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Views from the Declassified Archives
of the United States Government

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Abstract

On 27 October 1979, Korean Central Intelligence Agency Director Kim Jae-gyu assassinated South Korean President Park Chung-hee and his chief bodyguard, Cha Chi-chol. This development totally surprised the U.S. government. Through the review of newly declassified U.S. documents, archival oral interviews, and interviews with former U.S. government officials, further light is now being shed on how the U.S. government viewed the situation. It appears that analysis and concerns over internal threats were never considered when examining the stability of the South Korean government. Moreover, the U.S. government's failure to prepare for this outcome appears to be a sign of a recurring issue, similar to the CIA's failure to analyze the coup threat posed by Lin Biao against Mao Zedong, as well as its reliance on the Secret Police of the Imperial State of Iran for information on the domestic uprising in Iran, which left the U.S. shocked by the Shah's downfall.

Introduction

On 27 October 1979, Kim Jae-gyu, the Director of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA), assassinated South Korean President Park Chung-hee and Cha Chi-chol, his chief bodyguard. This event was a pivotal moment in modern South Korean history, leaving the South Korean government in disarray, and it was not an eventuality that was expected by United States intelligence. While the U.S., under the Carter Administration, was hopeful that a positive change could occur in South Korea, the sudden shift in power did not end South Korea's history of dictatorial rule. Kim Jae-gyu's motives were multifaceted, with him stating that he carried out this

plan to free South Korea from its dictatorship. His quick trial and execution left questions that remain unanswered, particularly regarding his true motivations and whether he had received external assistance. The South Korean Supreme Court is currently carrying out a posthumous retrial of Kim Jae-gyu and Kim Kye-won, Park Chung-hee's former chief of staff.¹ Now is the perfect time to review what has been declassified by the U.S. government, so we can gain a better understanding of how the diplomatic, military, and intelligence actors viewed the sudden death of Park, how the U.S. managed the crisis, and what analytical mindsets dominated U.S.-South Korean relations at the time of the assassination.

This paper argues that the U.S. Intelligence Community (IC) was left surprised by its over-reliance on the KCIA for information, which has echoes of the U.S. reliance on the Bureau for Intelligence and Security of the State (SAVAK) in Iran regarding the fall of the Shah. At the time, the U.S.'s monolithic analytical mindset meant that it blamed North Korea initially, without properly considering internal threats as a possibility. This lack of internal threat review was never considered or discussed, further echoing the past failure of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to assess the coup risk of Lin Biao against Mao Zedong. In the internal CIA post-mortem, there was no desire by CIA management to carry out or add any new analytical methodologies that would address the risk of coup within the countries they were assessing.

How the South Korean Government, Western Media, and Academia Viewed the Death of Park Chung-hee

On 28 October 1979, the *New York Times* reported that the Carter Administration had stated with regard to the assassination of Park that there "was no evidence of any wider plot" or of any culpable actors within the South Korean military. A State Department Official stated that "there were various versions of what happened," but there were no signs that North Korea was "taking advantage" of Park's death, or that either North Korea or South Korean opposition were involved in the killing.²

In the time leading up to Park's death, the Carter Administration was critical of Park's repression against opponents. Following Park's death, the South Korean military did

¹ Richard Lloyd Parry, 'South Korea to Retry Spy Chief Hanged for Assassinating Dictator,' *The Times*, 19 February 2025, <https://www.thetimes.com/world/asia/article/south-korea-to-retry-spy-chief-hanged-for-assassinating-dictator-sm9nqblnv>; Park Hye-yeon, "Seoul High Court Orders Retrial for Park Chung-hee's Ex-Chief of Staff in Insurrection Case," *The Chosun Daily*, 2 September 2025, <https://www.chosun.com/english/national-en/2025/09/02/TDC2TNM535AJLIC53IYIO32YU/>, 1-2

² Bernard Gwertzman, "U.S. Aides See No Wide Plot in Seoul," *New York Times*, 28 October 1979, 1.

not declare full martial law, but instead left the southern island of Cheju to ensure that a civilian government remained in power. Prime Minister Choi was made acting President and, based on the South Korean Constitution, a new election would be held in three months.³ President Carter sent a message to Mr. Choi expressing “sorrow” over Park’s death, stating that “his role in Korea’s remarkable economic development will not be forgotten,” and that the U.S. would “stand firmly” behind its treaty commitments with the Republic of Korea.⁴

On 29 October, the *Washington Post* reported that the South Korean government had said that Park had been killed in an accident, before admitting that he had been assassinated, adding that “many other [KCIA] personnel” were under investigation for potential involvement in these deaths. The *Post* also noted that the South Korean government had revised the reporting of Park’s “incapacitation” to “killed accidentally,” due to a “quarrel between Kim and his chief bodyguard.”⁵ The South Korean government again amended its statement to note that Secretary Kim Kye-won drove Park to a hospital, where he was pronounced dead at 7:55 pm. local time. Martial law was not declared in Seoul until 4:00 am on Saturday, nine hours after the killing of Park.⁶

In the reconstruction of the assassination of Park Chung-hee, the South Korean government assessed that Kim Jae-gyu had carried out this action due to him being “excoriated” by the President for “incompetence on numerous occasions,” alongside the fact that Cha Chi-chol regularly blocked his reports and recommendations. Fearing a potential dismissal amidst a rumored upcoming Cabinet reshuffle, Kim took the opportunity to murder both the President and his chief bodyguard.⁷

On 20 December, following a quick trial, Kim was sentenced to death. Doug Kim, cousin of Kim Jae-gyu, stated that Kim’s wife, Kim Yong-hee, and brother, Kim Hang-kyu, were “arrested, tortured, and compelled to sign false statements against him.”⁸ Doug Kim also alleged that a senior official within the South Korean army had threatened to have

³ Bernard Gwertzman, “U.S. Aides See No Wide Plot in Seoul,” 1

⁴ Bernard Gwertzman, “U.S. Aides See No Wide Plot in Seoul,” 1

⁵ William Chapman, “South Korea Confirms Assassination of Park,” *Washington Post*, 29 October 1979, 1.

