



# Making Amends: US Public Diplomacy Efforts in the Late 1980s to Address the Gwangju Democracy Movement

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## Abstract

*The May 1980 Gwangju Democracy Movement was a seminal event in the democratization process of South Korea. However, it was also a critical event in the development of anti-Americanism in the country. The US government recognized this and towards the end of the 1980s began to engage in public diplomacy to explain the US role in the events of May 1980 to the Korean public to dampen anti-American sentiment. These efforts culminated in the release of the “United States Government Statement on the Events in Kwangju, Republic of Korea, in May 1980” on June 19, 1989. This article reviews US motivations for producing the 1989 statement and argues misinformation provided by the Chun government to the Korean people and rising anti-Americanism were the two main factors. Next, the US public diplomacy effort to explain US actions during May 1980 is analyzed before showing that Korean reactions to these US efforts were on the whole negative.*

**Keywords:** Gwangju Democracy Movement, anti-Americanism, public diplomacy, South Korea, United States, United States Information Service

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## Introduction

On June 19, 1989, nearly two years to the day after Roh Tae-woo issued the June 29 Declaration in response to the massive democracy protests in South Korea (hereinafter, Korea) in the spring of 1987 and facilitated Korea's democratic transition, the US government issued a document explaining its role in the Gwangju Democracy Movement of May 1980. While the Gwangju Democracy Movement is mainly remembered in Korea as a crucial event in the country's democratization, it is also a sore spot in US-Korea relations as doubts linger to this day about the US role in the events of May 1980. For many, the US government at best turned a blind eye to the massacre of civilians in Gwangju by the Korean military. At worst, the US government is accused of actively assisting Chun Doo-hwan consolidate power through the repression of democracy protesters. American officials were not oblivious to these beliefs circulating throughout Korean society in the 1980s. In an attempt to explain US actions, the US government officially released the statement formally entitled the "United States Government Statement on the Events in Kwangju, Republic of Korea, in May 1980." American officials at the time believed this was an "unprecedented" step and the US government publicly stated its was releasing the statement with the "belief that [it] is in the best interests of the close friendship which exists between the United States and the Republic of Korea" (United States Embassy Seoul 1989).<sup>1</sup>

Research on the US role in the Gwangju Democracy Movement, and more broadly in Korea's democratization process, is quite vast. However, there are nearly no evaluations of the post-democratization effort by the US

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1. "Interview of William Clark Jr.," January 11, 1994, Oral History Project of the Association of Diplomatic Studies and Training (hereinafter ADST), 85. Transcripts of interviews conducted by the ADST as part of the Oral History Project can be found at <https://adst.org/oral-history/>. US documents frequently use the spelling "Kwangju." In this paper I have Romanized Korean terms using the South Korean government's Revised Romanization system and subsequently use the spelling "Gwangju." The US government statement is also included as an appendix in General John Wickham's memoirs (Wickham 2000, 193–228).

government to convince the Korean people that the US did not inhibit democratization or actively support previous military dictators. In this regard, this paper advances two questions. First, what efforts, in addition to the 1989 statement, were made to convince Korean society of the US position on its role in the events of May 1980? Second, were the 1989 statement and other efforts successful in convincing Korean society of the US position?

These questions lay at the intersection of various threads of research on US-South Korea relations. The first thread is the aforementioned debate on US involvement in the massacre of Korean citizens in Gwangju in May 1980. In this research, scholars use the 1989 statement, along with declassified US government documents (Shorrock 1996) and memoirs (Gleysteen 1999; Wickham 2000), to debate the US role in events surrounding May 1980 (S. Lee 1996; Oberdorfer 2001, 124–138; C. Lee 2006, 102–111; W. Park 2011; T. Park 2012, 319–335).<sup>2</sup> The second thread is research on anti-Americanism in South Korea. Studies on this phenomenon nearly universally recognize that debates about the US role in the massacre in Gwangju were central to the rise of anti-Americanism in the 1980s (Kim 1989; Shin 1996; Drennan 2015; Moon 2015). However, the central focus of this research is the development of Koreans attitudes toward the US and not US efforts to engage Korean society about its role in Gwangju. A third thread is research that focuses on US public diplomacy efforts in South Korea. Korean scholars in particular have conducted research on how US public diplomacy and the activities of the United States Information Service (USIS) impacted the views of Koreans (Heo 2008; 2011; Chang 2011). However, this research has

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2. In addition to these academic studies, the two highest-ranking American officials in Korea in May 1980, Commander of US Forces Korea General John Wickham (2000) and Ambassador William Gleysteen (1999) have written memoirs that extensively cover the Gwangju Democracy Movement and their role in it. Currently, many of the State Department documents written prior to, during, and after the repression of the Gwangju Democracy Movement are available through the State Department Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) reading room and on the US Embassy in the Republic of Korea's website. Interestingly, since this reading room was added to the Embassy's website, the link to the 1989 statement no longer functions. The author has not yet been able to ascertain whether the statement was deliberately or accidentally removed.

yet to investigate the specific case of US public diplomacy efforts related to Gwangju.

Seen in this light, this study can not only contribute to our understanding of the development of anti-Americanism in South Korea by asking whether US public diplomacy efforts were successful in swaying Koreans to believe the US position on its role in Gwangju, but also add to our understanding of how the US engaged in public diplomacy in South Korea.

To accomplish this task, I rely on a variety of primary sources, including both US and South Korean government documents and interviews of US officials. Through these materials I piece together the string of events that led the United States to issue the statement in 1989. Equally important, however, is an investigation of other public diplomacy efforts directed at swaying Korean public opinion about the US role in the Gwangju Democracy Movement. To this end I utilize articles published in *Sisanon-pyeong*, a newspaper targeting Korean college students produced by the USIS in Seoul in the 1980s.<sup>3</sup> I also review Korean newspaper articles published after the US statement of June 1989 was issued as well as Korean public opinion polls reproduced in literature on anti-Americanism in South Korea to assess the efficacy of US public diplomacy efforts.

