990), *War and Television* (Verso 1992), *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (Norton 1997), and *Parallax Visions* (Duke, 1999).

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Tim Shorrock lived in Seoul from 1959 to 1961, and studied Korean politics and economics at the University of Oregon in the 1970s. His articles on Gwangju have appeared in dozens of publications in the United States and Korea. In 2017, he worked with the city's 5.18 Archives to integrate his declassified F.O.I.A. documents (the "Cherokee Files") into Gwangju's collection.