⁶ William Chapman, “South Korea Confirms Assassination of Park,” 1.

⁷ “Excerpts from the Report on South Korean Inquiry into Murder of President Park,” *New York Times*, 7 November 1979, 1.

⁸ Richard Halloran, “Kin of Korea Assassin Are Said to Have Been Tortured,” *New York Times*, 31 December 1979, 1-2.

“three generations of the Kim family killed” if they tried to help Kim Jae-gyu. Kim Yong-hee spent between three and four days in prison, while the South Korean government confiscated her properties and savings, and froze all her assets. This experience left her “unable to eat and having [to be] fed by intravenous injection.” The South Korean Embassy in Washington denied the allegations made by the Kim Family.⁹

Chong Sik-lee argued that the assassination of Park Chung-hee had created “one of the most turbulent eras in modern Korean history.”¹⁰ He pointed to the extensive conflicting reports from the South Korean government in the aftermath of the assassination. The Joint Investigation Team of the Martial Law Command stated that Kim Jae-gyu was a man “lost in the wild fancies” and motivated by “taking over the Presidency.”¹¹ However, Kim did not mobilize military support or other KCIA positions within the government. The official report concluded that Kim Jae-gyu was “incensed” by Cha Chi-chol and the President’s “reprimands over failing the handling of Pusan and Masan.” Kim “allegedly” told his attorneys that his motives for carrying out the assassination were patriotic, meant to prevent further “bloodshed in Seoul.”¹²

The student protests in Pusan and Masan that preceded Park’s assassination were rooted in criticism of the *Yushin* (Revitalization) System that Park had instituted in 1972. This revision to the South Korean constitution gave Park the authority and “sole discretion” to declare “states of emergency” and “dictatorial powers.” This was coupled with the Emergency Decree Number 9 (EM9), issued on 13 May 1975, which allowed the government to imprison critics of Park or the Constitution. As Park was able to nominate one third of the members of the National Assembly, this ensured that he would be in power “indefinitely” and continually re-elected “without debate.” One of the key tools Park used to silence opposition, including Korean critics abroad, was the KCIA, which in 1973 had infamously kidnapped Kim Dae-jung, South Korean politician and critic of Park, from a Tokyo hotel.¹³ Kim Dae-jung would later become the 8th President of the Republic of Korea on 25 February 1998, marking the first instance of a peaceful transfer of power in South Korean history.¹⁴

⁹ Richard Halloran, “Kin of Korea Assassin Are Said to Have Been Tortured,” 1-2.

¹⁰ Chong-Sik Lee, “South Korea 1979: Confrontation, Assassination, and Transition,” *Asian Survey* 20, no. 1, (1980), 63-64.

¹¹ Chong-Sik Lee, “South Korea 1979: Confrontation, Assassination, and Transition,” 63-64.

¹² Chong-Sik Lee, “South Korea 1979: Confrontation, Assassination, and Transition,” 63-64.

¹³ Chong-Sik Lee, “South Korea 1979: Confrontation, Assassination, and Transition,” 64.

¹⁴ “Opposition boycott shadow South Korea’s New President,” *CNN*, 25 February 1998, <https://web.archive.org/web/20100530002352/http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/9802/24/s.korea.wrap/index.html>

David Boggett stated that the full details of what occurred in Park's death, including "who backed whom" and "why," was a "meaningless investigation," comparing it to the debate surrounding whether North or South Korea crossed the 38th Parallel to spark the Korean War.¹⁵ What Boggett did call for was a "careful examination" of U.S. involvement in Park's assassination, as it was "highly improbable" that KCIA Director Kim Jae-gyu "devised the assassination himself [...to] assuage his own lust for power" as the South Korean government alleged.¹⁶

As questions continue to this day surrounding U.S. involvement in the assassination of Park, a detailed examination of the declassified U.S. government documents is needed, along with a review of past interviews with former U.S. government officials, to see what has been revealed regarding the 1979 incident.

Department of State View

It should first be stated that, according to the Office of Historian, at the time of writing this article, the specific volume regarding President Carter's term (Volume XIV) is still in the process of being declassified and published. Further review of this volume and what it says regarding Park Chung-hee's death will be required after it is released, to see what new evidence is uncovered, depending on what the State Department has revealed.¹⁷ However, based on the existing documents that the author has uncovered, this is what can be reconstructed regarding the State Department's view of the assassination and its immediate aftermath.

According to the declassified State Department documents, during the month of October 1979 there was concern within the U.S. Embassy in Seoul regarding unrest throughout South Korea. It was noted on 9 October by the South Korean Ministry of Home Affairs that the government had captured twenty people out of a 74-member group known as the "South Korean Liberation Front" (officially named National Liberation Front Preparation Committee, or SKNLF-PC), a South Korean leftist organization that held pro-North Korean sympathies, which sought to overthrow the government. In addition to communications equipment and weapons, members of the group also had tapes of Kim Il-sung's "words" [likely meaning speeches].¹⁸ The

¹⁵ David Boggett, "U.S. Empire Changes Gear," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 15, no. 19 (1980), 6.