### **The Decision to Address the US Role in the Gwangju Democracy Movement**

Here I seek to answer the question of why the US government decided to publicly address its role in the Gwangju Democracy Movement of May 1980. In a word, the US decided to do so because anti-Americanism in South Korea had become palpable and even violent, and the US government recognized that doubts about its involvement in the massacre of Gwangju citizens was contributing to the spread of anti-American sentiment in the

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3. There are several contemporary Korean publications with similar names. There is no relationship among them.

country. Yet anti-American sentiment is not an uncommon phenomenon in the world and does not fully explain why the US would take the “unprecedented” step of issuing a public statement about the US role in another country’s domestic politics.<sup>4</sup> A review of the record suggests that anti-American sentiment as well as frustration with misinformation produced by the military government of Chun Doo-hwan were the two primary motivators for issuing the statement.

The desire to clarify the US role in the events of May 1980 actually goes all the way back to May 1980. In his memoirs, William Gleysteen, the US Ambassador to South Korea from 1978 to 1981, recalls his anger with the “deliberate distortions of US policy by General Chun and his underlings in the army” as the events in Gwangju unfolded (Gleysteen 1999, 141). A review of articles in South Korean newspapers from May 18–27, 1980 shows Gleysteen’s anger was not unjustified. A US statement issued in Washington on May 18 stated “We are deeply disturbed by the extension of martial law throughout the Republic of Korea, the closing of universities, and the arrest of a number of political and student leaders” (United States Embassy Seoul 1989, No. 36). However, the *Dong-A Ilbo* reported on May 24 that the US government “positively understands the background and inevitability of the May 17 measures.”<sup>5</sup> Perhaps even worse, the *Chosun Ilbo* reported on May 25 that Ambassador Gleysteen was cooperating closely with the ROK government and military leaders.<sup>6</sup> Gleysteen, in his memoirs, goes on to argue that the censorship and distortion of US government views continued after the Gwangju Democracy Movement had been repressed. Gleysteen seems to imply that if only the Korean people had understood what the US government actually believed and did, then the Korean people would have

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4. The US statement on Gwangju is quite unique if one considers the breadth of accusations leveled against the US government for interference into domestic politics. See “Interview of William Clark Jr.,” January 11, 1994, ADST, 85.

5. “Migyeol-ui imi jeondal juhanmigwanni” (American Decision Already Expressed according to American Official in Korea), *Dong-A Ilbo*, May 24, 1980.

6. Jong-ik Ahn, “Opanwigi’ mi-ui (baesujin) gwangju satae...hanguk-eul boneun wosingteon sigak” (‘Miscalculation’ America’s [Bringing of Bridges] Gwangju Situation...The View of South Korea in Washington), *Chosun Ilbo*, May 25, 1980.

understood US policy and actions (Gleysteen 1999, 158–160). In other words, the fault lay not with US policy or actions, but with the misinformation campaign conducted by the Chun government. Gleysteen retired from the State Department in 1981, and, as shown below, spoke out about the events in Gwangju well before the official statement was released, presumably to set the record straight after having been, from his point of view, slandered by the Chun government.

The frustration with censorship under the Chun Doo-hwan regime continued to be lamented by US officials throughout the 1980s in connection with the events in Gwangju and the ongoing democracy movement. For example, Thomas Dunlop, a political officer who served in Seoul in the mid-1980s, recalled that the Chun government's efforts to tie the US to the events in Gwangju had led to a "widespread perception that [the United States] had approved of the whole course of action in [G]wangju."<sup>7</sup> Donald Bishop, a public affairs officer who headed the USIS office in Daegu from 1985 to 1987, obtained a copy of an underground Korean magazine entitled *Mal* ('words' in Korean) which had published an article detailing how the Korean government censored news reports about US State Department statements on human rights or democratization in Korea. Bishop wrote an internal State Department report about the *Mal* article, which was subsequently leaked to United Press International (UPI). UPI quoted Bishop's report as having stated, "Even if a policy of press freedom were established tomorrow, it would take as long for us to untangle the deceptions as it did for the Korean government to weave them."<sup>8</sup> As we will see below, this frustration with censorship in Korea prior to democratization in 1987 led the US Embassy to produce a newspaper itself so that it could directly communicate with the Korean people.

The second motivation was the increase in anti-American sentiment in Korea in the 1980s. We should, however, be careful to note that the Chun government's misinformation campaign regarding US actions in May 1980

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7. "Interview of Thomas P. H. Dunlop," July 12, 1996, ADST, 188.

8. Spencer Sherman, "Censorship in South Korea: Even the Rules Are Secret," *UPI*, May 24, 1987. Also see "Interview of Donald Michael Bishop," September 14, 2010, ADST, 167.

was not the sole cause of anti-Americanism. As shown below, public opinion polls from the time suggest economic grievances were factors in anti-American sentiment at the time (Shin 1996, 798). A report prepared by the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) in March 1988 as a primer for meeting with US Ambassador James Lilley states that it saw commercial issues as the main factor behind anti-Americanism.<sup>9</sup> Despite this, a summary of a conversation between Ambassador Lilley and Korean officials notes that the US government saw the Korean public's anger about the US role in the Gwangju Democracy Movement as the major motivator behind anti-American sentiment, suggesting a slight obsession with the issue on the US side.<sup>10</sup>

However, given the events of the early and mid-1980s, it is easy to understand why US officials may have fixated on the Gwangju Democracy Movement as a major factor in anti-American sentiment. Although anger with US policy among pro-democracy activists in Korea predated the events of May 1980,<sup>11</sup> anti-Americanism became associated with violence in the wake of the Gwangju Democracy Movement. Arsonists set the American Cultural Centers in Gwangju and Busan ablaze in December 1980 and March 1982, respectively.<sup>12</sup> Jinwung Kim, who authored a contemporary scholarly account of the anti-American violence in the 1980s, offered this comprehensive review:

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9. "Lilley, James juhan migukdaesa hwaldong donghyang, 1987–1989" (Activities and Trends of US Ambassador to South Korea James Lilley, 1987–1989), 1989 (2019). 2019-0005.11.037, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea.
  10. "Lilley, James juhan migukdaesa hwaldong donghyang, 1987–1989" (Activities and Trends of US Ambassador to South Korea James Lilley, 1987–1989), 1989 (2019). 2019-0005.11.067, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea.
  11. One prominent example of dissatisfaction with US policy came from prominent opposition politician Kim Young-sam in September 1979. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Kim stated, "The time has come for the United States to make a clear choice between basically a dictatorial [Park Chung-hee] regime, increasing alienated from the people, and the majority who aspire to democracy" (Henry Scott Stokes, 'Foe of Seoul Regime Asks Decision by U.S.,' *New York Times*, September 16, 1979).
  12. Henry Scott Stokes, "Anti-U.S. Sentiment Is Seen in Korea," *New York Times*, March 28, 1982.

From 1982 on, dissidents began to criticize the United States more actively, and finally, for the first time in nearly three decades, the cry, “Yankee, go home,” began to be heard on South Korean campuses. Militant students have not hesitated to attempt to seize the American Embassy, U.S. Information Service facilities, and other American buildings. They have even launched firebomb and stone assaults on American military bases and premises used primarily by military family members, and have burned the U.S. flag. Many Koreans, initially shocked, are now little surprised at such news. (Kim 1989, 761)

Amid all these violent demonstrations, one event stands out in its impact on US policymakers: the 1985 occupation of the USIS library. On May 23, 1985, roughly 60 students entered and occupied for several days the USIS library which was located inside an American government building in downtown Seoul.<sup>13</sup> According to Dunlop, who became the main negotiator for the US Embassy and led the effort to encourage the students to peacefully leave the premises, the students presented him with a list of demands, including an apology from Ambassador Richard “Dixie” Walker for the “slaughter” of Korean citizens in Gwangju as well as demands for the withdrawal of US nuclear weapons and the unification of the Korean Peninsula.<sup>14</sup>

The issue of nuclear weapons or unification were obviously not something the US government could speak about openly or resolve quickly, but Dunlop stated that Gwangju was something he was willing to discuss with the students. As Dunlop had not been in Korea in May 1980, he sought out a civilian adviser to the US government who did have a firm understanding of the events of the Gwangju Democracy Movement and brought him over to the USIS library to have a conversation with the students. Although Dunlop admits he was not sure the discussions managed to change the minds of any of the students about the US, Dunlop believed the willingness to at least engage the students helped, and he notes that after three days of dialogue the students left the library peacefully although most

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13. Susan Chira, “60 Students in Seoul Occupy U.S. Office,” *New York Times*, May 24, 1985.

14. “Interview of Thomas P. H. Dunlop,” July 12, 1996, ADST, 189.



were later arrested and charged for their participation in the protest.<sup>15</sup> For Dunlop in particular, the 1985 incident proved the need for an official US explanation of its role in the Gwangju Democracy Movement.

While the actions of the students were important, the 1985 sit-in at the USIS library also served as a moment to show the US government that resentment over the US role in the events of May 1980 was not limited to a few radical students. In the midst of the sit-in, Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung, widely recognized as the two most important political leaders of the democracy movement and two future presidents of Korea, sent a letter to the students encouraging them to end their sit-in peacefully. In their letter, the two Kims stated that while they appreciated the US Embassy's efforts to end the sit-in through dialogue:

...we have conveyed our belief [to the US Embassy] that, even though we do not agree with your sit-in at the American Cultural Center, many people have the same opinion on U.S. responsibility for the [G]wangju incident and on an end to U.S. support for Korea's military dictatorship—points on which you have already asserted. We hope that...the United States will restore trust and reputation as a friendly country, which supports democracy and human rights and which we can respect and trust most for true friendship and cooperation between the two countries of Korea and the United States. (National Museum of Korean Contemporary History 2017a, 267–270)

The letter concluded with a promise that the main opposition party would “do its best for a convincing solution to the [G]wangju incident.” In short, investigating the string of events that led to the massacre of Korean citizens by the Korean military in Gwangju in May 1980 was a salient political issue and the US role in the events was going to be investigated with or without American support if and when democratization was achieved.

By mid-1986, US officials in Seoul were so alarmed at rising anti-American sentiment in Korea that they sent a series of reports on the subject to Washington. The third report on the subject covered the anti-American

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15. “Interview of Thomas P. H. Dunlop,” July 12, 1996, ADST, 189, 190–193.

sentiment of Korean college students, noting that this demographic was the main driver of anti-Americanism. Interestingly, the report barely mentioned the Gwangju Democracy Movement other than to note that May 1980 “served to crystallize anti-US sentiment among students and dissidents, and overt manifestations of anti-Americanism (including raids on American facilities) have sharply escalated since then” (National Museum of Korean Contemporary History 2017b, 195–205). Instead, the report mainly focused on the rising reference to neo-Marxist ideas among college students and their demands, which mirrored those of the North Korean government, for the US government to withdraw nuclear weapons from the Korean Peninsula and facilitate unification.

What is interesting to note, however, in the oral histories provided by Dunlop and Bishop is that there was disagreement among US officials about what to do about the Gwangju issue. Bishop in particular did not hold back, stating:

I had consistently been frustrated by the unwillingness of the Embassy and the Department to rebut the Korean government’s disinformation on the [Gwangju] uprising...I was dumbfounded that some in the Embassy—and some in the Department—felt that if we did so, we would pull the rug out from under the Chun government. Keeping the truth from the Korean people, and placing the Chun government’s interests ahead of our own, meant that those of us in Korea dealing with the students and the public were left hanging out to dry.<sup>16</sup>

Dunlop recalls differences with William Clark, Jr., who served as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs from 1986 to 1989, over the issue of publishing a “white paper” on the Gwangju Democracy Movement shortly after the May 1985 occupation of the USIS library. Dunlop charged Clark with “angling” for an ambassadorial position and not wanting to “stick his neck out.”<sup>17</sup>

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16. “Interview of Donald Michael Bishop,” September 14, 2010, ADST, 176.