¹⁶ David Boggett, "U.S. Empire Changes Gear," 6.

¹⁷ Office of the Historian, "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980, Volume XIV, Japan; Korea," <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v14>

¹⁸ Department of State, "ROK Announces Capture of Subversive Ring," 9 October 1979. E748, 1-2; Lee Haye-ah, "Editorial from the Korea Herald on June 27," *Yonhap News Agency*, 27 June 2023, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230627000300315>

State Department noted that Yi Chae-mun, the leader of the SKNLF-PC, was known to the South Korean government, due to past “allegedly subversive activities.” The Seoul embassy also noted the arrest of Yi Chae-o, the secretary of Amnesty International Korea, for a month for violating EM-9.¹⁹ From the declassified documents that have been made available, there was no discussion in the State Department at the time of this group being involved in Park’s death. A review of the CIA’s Records Source Tool (CREST) brings up no declassified documents that pertain to this organization, or to Yi Chae-mun.

Nine days before Park’s death, reports from the Seoul embassy noted violent demonstrations and the declaration of martial law in Busan, as a result of students showing “widespread objection” towards the Park government. This led to the Park government invoking martial law, as it believed the “situation had clearly gotten out of hand,” and wanted to deter “other potential demonstrators” throughout South Korea. The State Department could not get “access” to better-judge “the real government concerns.”²⁰ Notably, the last time nationwide martial law had been instituted was in 1972. The current proclamation showed that the South Korean government viewed the protests as “serious”; the South Korean public still remembered the 1960 student uprising against Syngman Rhee, after student bodies were found in Masan Harbor. The embassy believed that “the demonstrations would spread,” thus leading to a stronger reaction by the South Korean government to stop its spread.²¹

On 22 October, as the student protests continued to spread, the Seoul embassy noted the Masan Police chief’s statement that the area was “near pandemonium,” and a growing belief within the South Korean government that the demonstration could spread to surrounding cities. Embassy contacts with the South Korean government noted concerns that the Park government “faced real problems in staying afloat.”²² Other South Korean sources told the embassy that the conflict had elements of “class warfare,” which if true, would mean that there was a “significant problem for Park” that went further than just student unrest.²³

¹⁹ Department of State, “ROKG Announces Capture of Subversive Ring,” 1-2.

²⁰ Department of State, “Embassy thoughts on the current mood following declaration of martial law in Pusan,” 20 October 1979, E833, 1-2.

²¹ Department of State, “Embassy thoughts on the current mood following declaration of martial law in Pusan,” 1-2.

²² Department of State, “Update on Martial Law Situation October 22,” 22 October 1979, E836, 1; --“Demonstrations in Pusan area,” 25 October 1979, E840, 1.

²³ Department of State, “Update on Martial Law Situation October 22,” 1; -- “Demonstrations in Pusan area,” 25 October 1979, E840, 1.

On 27 October at 9:30 am, U.S. Ambassador William G. Gleysteen, Jr, stated that the acting President Choi Kyu-hah had told the nation that Park had been killed the previous night by KCIA Director Kim over an argument between Kim, the president, and the president's chief bodyguard. Choi urged the "people [to] unite and to trust the government and the army."²⁴ Gleysteen also noted that there had been new links established between the U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) Public Information officer and the martial law administrator, to ensure there were no "misinterpretations [...] or directives issued by the martial law commander [Chong Sung-hwa, Army Chief of Staff General]."²⁵

Ambassador Gleysteen sent his condolences to Interim-President Choi. Gleysteen reported that Choi had told him that the South Korean Cabinet met at 11:15 pm and decided to declare martial law across the country except in Cheju-do, to prevent total martial law and "allow civilian government" to remain in power.²⁶ Gleysteen expressed that everyone was "stunned by the events" and wanted to be "as helpful as possible." He also expressed reservations regarding Choi, largely due to the "weight [...] suddenly thrust upon him."²⁷ Ambassador Gleysteen sent a memo at 2:30 pm stating that from the discussions he had with the South Korean people, there was a strong desire for the country to move towards democracy. However, there was deep suspicion that the "U.S. must have somehow been involved [in Park's death]" and that these conspiracies "still circulate due in part to the suddenness and improbability of the event."²⁸ Kim Seong-jin, South Korean Minister of Culture and Information, "formally denied any plot," but the quick U.S. response to Park's death left the Korean people "uncertain" regarding the U.S.'s role in Park's death.²⁹

On 28 October, Ambassador Gleysteen noted in a telegram to Secretary of State Cyrus Vance that it was still unknown whether it was a "well-placed military coup," a more limited "elimination of a leader [...who] lost his touch," or a "bizarre incident."³⁰ The death of Park also left the "key players" to maintain an "authoritarian power

²⁴ Department of State, "President Park 'Incapacitated' (Dead) – Prime Minister Takes Over, Martial Law Declared," 27 October 1979, E857, 1-3.

²⁵ Department of State, "President Park 'Incapacitated' (Dead) – Prime Minister Takes Over, Martial Law Declared," 1-3.

²⁶ Department of State, "Ambassador's Call on Acting President," 27 October 1979, E855, 1-2.

²⁷ Department of State, "Ambassador's Call on Acting President," 1-2.

²⁸ Department of State, "ROK Situation Report October 27 1430 Hours," 27 October 1979, E860, 1-2.

²⁹ Department of State, "ROK Situation Report October 27 1430 Hours," 12-2.

³⁰ "Telegram from the American Embassy in Seoul to the Secretary of State, 'Initial Reflections on Post-Park Chung Hee Situation in Korea'", 28 October 1979, Wilson Center Digital Archive, NLC-16-13-2-23-3, Remote Archives Capture (RAC), Jimmy Carter Library. Obtained by Charles Kraus, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/122099>, 1.

structure” within South Korean politics.³¹ Gleysteen thought that the unified political structure would hold due to the threat of North Korea, and that the South Korean bureaucracy would ensure “considerable continuity.”³² He was not optimistic however that the Yushin structure would be liberalized. The possible successors to Park at the time were Kim Chong-pil and Chung Il-kwan.³³ The core suggestions to Secretary Vance were to “resist the temptation to suggest architectural design [changes] to the Korean system.” The U.S. had to “reassure” its commitment against North Korean threats, call for an observance of the “constitutional process,” and “work through all channels towards political liberalization.”³⁴ Gleysteen noted the drawback of provoking an “unhealthy Anti-American reaction” if we “press too hard, too crassly, and too soon” for any “structural changes” within South Korea. He noted that due to the mystery of Park’s death, the general belief within South Korea was that Park was killed by a “military coup.” Gleysteen admitted this had been his “initial reaction” which he had “since revised” due to there being an “absence of corroborative signs.” The more “plausible possibility” was that Kim Jae-gyu “may have decided to eliminate the President.”³⁵ There were accounts that the assassination was a conspiracy carried out by Kim because Park’s actions “endangered the Republic.”³⁶ The uncertainty over Park’s death sparked a lot of skepticism towards the official explanation, as “certain aspects” were “implausible.”³⁷ Who exactly within the South Korean government made those concerns known to Ambassador Gleysteen is not known.

Suspicion of U.S. involvement in President Park’s death “persists” across the political spectrum within Korea, which “may complicate our lives for some time,” Gleysteen noted. He added that there had been “specific allegations by communist fabricators, Japanese, and some U.S. media” that may have spread this theory. The

³¹ "Telegram from the American Embassy in Seoul to the Secretary of State, 'Initial Reflections on Post-Park Chung Hee Situation in Korea'", 1.

³² "Telegram from the American Embassy in Seoul to the Secretary of State, 'Initial Reflections on Post-Park Chung Hee Situation in Korea'", 1.

³³ "Telegram from the American Embassy in Seoul to the Secretary of State, 'Initial Reflections on Post-Park Chung Hee Situation in Korea'", 1.

³⁴ "Telegram from the American Embassy in Seoul to the Secretary of State, 'Initial Reflections on Post-Park Chung Hee Situation in Korea'", 1.

³⁵ "Telegram from the American Embassy in Seoul to the Secretary of State, 'Initial Reflections on Post-Park Chung Hee Situation in Korea'", 1-2.

³⁶ "Telegram from the American Embassy in Seoul to the Secretary of State, 'Initial Reflections on Post-Park Chung Hee Situation in Korea'", 1-2.

³⁷ Department of State, "Situation in Seoul as of Noon, Sunday, October 28," October 28, 1079, E866, 1.

core implication is that past U.S. criticism of the Park government had served as a “signal” to the coup members to assassinate Park and make them “saviors of the nation.”³⁸ Gleysteen noted that the strongest support came from “dissidents, and church groups,” students, and “Park’s cronies” (General Mun Hyong-tae, chairman of the National Assembly National Defense Committee).³⁹

Gleysteen said he had been “vaguely accused” of telling “individuals or groups” that the Park government would “last for more than one year”—a statement he denied, as the South Koreans had “misconstrued our words and actions.” He noted with regard to Kim Jae-gyu’s trial that there would be “some reference” to “U.S. ambassadorial conversations” with him. Gleysteen pointed out that his conversations with Kim were “recorded on both sides,” and that he would never have been “so reckless” as to discuss Park’s tenure; he last met Kim on 26 September. Gleysteen “feared” that Congressional hearings would focus on this issue and would only “assist our enemies,” would “deeply distress Koreans,” and “damage basic U.S. national security.” He had no objections to the State Department sharing relevant documents with the “appropriate Congressmen and their staff.”⁴⁰

What Has Been Revealed in Ambassador Gleysteen’s Memoirs

On 26 October 1979, Gleysteen notes that he met with Kim Yong-sam and William Clark, Jr, political counsellor at the Seoul Embassy, for lunch as a “symbol of solidarity for the democratic process.” Kim stated that the Korean people would “rise up and overthrow the Park regime” but Gleysteen was “skeptical” that would occur. Nor did Gleysteen “sense a mortal threat to the regime.”⁴¹

By midnight, Lt. Gen Rosencrans, who was acting commander of the U.S. Forces in Korea (USFK), and Bob Brewster, CIA Seoul Station Chief, alerted Gleysteen that Korean military movements appeared to be in line with “the imposition of martial

³⁸ Department of State, “U.S. Embassy Seoul to Department of State *Charges of U.S. Complicity in President Park’s Death*,” 19 November 1979, in William G. Gleysteen, Jr, *Massive Entanglement, Marginal Influence: Carter and Korea in Crisis*, 207-208.

³⁹ Department of State, “U.S. Embassy Seoul to Department of State *Charges of U.S. Complicity in President Park’s Death*,” 19 November 1979, in William G. Gleysteen, Jr, *Massive Entanglement, Marginal Influence: Carter and Korea in Crisis*, 207-208.