17. “Interview of Thomas P. H. Dunlop,” July 12, 1996, ADST, 226. It is unclear when exactly the first proposal to publish a “white paper” on the US role in the Gwangju Democracy

Whatever opposition that may have existed was overcome when a change in US leadership in Korea occurred in late 1986. Over the course of the 1980s, several insensitive statements by senior US officials had a detrimental impact on the image of the United States in Korea. In August 1980, not long after the Gwangju Democracy Movement had been repressed, Commander of US Forces Korea General John Wickham was quoted as having said, “the Korean people are like lemmings who were willing to follow any leader they get,” and suggested the Korean people were not ready for democracy (Kim 1989, 755). Then in 1982, Ambassador Walker was quoted as having called college democracy activists “spoiled brats.”<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Walker was widely perceived by the Korean people as being very close to Chun Doo-hwan. Walker met so frequently with Chun during his time in Seoul that some junior officers at the US Embassy worried he was further provoking anti-American sentiment (C. Lee 2020, 41). However, Walker was replaced by James Lilley in November 1986, and Lilley brought a different attitude to the issue of anti-Americanism and Gwangju. In a memoir, he recalled believing that “the US Government’s reluctance to speak in depth about the [Gwangju Democracy Movement] further encouraged many Koreans to consider America culpable” (Lilley 2009, 5). Additionally, Lilley found support from Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Gaston Sigur Jr., who Jim Przystup (Policy Planning Staff) and John Merrill (Bureau of Intelligence and Research), the two main people responsible for drafting the June 1989 statement, saw as the impetus for the report.<sup>19</sup>

However, we should also not discount influence placed on the US government after Korea’s democratic transition in June 1987. Once a new

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Movement was made, although it was certainly after the occupation of the USIS library in May 1985. According to Clark, Dunlop wrote an explanation of Gwangju that he hoped would be published to support what he had told the students during the sit-in. See “Interview of William Clark Jr.,” January 11, 1994, ADST, 84.

18. Henry Scott Stokes, “Anti-U.S. Sentiment Is Seen in Korea,” *New York Times*, March 28, 1982.

19. Jim Przystup and John Merrill, interview by author via email, November 3, 2023. Their role in drafting the statement is confirmed through “Weekly Status Report: Korea, February 17, 1989,” February 17, 1989, DNSA collection: Korea, 1969–2000, Digital National Security Archive.

National Assembly was elected in April 1988, investigating the events of May 1980 became a major focus of a body that was now heavily influenced by the political parties of Kim Dae-jung and Kim Young-sam. Pressure mounted on the US to address its role in Gwangju when Secretary of State George Shultz visited Seoul in July 1988. Shultz responded positively during an interview with the press to a question about the US providing information and testimony to the National Assembly as part of their investigations.<sup>20</sup> Days later, the US Embassy prepared a very brief statement on the US role in the Gwangju Democracy Movement in response to a request from a “group of dissidents” and cabled the State Department requesting feedback.<sup>21</sup> This statement, drafted in Seoul and received by Harry Dunlop, who was now the lead official in Foggy Bottom on Korea, was never released, but it provided initial groundwork for the statement which would be drafted by Przystup and Merrill and released a year later in June 1989.<sup>22</sup>

### **Efforts to Explain the US Role in the Gwangju Democracy Movement**

Based on the recognition that the Chun Doo-hwan government was spreading misinformation about the US role in Gwangju and the perception that US actions during May 1980 were at the heart of anti-American sentiment in Korea, US officials began to recognize the need for an official

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20. “Public Reaction to Secretary’s Korea Visit: ‘Most Successful Trip Yet,’” July 20, 1988, DNSA collection: Korea, 1969–2000, Digital National Security Archive.

21. “Official-Informal” (Questions about U.S. Involvement in Kwangju Uprising), July 29, 1988, DNSA collection: Korea 1969–2000, Digital National Security Archive.

22. Przystup and Merrill recalled that Deputy Assistant Secretary Bill Clark was not opposed to the draft, but worried that Dunlop “may have been too close to the actual events” given his role in resolving the 1985 student occupation of the USIS library. According to them, this resulted in their assignment to the task of drafting the statement, and their work covered the next four to six months during which they had access to Embassy, defense attaché, and station reports. They also stated they conducted interviews with Ambassador Gleysteen, General Wickham, and others as they wrote the report that would become the June 1989 official statement (Jim Przystup and John Merrill, interview by author via email, November 3, 2023).

statement. The democratic transition and investigations of the Korean National Assembly expedited US efforts in 1988, leading to the publication of the official statement in June 1989. However, the official statement was actually the culmination of a longer US effort to engage Korean society on the subject of the Gwangju Democracy Movement which involved vigorous attempts at public diplomacy.

As noted in the above-mentioned report by the US Embassy in Seoul, students were the vanguard of anti-Americanism in Korea. So American officials made reaching out to college students a priority. To reach this group, the USIS began publishing in December 1986 a newspaper intended for college students called *Sisanonpyeong* 時事論評.<sup>23</sup> This newspaper covered a wide-range of subjects and in particular made many efforts to discuss US efforts to open the Korean market to American products, which was an important instigator of anti-American sentiment. From time to time, the newspaper also sought to explain the US position at the time of the Gwangju Democracy Movement.

Signifying the importance of the Gwangju issue, the second issue of the newspaper, published in March 1987, included a discussion between Ambassador Gleysteen and several Korean reporters. Gleysteen covered a variety of subjects, including the December 12, 1979 coup by Chun Doo-hwan and the Gwangju “incident.”<sup>24</sup> In the article, Gleysteen’s remarks are interspersed with bold font quotations that seek to highlight the message of

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23. Although it was supposed to be a monthly publication, publication was in fact irregular and in particular not published during the winter months. The first issue was appeared in December 1986 and by November 1993 a total of fifty-eight issues had been run. According to John Reid, 200,000 copies of each issue were printed (‘Interview of John M. Reid,’ September 4, 2002, ADST, 46).