⁴⁰ Department of State, “U.S. Embassy Seoul to Department of State *Charges of U.S. Complicity in President Park’s Death*,” 19 November 1979, in William G. Gleysteen, Jr, *Massive Entanglement, Marginal Influence: Carter and Korea in Crisis*, 209

⁴¹ William G. Gleysteen, Jr, *Massive Entanglement, Marginal Influence: Carter and Korea in Crisis*, (Washington D.C., Brookings Institute Press, 2000), 53.

law.” After meeting with Rosencrans and Gen. Lew Byong-hion, acting commander of the Combined Forces, he was informed that Park had been killed. Authorities had declared martial law as a “precautionary measure” against North Korea.⁴²

Gleysteen spoke with David Aron, deputy national security advisor to President Carter, about the situation, saying that he endorsed South Korea’s decision to warn North Korea. In the early morning of 27 October, General Lew also informed him that the “small group” who killed the President were “eliminated,” and that there were no signs of a “coup or major conspiracy.”⁴³ Both Prime Minister Choi and Foreign Minister Park Tong Jin stated to Gleysteen that they did not know if President Park was “killed accidentally,” what the motivations of KCIA Director Kim Jae-gyu were, or who his accomplices were. Gleysteen was left in “paralysis” when he heard the early account of Park’s death, which came from the surviving member of the dinner, Secretary General Kim Kye-won, who accused Kim Jae-gyu of confessing.⁴⁴

The only two individuals left alive to provide details about the event, Kim Jae-gyu and Kim Kye-won, did not “disclose the killer,” leaving others concerned that there was a larger conspiracy throughout South Korea. It was only after several weeks that Gleysteen realized there was no conspiracy linked with Kim, and his actions were simply due to an “irrational surge of anger.” Kim Jae-gyu may have believed that his actions would be supported by the Korean people and army, being perceived as “heroic.” Gleysteen did not believe that Kim Kye-won, a person he knew well, would be involved in a conspiracy to kill President Park. Nor would Maj. Gen. Chun Doo-hwan “warp the investigation to destroy a senior official and advance his own career.”⁴⁵

The Korean public suspected that the U.S. govt was complicit in President Park’s death because the U.S. government had been critical of Park. Park’s critics and supporters both thought that “we had conspired with the assassin.” This suspicion was “fed by ignorance of the fact and [the] circumstances of Park’s death.” Army Chief of Staff General Chong Seung-hwa provided “sketchy and contradictory descriptions” to the public. The first report on what occurred would not be released until 6 November by the Defense Security Command. During that period, the speculation within Seoul centered on communist propaganda, an idea that was

⁴²William G. Gleysteen, Jr, *Massive Entanglement, Marginal Influence: Carter and Korea in Crisis*, 53-54.

⁴³ William G. Gleysteen, Jr, *Massive Entanglement, Marginal Influence: Carter and Korea in Crisis*, 53-54.

⁴⁴ William G. Gleysteen, Jr, *Massive Entanglement, Marginal Influence: Carter and Korea in Crisis*, 54.

⁴⁵ William G. Gleysteen, Jr, *Massive Entanglement, Marginal Influence: Carter and Korea in Crisis*, 57.

strengthened by foreign reporting of it, while Japanese and American papers spread the message that the U.S. govt criticisms were “signals” to the coup plotters that they were “saviors of the nation.”⁴⁶

At Park’s funeral, Clement Zablocki, chairman of the House International Relations Committee, asked Gleysteen if there was “blood on American hands” and whether there was “CIA involvement,” which Gleysteen denied. Despite additional denials from Secretary Vance and other top military officials, Zablocki refused to believe that the U.S. govt was not involved in some shape or form.⁴⁷ According to a South Korean military intelligence report, Kim stated during his interrogation that a “former American ambassador” had told him that Park had been “in power too long.”⁴⁸ Gleysteen reviewed the records of his own contact with Kim and with Ambassador Sneider, brought this to Washington’s attention, and “flatly denied” that either Sneider or he had told Kim or any other Korean that the U.S. thought Park’s government days were “numbered,” or that the U.S. “condoned” his actions. Gleysteen speculated that these rumors may have come from the conversation he had with CIA Seoul Station Chief Bob Brewster and Kim Jae-gyu on 26 September. That specific conversation’s goal was to bolster hope that Park would become more moderate. However, at the time “neither Brewster” nor Gleysteen had the “slightest premonition” that Kim was going to turn against Park.⁴⁹ In 2000, Gleysteen still believed that most Koreans thought that the U.S. was not involved in trying to “unseat President Park,” and that it was Park’s own actions throughout the 1970s that doomed him.⁵⁰

Reviewing Oral Interviews of U.S. Government Officials Regarding Park’s Assassination

William Clark, Jr, political counsellor in the Seoul Embassy (1977-80), recalled the assassination. He said he was told he had to come in immediately by the Embassy officer that, but that the officer would not say why. When he went into the Embassy, he was told that Park had been killed before midnight. He noted that “there was considerable confusion” as to whether Park had died. Kim Jae-gyu was “one of our better contacts,” and it was “not apparent” that he was the assassin. He noticed around 2:00 am that South Korean military convoys were headed past the embassy.

⁴⁶ William G. Gleysteen, Jr, *Massive Entanglement, Marginal Influence: Carter and Korea in Crisis*, 58.

⁴⁷ William G. Gleysteen, Jr, *Massive Entanglement, Marginal Influence: Carter and Korea in Crisis*, 58.

⁴⁸ William G. Gleysteen, Jr, *Massive Entanglement, Marginal Influence: Carter and Korea in Crisis*, 58.

⁴⁹ William G. Gleysteen, Jr, *Massive Entanglement, Marginal Influence: Carter and Korea in Crisis*, 59.

⁵⁰ William G. Gleysteen, Jr, *Massive Entanglement, Marginal Influence: Carter and Korea in Crisis*, 61.