24. How to refer to the events of May 1980 in Gwangju remains controversial and a variety of formulations exist, such as the Gwangju Uprising. It is unclear what English terminology Gleysteen used in his remarks, but the Korean translation of Gleysteen’s statements referred to the Gwangju Democracy Movement as the “Gwangju incident” (*Gwangju satae*). However, the official government publication released in 1989 did refer to the event as the “Gwangju Democratization Movement” and the “Gwangju Movement for Democracy.” Use of this phrase would not have been welcomed by conservative Korean politicians at the time and was another American rebuke of the Korean military’s actions.

the US government. For example, one bold quote states: “The US has no responsibility for the Gwangju incident. We did not know that the incident had occurred.”<sup>25</sup>

Gleysteen’s more specific explanations for what the US did in May 1980 mirror what would be the official US position issued in 1989. When asked by a reporter to explain why he thought the US had no responsibility for the events of May 1980, Gleysteen replied with three points. First, the US did not know about the violence that was carried out in the first few days of incident by the South Korean military. Second, after finding out what was going on, the US government consistently pushed for a peaceful resolution. Third, and what has remained most controversial, Gleysteen recognized that the US government knew of the deployment of the 20th Division to Gwangju to resolve the situation, but argued that this division was trained for such situations and in reinstating order in Gwangju, there were only two people killed. Gleysteen’s opinions are far from ambiguous. He stated flatly that those who believe the US is responsible for the massacre of civilians are “wrong” and that he “does not regret” the decision to deploy the 20th Division to Gwangju.<sup>26</sup>

The next time the Gwangju Democracy Movement was addressed in this newspaper was June 1988, after Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo had relented and agreed to a new Constitution and the direct election of the next president. With democratization achieved and opposition parties taking control of the National Assembly in the April 1988 general election, an investigation of the events of May 1980 loomed on the horizon. With this in mind, the newspaper ran an interview of Ambassador Lilley under the headline “The Whole Story of the Gwangju Incident Should Be Disclosed.”<sup>27</sup> Per the headline, Lilley confidently stated that the US was not involved in the repression in Gwangju and that the forces in Gwangju were not under

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25. “Geullaiseutin jeonjuhanmiguk daesa-ui eollonin hoegyeon” (Former US Ambassador to South Korea Gleysteen’s Interview with Reporters), *Sisanonpyeong*, March 1987.

26. “Geullaiseutin jeonjuhanmiguk daesa-ui eollonin hoegyeon” (Former US Ambassador to South Korea Gleysteen’s Interview with Reporters), *Sisanonpyeong*, March 1987.

27. “Gwangju satae jeonmo balkyeojyeoya” (The Whole Story of the Gwangju Incident Should Be Disclosed), *Sisanonpyeong*, June 1988.

Combined Forces Command (CFC) control. Interestingly however, Lilley's remarks gave the connotation that comments made by Gleysteen or other US officials thus far may not be completely true: "Even if what I know turns out to be different from the truth, [the US] welcomes an investigation."<sup>28</sup> While this could be interpreted as Lilley wanting a sincere investigation, a cynical reading may conclude that the truth was being hidden.

The final time that *Sisanonpyeong* addressed the Gwangju incident prior to the issuing of the official US statement was in September 1988. This time the newspaper ran an article containing an interview of General Wickham, CFC Commander in 1980. The headline for the article continued the confident stance of the US government declaring "The United States Played No Role in the Gwangju Incident."<sup>29</sup> But Wickham's answers to questions about the deployment of the 20th Division to Gwangju seemed to contradict Gleysteen's account provided a year earlier. Wickham told reporters that "the 20th Division was not under the command of the CFC, and as a result the Korean authorities could freely mobilize the Division."<sup>30</sup> In other words, the US did not *approve* the movements and actions of the 20th Division. As a result, although the main message of the *Sisanonpyeong* articles was that the US had no responsibility for the repression of the Gwangju Democracy Movement, a discerning reader would have noticed contradictions and even an admission that there may be more to the story.

As this US public diplomacy campaign unfolded, on June 27, 1988, the Korean National Assembly moved to form the Special Committee on the Investigation of the May 18th Gwangju Democratization Movement. While the main focus was on testimony from Chun Doo-hwan himself and other Korean witnesses, the Special Committee also made an official request to the US government, on November 23, 1988, for Ambassador Gleysteen and

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28. "Gwangju satae jeonmo balkyeojyeoya" (The Whole Story of the Gwangju Incident Should Be Disclosed), *Sisanonpyeong*, June 1988.

29. "Miguk-eun gwangju satae-eseo amu yeokaldo haji anatta" (The United States Played No Role in the Gwangju Incident), *Sisanonpyeong*, September 1988.

30. "Miguk-eun gwangju satae-eseo amu yeokaldo haji anatta" (The United States Played No Role in the Gwangju Incident), *Sisanonpyeong*, September 1988. For more about the issue of command arrangements and the Gwangju Democracy Movement, see Drennan (2015).

General Wickham to testify before the National Assembly (United States Embassy Seoul 1989, Introduction). However, considering the norm of diplomatic immunity, the US government declined to allow Gleysteen and Wickham's testimony, but instead offered to answer written questions posed by the Special Committee on December 2, 1988. As a result, on February 9, 1989, the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent a list of questions from the National Assembly to the US Embassy in Seoul. This had been done without the consent of the ruling party led by President Roh Tae-woo since they had walked out of the Special Committee investigating the events of May 1980.<sup>31</sup> However, as mentioned above, the US government had already been working on a statement since the summer of 1988, and the answers to the National Assembly's questions would be rolled into a single document that would later cause controversy in Korea.

### **Korean Reactions to the June 1989 US Statement**

While the accuracy of the contents of the June 19, 1989 US government statement are certainly worth scrutinizing, this is not the aim of this article. Instead, the focus here is on the following question: Were the above-described public diplomacy efforts and the 1989 statement successful in mitigating anti-American sentiment in South Korea? To answer this question, I rely on the reactions of the Korean media to the US government's statement issued in June 1989 and by utilizing public opinion surveys conducted in the early 1990s.

As with most things, the answer to this question is not straightforward. First of all, when answering this question, we have to understand that different groups within Korean society had different reactions. Here I will broadly divide Korean society into two groups: those who supported the then ruling Democratic Justice Party (DJP), which was led by then President Roh Tae-woo and was the party of the previous military dictator Chun Doo-

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31. "Weekly Status Report: Korea, February 17, 1989," February 17, 1989, DNSA collection: Korea, 1969–2000, Digital National Security Archive.



hwan; and the group opposed to the ruling party, which included the political parties of both Kim Dae-jung and Kim Young-sam.

When we think about US efforts to convince Korean society that it had no role in the repression of the Gwangju Democracy Movement, we are mostly inclined to think about whether the US effort was successful in persuading college students and others who held a grudge against the US for alleged support of past military rulers. However, the group most resoundingly disappointed with the US statement of 1989 was actually the ruling party. And the reason for this is simple: the US statement undercut the ruling party's previous justifications and explanations about the events of May 1980 and the December 12, 1979 coup.