The Korean government did not announce the assassination until 7:00 or 7:30 am but in Pusan, those who could receive Japanese news were aware of Park's death by 5:00 am.⁵¹

Clark stated the CIA Station Chief, Bob Brewster, was the first to know of Park's assassination. He was tipped off by one of his sources, which Clark found "ironic" due to the KCIA involvement. Kim was seen as "unique" because he "talked a lot about democracy" and was responsible for carrying many messages from President Carter regarding human rights issues in South Korea. There were those, at least within the State Department, who saw his "credential[s] as impressive" and who believed that he could become the next South Korean President. As for the assassination plot, it "did not seem very planned" due to the fact that Kim left the dinner to "borrow the gun" that was used to kill Park, before leaving again to get more bullets. This led those within the Seoul embassy to see this as a "not well-planned coup attempt." What concerned Clark was finding the answer to who was in charge now, and to "establish a point of contact with the new regime." Choi was seen as a "weak man who really didn't want the job."⁵²

When news of the assassination went public, the United Nations Command went to DEFCON 1 and the situation was seen as "dicey," with South Korean military troops being moved from the front lines to Seoul. There was "considerable confusion" as to whether North Korea would take advantage of the chaos. Johnny Sohn, who later became the KCIA Station Chief in Washington, asked "where he needed to go" and assumed that the "Americans knew what was going on," which led to many Korean government officials calling the U.S. embassy for more information. Clark noted that there were numerous rumors abounding within South Korea over the assassination, stating that "Koreans [...] always see plots of one kind or another" and that "no one really understood [the] events for a long time." At the time of the interview, which was in 1994, Clark did not think "any of us understood why Kim did it." People found the government explanation "hard to accept" since a "single gunman [...] could not carry out a] widespread plot." The closest comparison for Americans was the assassination of U.S. President John F. Kennedy. However, after Kim was "hung for his deed without ever giving a full explanation," it leaves us never knowing "what went through his mind."⁵³

David Blakemore, who was the Korean desk officer in Washington at the time of the assassination, referred to it as "ROK [Republic of Korea] Corral." He said it was a "frightening time" due to the question of how North Korea would react, which was

⁵¹ William Clark Jr, Oral History, Interviewed by Thomas Stern, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, January 11, 1994, Arlington, VA, adst.org, 74-75.

⁵² William Clark Jr, Oral History, Interviewed by Thomas Stern, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, 75-76.

⁵³ William Clark Jr, Oral History, Interviewed by Thomas Stern, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, 76.

“difficult to predict.”⁵⁴ The key issue facing the U.S. was whether South Korea was “worth supporting.” With the demise of Park, it would be an “invitation [for] Kim Il-sung to start an adventure of some size.”⁵⁵ While a carrier was deployed and tough rhetoric was employed, Blakemore remained uncertain as to whether a response was needed, as Kim Il-Sung “was never any closer to moving than [...] before the assassination.”⁵⁶ Blakemore noted that Washington was just as “perplexed” by Park’s assassination as anyone, but added that Park had been becoming “more and more difficult for everyone to deal with.” Blakemore does not remember “what we thought [then], and I don’t have a good explanation now.” What he impressed in the interview was that the event came as a “great surprise to everyone,” being viewed within the State Department as the “Seoul Spring” as a nod to the Prague Spring of 1968. The hope within the State Department was that the event would initiate a “great liberalization” within South Korea.⁵⁷

Department of Defense View on Park Chung-hee’s Assassination

On 27 October Brigadier General Thomas ‘T.C.’ Pinckney, Director of the East Asian Pacific Region within the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, drafted an information memorandum regarding Parks’ death. The memorandum, addressed to the Secretary Defense Harold Brown, stated that on 25 October Park convened a meeting with Senior Republic of ROK security cabinet officials that included the following: Kim Jae-gyu, Cha Chi Chol, Kim Kye Won, Blue House Senior Secretary, and several cabinet members. Park accused the ROK Security forces of being “inaccurate” in their assessments of the domestic unrest, and stated that there was an “issue of lack of communication between the Blue House and the [Korean] population.” Brig. Gen. Pinckney stated that General Byong-hun Lew, deputy commander of the Combined Forces, told the U.S. embassy that it was Cha Chi Chol, not Kim Jae-gyu, who was the real assassin.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ David Blakemore, Oral History, Interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, November 7, 1997, Arlington, VA, adst.org, 45

⁵⁵ David Blakemore, Oral History, Interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, 45

⁵⁶ David Blakemore, Oral History, Interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, 45

⁵⁷ David Blakemore, Oral History, Interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, 45-46.

⁵⁸ T.C. Pickney, “Korean Situation an Future U.S. Policy,” 27 October 1979, R4 14-M-0720, 1-4, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/22885-document-11-information-memorandum-drafted>.