Following the events of December 12, 1979, the new military rulers centered on Chun Doo-hwan justified their actions in the name of investigating the assassination of Park Chung-hee. Roh Tae-woo continued to assert this in his memoirs published in 2011 (Roh 2011, 236–240). Regarding the violence in Gwangju in May 1980, the ruling party asserted that it was a North Korean led plot and a precursor to a North Korean invasion (United States Embassy Seoul 1989, No. 26). However, the US statement undercut all of these arguments. The June 1989 statement used the word “coup” to refer to the events of December 12, 1979, and made it clear that the US did not believe the story that Chun was simply investigating Park's assassination. Regarding the outbreak of violence in May 1980, the US statement clearly outlines that “Ambassador Gleysteen concluded that overreaction by Special Warfare troops was the basic cause of the tragedy,” which differed greatly from the military rulers' assertion that North Korea was behind the incident (United States Embassy Seoul 1989, No. 47). To make this point even clearer, the US statement declared that while Chun Doo-hwan asserted that “North Korea was the hidden hand behind the student demonstrations and that the decisive moment for an attack on the South might be at hand,” Wickham told Chun that “there was no sign that a North Korean invasion was imminent.” The statement further reported that Wickham reported to Washington that Chun was stressing the North Korean threat as a “pretext for a move into the Blue House” (United States Embassy Seoul 1989, No. 26). Although Chun was now officially retired,

President Roh Tae-woo was Chun's handpicked successor and intimately involved in the events of December 1979 and May 1980. Thus, the stain the statement left on Chun Doo-hwan covered the Roh administration as well.

The Roh administration had received a copy of the statement prior to it going public, and according to William Clark, the Korean government was scrambling to send a delegation to Washington to pressure the US government not to release the report. However, the statement was leaked to the press, thus nullifying any attempt the Roh administration may have made to keep the document secret.<sup>32</sup> With the document out in the open, the ruling party went into crisis management mode. Representatives of the ruling DJP complained that the US government statement "went beyond providing simple testimony" about the US role in events in Korea "defining the December 12 incident as a 'coup' and saying that the events of May 1980 were caused by the overreaction of the Special Warfare troops."<sup>33</sup> Lee Man-seop, the DJP's lead representative on the Special Committee investigating the events of May 1980, argued that the US statement was "only the views of the Americans" and that they should be "selectively accepted."<sup>34</sup> Another DJP official was even more critical, stating that "the questions sent by the Special Committee on Gwangju were to check the facts and ask about the US role, but the US side gave us subjective evaluations and conclusions based on their own perspectives."<sup>35</sup> One media report argued that the current government would have concluded its image had been damaged and would take a more critical view of the US in light of the statement.<sup>36</sup>

Most reactions to the US statement, however, came from the

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32. "Interview of William Clark Jr.," January 11, 1994, ADST, 86.

33. "Mi gwangju dapbyeonseo yuchul-naeyong bulman chuga jilmun umjigin" (Disappointment with the Leak and Content of the US Written Answers on Gwangju, Movement for Additional Questions), *Maeil Business Newspaper*, June 22, 1989.

34. Chung-il Kim, "Yeogwon Gwangju dapbyeonseo sogari" (Ruling Party Sick at the Thought of the 'Written Answers on Gwangju'), *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, June 23, 1989.

35. "Uidojeok eollon peulle ida" (Intentional Play in the Media), *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, June 21, 1989.

36. Chung-il Kim, "Yeogwon Gwangju dapbyeonseo sogari" (Ruling Party Sick at the Thought of the 'Written Answers on Gwangju'), *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, June 23, 1989.

perspective of the opposition. And while there were some positive reactions, the majority of comments were not favorable. On the positive side, the US statement was credited with kickstarting further discussion about the events of May 1980. For example, one article credited the release of the US statement with reinvigorating the Special Committee's investigation, which had stalled due to the ruling party's "intentional refusal to cooperate."<sup>37</sup> Another article pleaded for the United States to continue answering questions about the events of May 1980 to set the historical record straight and release in full documents about the Gwangju Democracy Movement, arguing that some Korean politicians, soldiers, and media figures were "becoming flush in the face" following the release of the US statement.<sup>38</sup> Yet another editorial argued that US clarifications made in the statement should force Koreans to look inward at their own country by arguing that "now when the tragedy of Gwangju is discussed, we have to rid ourselves of the tendency to turn toward the issue of the US role."<sup>39</sup>

Despite these sentiments, most of the reactions from the Korean media to the US statement were decidedly negative. And these negative appraisals can be grouped broadly into two categories: first, criticisms of the format of the statement and how it was released; and second, criticisms of the contents of the statement.

Interestingly, media reports published in the immediate aftermath of the statement's release spent a great deal of effort criticizing the manner in which the report became public. As mentioned above, the report was leaked to the press prior to its intended release. Here some background is required. The statement was provided by the State Department to the Korean Embassy

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37. Byeong-chan Kwak and Yeong-seon Choi, "'Dapbyeonseo' gyegi gwangju hangjaeng 'jaejomyeong' jeonmang" (Gwangju Struggle Likely to be 'Reevaluated' after the 'Written Answers'), *Hankyoreh*, June 23, 1989. See also, Dong-cheol Kim, "Gwangju teugwi doesallin midapbyeonseo pamun" (Wave of the US Written Answers Saves the Gwangju Special Committee), *Dong-A Ilbo*, June 22, 1989.

38. Jae-hong Kim, "Mi 'gwangju' jaedapbyeonseo piryoseong" (The Need for More US Answers on 'Gwangju'), *Dong-A Ilbo*, June 27, 1989.