This initial information was not in the State Department's declassified reports. Pinckney notes that Ambassador Gleysteen believed the "impassioned argument explanation," due to the "temperament of the KCIA and [the] security chief." As for knowing "what really happened, we do not know and may never know."⁵⁹ There was a concern that various actors, such as the Army Chief of Staff Chong Seung-hwa or others, would take advantage of the chaos in order to enrich themselves. As for what the U.S. Department of Defense should do, Pinckney argued that we "want a strong, responsible, independent ally in Korea," hence we should "model not only western economic development, but [...a] democratic political system." What the U.S. needed to avoid was "the appearance of manipulating a puppet."⁶⁰ Lastly, Pinckney stressed that we should emphasize the "resiliency of democracy" over the "brittleness of autocratic regimes" and "not expect any significant changes in Korean defense policy."⁶¹

General John A. Wickham, Commander of USFK, noted in a 29th October cable to Secretary of Defense Harold Brown that General Lew Byong-hyon served as one of the primary sources of information for the U.S. government on what was going on inside South Korea at the time. General Lew told General Wickham that he had what he thought was the "most complete account" of the events of Park's death. Lew had known Kim for "many years," and felt confident that Kim's motive for slaying Park was "due to a series of personal failures" as he rose within higher positions. His time within the KCIA was marked with "incompetence," and there were "increasingly evident" and "widespread rumors" that he would be replaced. He was also losing influence to Cha Chi-chol, the president's bodyguard, which caused him to become "temporarily deranged" and decide to eliminate them both.⁶² When Kim was arrested in the ROK Army Bunker at 9:00 pm, he "did not confess" but rather "argued [...] that the military [should] take action in support of the situation." This was because Kim believed that Seoul was "anti-government and would support the military taking action." There was still a "mystery" about how Kim was able to "escape unscathed" after assassinating the president, and "why he delayed full disclosure of his actions." There was also a "question about General Chung Seung-hwa's involvement," though General Lew believed Chung to be "totally innocent."⁶³ He cautioned all military officers from "taking actions for personal gains" and urged them to focus on "the

⁵⁹ T.C. Pickney, "Korean Situation an Future U.S. Policy," 1-2.

⁶⁰ T.C. Pickney, "Korean Situation an Future U.S. Policy," 3.

⁶¹ T.C. Pickney, "Korean Situation an Future U.S. Policy," 3.

⁶² John A. Wickham, "The Assassination and the Aftermath," 29 October 1979, 14-M-0722, 1-2, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/22886-document-12-cable-sso-korea-sso-dia-subject>

⁶³ John A. Wickham, "The Assassination and the Aftermath," 1-2.

future of the republic over personal interests.” General Wickham noted that the South Korean military had not seized communications, called for loyalty oaths from subordinate commanders to the acting president, and agreed to support the acting president and the South Korean Constitution. What Wickham wanted the U.S. to focus on was “urging the constitutional process be supported” and continue “in overt ways [its] strong support against armed intervention by North Korea.”⁶⁴

What Was Revealed in General Wickham’s Memoir

On 26 October 1979, Wickham notes that when he was informed of Park’s death by Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, the concern in Washington was that “North Korea might capitalize on the confusion” through “attacks with their agents in South Korea” or along the “demilitarized zone.”⁶⁵ Wickham said that no one knew a coup was underway because he had “no intelligence reports or indications” that a coup had been plotted. Rather, he thought the primary culprit was North Korea, as it had previously tried to kill Park in 1968 by attacking the Blue House, which was the South Korean president’s executive office and residence. Secretary Brown was concerned about the status of the North Korean military as its armored divisions were “only 30 miles north of Seoul.”⁶⁶ This was complicated by the fact that trying to understand how North Korea would react was seen as “futile,” due to Kim Il-sung and his “inner-circle” being “always unpredictable” and “baffling,” which meant that there was “no use trying to speculate.”⁶⁷

Wickham spoke with Lt. Gen. Evan Rosencrans, U.S. Air Force (USAF), USFK deputy commander, who confirmed everything Secretary Brown had told him, and that he also “suspected the North Koreans were behind the President’s death.” When meeting in the White House Situation Room with Sec Brown, General David C. Jones, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, Department of State representatives, and CIA staff officers, the intelligence officers “could not provide any additional information” regarding the situation. They did know that ROK military forces had increased their alert status, as did U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) with its status of high operational readiness of USFK.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ John A. Wickham, “The Assassination and the Aftermath,” 1-2.

⁶⁵ John A. Wickham, *Korea On The Brink: From the “12/12 Incident” to the Kwangju Uprising, 1979-1980*, (Washington D.C: National Defense University Press, 1999), 3.

⁶⁶ John A. Wickham, *Korea On The Brink: From the “12/12 Incident” to the Kwangju Uprising, 1979-1980*, 3.

⁶⁷ John A. Wickham, *Korea On The Brink: From the “12/12 Incident” to the Kwangju Uprising, 1979-1980*, 6.

⁶⁸ John A. Wickham, *Korea On The Brink: From the “12/12 Incident” to the Kwangju Uprising, 1979-1980*, 7.

Wickam said that all the principals in the meeting were “shocked” by the assassination and “apprehensive” with regards to “future developments,” but what needed to be done at the time was show a “strong defensive military measure” to “stabilize the situation and reassure the interim government in South Korea.” No “immediate intelligence” existed about North Korea’s reaction to Park’s death, but all radio communications were being monitored. The DoD theorized the “alarming possibility” that NK agents had infiltrated the Blue House again and killed Park.⁶⁹

How Did the CIA view the Assassination and its Aftermath?