39. "Gwangju-wa hanmi gwangye" (Gwangju and Korea-US Relations), *Dong-A Ilbo*, June 22, 1989.

in Washington on June 19 at 5:00 p.m. local time. A couple hours later, the statement was given to the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs by the US Embassy in Seoul on June 20, 9:00 a.m. local time.<sup>40</sup> Shortly thereafter, the statement was leaked to the press on June 20, Korea time. Although media reports do not identify the source of the leak, William Clark asserts that it was someone in the South Korean government who provided the statement to the Korean press.<sup>41</sup>

The leak became a controversy as did the format of the statement. From the Korean perspective, the statement was supposed to be a response to questions issued by the National Assembly through the Special Committee on the Investigation of the May 18th Gwangju Democratization Movement. As such, Koreans critical of the ruling party expected that the statement would be provided directly to the National Assembly. That the Roh administration had the first opportunity to review the statement was controversial to say the least. Kim Dae-jung remarked that it was “like someone else was unknowingly opening your mail and cannot be condoned.”<sup>42</sup> The Special Committee went as far as to lodge an official complaint and demand an apology.<sup>43</sup> While some recognized that the leak may have prevented an effort by the Korean government to keep the statement from becoming public,<sup>44</sup> there was clearly dissatisfaction with the fact that the National Assembly, which was seen publicly as the instigator of the US statement, had no chance to receive and review it before it was made public.

Moreover, some were upset about the format of the statement, and this also related to the Korean perspective as the National Assembly as the

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40. This sequence of events is covered in several Korean media reports. For one example, see Yong-ho Lee, “Miguk-ui murye” (The Rudeness of America), *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, June 22, 1989.

41. “Interview of William Clark Jr.,” January 11, 1994, ADST, 86.

42. “Eocheoguni eomneun il” (It’s Absurd), *Dong-A Ilbo*, June 21, 1989.

43. “Jaryo yuchul gongsikang-ui teugwi midaesagwancheuk-e” (Special Committee Makes an Official Complaint to the US Embassy for the Leak of Documents), *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, June 21, 1989.

44. “Gosim goyeom-ui ‘midapbyeonseo’” (The Great Pains and Bitterness of the ‘US Written Answers’), *Dong-A Ilbo*, June 22, 1989.

instigator of events. As shown above, US officials had been contemplating releasing a white paper for several years and had begun work on the statement before the National Assembly sent questions. For US officials, the statement was the central focus and answers to the questions were secondary. Thus, the US statement was, as mentioned above, organized into a long statement upfront, with answers to the National Assembly's questions organized into an "appendix." Yet the Korean media overwhelmingly used the term "*dapbyeonseo*" (written answers) to refer to the US statement, rather than the term "*seongmyeongseo*" (statement). Although this may appear a minor difference, it is an indication that the National Assembly, and Korean society more broadly, saw itself in the driver's seat and demanding answers from the United States. Moreover, it is interesting to note that most of the answers to the Special Committees questions began by referring readers to paragraphs in the statement rather than actually providing answers. This gives the impression that the US wanted to tell its narrative first, and answering the questions was an afterthought. One article decried this format as an "insincere attitude."<sup>45</sup> Given all these problems with the leak and format, one editorial concluded that the US government was downright "rude."<sup>46</sup>

However, the biggest problem for critics of the former military rulers and the Roh administration was that the content of the statement was unsatisfying. And while there were examples of outright accusations of lies, a broader problem was that the Korean perception of America did not meet the perception of America painted in the US government statement. One report pointed out that the US government expected the Korean people to believe that it received prior notification for some things but not all, and that the US government was limited in its influence on events to only making statements about "concerns and protest."<sup>47</sup> Another commenter argued it

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45. Hyeon-seop Kim, "Miyeokal chuksoro 'myeonchaek' yudo mi 'gwangju japbyeonseo'-ui heosil" (Attempts to 'Take No Blame' by Reducing US Role, Truth and Lies in the US 'Written Answers on Gwangju'), *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, June 22, 1989.

46. Yong-ho Lee, "Miguk-ui murye" (The Rudeness of America), *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, June 22, 1989.

47. Yeong-seon Choi, "Singunbu jeongtongseong buin... 'Gwangju'-en balppaem" (Denying

was difficult for the Korean people to believe that, with the information-collecting abilities of the US government, the US Embassy could not have known about the violence in Gwangju until days after it started.<sup>48</sup> These comments display the Korean assumption of a mighty US government, while the authors of the US statement portrayed an America with limited influence.

Other media commentators attacked the US morally. For example, one article asked if the US was so appalled at the events of May 1980, why did the Reagan administration continue to support the Chun Doo-hwan government throughout the 1980s?<sup>49</sup> This is a perfectly reasonable question given Chun's two visits to Washington (1981 and 1985) and Reagan's visit to Seoul (1983). That same report suggested that since the United States admitted to knowing about the deployment of the 20th Division to Gwangju, the United States was responsible for some part of the violence in Gwangju and should apologize to the Korean people.<sup>50</sup> Connected to this moral dimension, other commentators complained that the statement was an obvious attempt by the US government to address anti-American sentiment, making the statement feel insincere.<sup>51</sup> This sentiment was reflected in a political cartoon that ran in the *Kyunghyang Shinmun* on June 21, 1989 in which a figure seemingly representing then President George H. W. Bush is begging Koreans to believe the US government had no prior knowledge about what would happen in Gwangju (see Fig. 1). In sum, the statement came across as an insincere effort to gloss over US wrongdoings and get back in the good graces of the Korean people.

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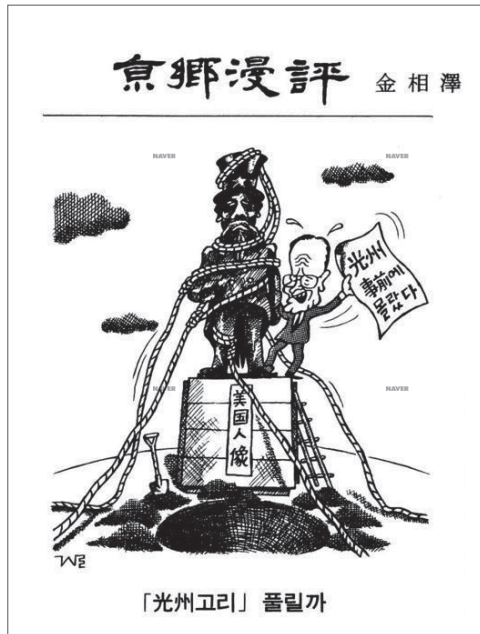
the Tradition of the New Military Government... 'Gwangju' Was an Excuse), *Hankyoreh*, June 22, 1989.

48. Hyeon-seop Kim, "Miyeokal chuksoro 'myeonchaek' yudo mi 'gwangju japbyeonseo'-ui heosil" (Attempts to 'Take No Blame' by Reducing US Role, Truth and Lies in the US 'Written Answers on Gwangju'), *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, June 22, 1989.

49. "Miguk-ui jeongui-wa dodeokseong-eul dasi munneunda" (Asking Again about American Justice and Morality), *Hankyoreh*, June 23, 1989.

50. "Miguk-ui jeongui-wa dodeokseong-eul dasi munneunda" (Asking Again about American Justice and Morality), *Hankyoreh*, June 23, 1989.

51. "Gosim goyeom-ui 'midapbyeonseo'" (The Great Pains and Bitterness of the 'US Written Answers'), *Dong-A Ilbo*, June 22, 1989.



**Figure 1.** “Will the ‘Gwangju Noose’ come loose?”

Source: Kim Sang-taek, “Gwangjugori’ pullikka” (Will the ‘Gwangju Noose’ Come Loose?), *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, June 21, 1989.

Note: The piece of paper the man, who appears to be then US President George H. W. Bush, is holding says, “We did not know Gwangju would happen beforehand.” The writing under the statue, which appears to be Uncle Sam, says “Portrait of an American.” The title below the cartoon is, “Will the ‘Gwangju Noose’ Come Loose?” And above the cartoon is the name of the newspaper and the artist.

A lingering question may be whether these media reports represent the broader Korean public or are merely the opinions of the media elite. To answer this question, I turn to public opinion surveys conducted in Korea around the time the US statement was released. Gi-Wook Shin, in his research on anti-Americanism in Korea in the late-1980s and 1990s, provides a review of four different surveys conducted between June 1990 and April 1992 (Shin 1996). Although the surveys are not specifically focused on the US statement or the Gwangju Democracy Movement, we can tease out the impact of the US statement released a year or two prior to

the collection of this data.

In a June 1990 survey, only 38.7 percent of Koreans “liked America” while 29.6 percent “disliked America.” Moreover, the propensity to dislike the US was much higher in the Jeolla provinces, near Gwangju, than in other regions of the country (39.9% vs. 27%). However, when asked to choose the reason anti-American sentiment existed in Korea, more people sighted economic issues (39.5%) than political issues (36.7%); yet the people of Jeolla were more likely to select political issues (45.9%) than economic issues (37.2%). College students as well were more likely to select political issues (43.8%) than any other reason. A separate study of only university students conducted in October 1991 sought to appraise public opinion on the US influence on Korea in the area of political democratization. In this poll, 60.2 percent said American influence was “negative” with only 10.1 percent saying it was “positive.” Although less extreme, 41.9 percent of college students in the survey said American influence on Korea in the area of human rights was negative, with only 22.5 percent saying it was positive (Shin 1996). This data suggests that those most concerned about (students) and most directly impacted by (people of the Jeolla provinces) the Gwangju Democracy Movement and the US role in it were not persuaded by the US statement of June 1989.

In sum, media reports and public opinion surveys point toward the same conclusion: the US government’s public diplomacy efforts and the statement on the events of May 1980 released in June 1989 did not have much of an impact on the Korean public’s perception of the US role in the tragedy. Although individuals not convinced by the US statement may have highlighted different things, the three major factors in the statement’s failure to sway the Korean public seem to have been the gap between Korean and US perceptions of the weight of US influence in Korea; and Korean perceptions of that the US government was morally bankrupt; and Korean perceptions that the US public diplomacy scheme was a brazen attempt to nullify anti-American sentiment. And in a broader sense, the statement was too narrowly confined to the specific events of December 1979 and May 1980. It did not tackle the other various legitimate complaints of the Korean people, including the Reagan administration’s surface-level support for the



Chun regime as displayed in the three summit meetings, Ambassador Walker's frequent visits with Chun, and the various insensitive statements of senior US officials.

## Conclusion

In this article I have addressed the US government's motivations for publicly engaging Korean society to explain the US role in the repression of the Gwangju Democracy Movement, noting that censorship by the Chun Doo-hwan government and rising anti-American sentiment led to the decision to do so. I have also outlined a public diplomacy effort to discuss the American role in the events of May 1980 through a newspaper published by the USIS called the *Sisanonpyeong* in the lead-up to the release of the June 1989 official statement. And I have shown that this effort and the statement did not have the effect that the US government had hoped, with the reactions being mostly negative on all sides of the Korean political spectrum.

This research suggests that bald-faced public diplomacy efforts to explain the US role in events in Korea were unsuccessful in part because the Korean public was keen enough to recognize these efforts for what they were. Moreover, the picture of America painted by US officials and the perception of America held by the Korean people were starkly different. To the Korean people, the US is the country that guarantees its security from the North Korean threat, commanded the Korean military, provided huge amounts of aid to modernize its economy, and bestowed a degree of legitimacy upon Korea's leaders. However, to American officials in Korea in the 1980s, as signified by the title of Ambassador Gleysteen's book, *Massive Entanglement, Marginal Influence*, the US government had very little say in what happened in Korea and was at the mercy of Korean government censorship and misinformation. American officials likely hoped to close this perception gap between themselves and the Korean people, but they were unsuccessful.

In hindsight, an arguably better approach would have been for the US government to declassify and release documents from the events under

question rather than offering a statement that was devoid of evidence and could be construed as a cover-up. Indeed, when journalist Tim Shorrock gained access to US government documents from May 1980 via a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request in the mid-1990s, the issue was discussed anew, with Shorrock (1996) accusing US officials of not having been truthful in their explanations of US actions. This in turn spurred Ambassador Gleysteen (1999) and General John Wickham (2000) to write memoirs explaining their actions in these tense moments of contemporary Korean history. To this day it remains unclear what still-classified documents contain and the tendency to distrust the US government about its role in the events of contemporary South Korean history continues.<sup>52</sup> In this regard, attempts by the US government to interpret its own history with the assistance of US officials who made that history, and to benefit US policy in the present, seems a recipe for failure.

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52. According to Tim Shorrock, documents from the US military, which remain classified, may prove crucial in detailing when and how much the US government knew about what was happening in Gwangju in May 1980 (Tim Shorrock, interview by author, Seoul, April 2023).

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