At the time this article was written, the CIA Records Search Tool (CREST) database had no declassified documents regarding Park Chung-hee’s death, Kim Jae-gyu, or the immediate aftermath of the assassination. New Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests have been paused at the time of the writing of this article due to the Trump Administration’s budget cuts, but one will be submitted by the author as soon as new requests are accepted again. The documents that have been declassified chiefly pertain to the aftermath of Chun’s coup in December 1979. Seoul station chief Bob Brewster retired from the Agency and died of cancer in 1981.⁷⁰ All that is known about what Brewster knew comes from Ambassador Gleysteen’s statement—that on 27 October Brewster was the first to know that Park had been assassinated, had “enough information” to know that a “plot had been hatched by the KCIA director,” and that General Chun Doo-hwan was a “long-time friend of Brewster.”⁷¹

What has been declassified regarding Kim Jae-gyu is as follows: on May 20, 1980, the CIA assessed that after the South Korean Supreme Court upheld the death sentence of Kim Jae-gyu, his execution could lead to further “discontent amongst students” as they saw Kim as a “hero.”⁷² The CIA noted the first major commentary from North Korea regarding the events within South Korea after Park’s assassination, stating that it “criticized Seoul’s decision to extend martial law nationwide” and disavowed South Korean claims that it had “intentions to interfere in the South.” The CIA saw this statement by North Korea as their attempt to avoid being charged with supporting South Korean dissidents to foment revolt inside South Korea.⁷³

⁶⁹ John A. Wickham, *Korea On The Brink: From the “12/12 Incident” to the Kwangju Uprising, 1979-1980*, 9, 12.

⁷⁰ “Robert George Brewster, 54, Retired from Service at CIA” *Washington Post*, 13 August 1981, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1981/08/13/robert-george-brewster-54-retired-from-service-at-cia/42b16226-f991-47c0-9707-567769fdab81/>

⁷¹ John A. Wickham Jr., *Korea on the Brink: A Memoir of Political Intrigue and Military Crisis*, 34.

⁷² CIA CREST, “Spot Commentary: South Korea,” 20 May 1980, 4844217-2, 1-2.

⁷³ CIA CREST, “Spot Commentary: South Korea,” 1-2.

With regard to the CIA's relationship with the KCIA: Fred Charles Thomas, Jr, political assistant Seoul (1952-1954) and political officer Seoul (1956-1958) within the State Department, argued that the CIA had created the KCIA and that the CIA would serve in a liaison role. This created a situation where "knowledge of Korea and its language" was "not needed but a hindrance." The people that the CIA sent to the station in Seoul were "organization men" who "would and could fit the required mold."⁷⁴ Thomas called the KCIA "the CIA mirror," which was used by a "series of questionable generals" to "usurp power."⁷⁵

Donald Gregg, CIA station chief in Seoul (1973-1975), stated that the relationship between the CIA and KCIA was "difficult." He found that while the KCIA would "talk about North Korea as a threat," all of their focus was on "stemming any kind of dissent within South Korea."⁷⁶ He reported that he was "deeply unhappy to be working with [such] an organization."⁷⁷

Ambassador Thomas Dunlop, while he was a political counsellor for the Seoul consulate (1983-1987), remarked that he could not remember a time when the Chief of Station (CIA's top representative in the country) provided him with "something important." The intelligence on North Korea that was being briefed "relied primarily on just satellite imagery," and the state of North Korean intelligence was described as "terrible [...] almost non-existent." This was compounded by the fact that there was "no useful human intelligence" (HUMINT) from South Korea, as they "did not seem to be able to find out anything about North Korea." All South Korean intelligence cared about was "domestic South Korean politics."⁷⁸ One of the KCIA's primary jobs was to collect information on North Korea, yet it had "failed in that function."⁷⁹ Dunlop saw that the relationship was one-sided in favor of South Korea. In his experience, working with the CIA Station, they "[weren't] very helpful." Dunlop was not certain if the CIA had helped construct the KCIA in the 1960s, but the KCIA

⁷⁴ Fred Charles Thomas, Jr, Interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, March 8, 1995, Arlington, VA, adst.org, 67.

⁷⁵ Fred Charles Thomas, Jr, Interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, March 8, 1995, Arlington, VA, adst.org, 67.

⁷⁶ Donald Gregg, Interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, March 3, 2004, Arlington, VA, adst.org, 6

⁷⁷ Donald Gregg, Interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, March 3, 2004, Arlington, VA, adst.org, 6

⁷⁸ Thomas P.H. Dunlop. Interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, July 12, 1996, Arlington, VA, adst.org, 167, 237, 251.

⁷⁹ Thomas P.H. Dunlop. Interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, July 12, 1996, Arlington, VA, adst.org, 167, 237, 251.

had become an “instrument of political control in South Korea” as well as an “instrument of terror or near terror.”⁸⁰ Similar internal frustrations within the CIA were also expressed in a 1976 report by Korean analysts over the quality of information coming out of South Korean intelligence reporting, and the ability of their HUMINT sources to verify events. The report stated that the analysts did not see South Korean intelligence as “reliable information.”⁸¹

Handling the Post-Park Crisis

On 8 November there was a meeting between Secretary of State Vance, Ambassador William Gleysteen, Assistant Secretary Richard Holbrooke, Nicholas Platt, Staff Member of the National Security Council, and Foreign Minister Park Tong-jin.⁸² In this meeting Secretary Vance affirmed the U.S. obligation to provide “constant support” and to maintain “peace and stability” within the Korean Peninsula. Foreign Minister Park stated his chief concern was the maintenance of “stability” and “national security against the North [North Korea], and stability at home in politics and economics.”⁸³

Foreign Minister Park stated that South Korea must work to avoid what he called “the three evils,” which were: (1) political reprisals against those who worked for President Park Chung Hee under the Yushin Constitution; (2) a military takeover, which the Korean people do not want to see; and (3) a return to the Yushin system, where authority is “blindly followed and preserved.”⁸⁴ Park was also concerned with Acting President Choi’s ability to control the situation due to the fact he was a man who preferred to “follow rather than lead,” but he was “honest, sincere, and hard working.” The U.S. should not expect Choi to “take the initiative,” but rather “adapt to the consensus.”⁸⁵ The question of liberalizing South Korea was necessary, but it was not certain “how fast” this could happen, as any chaos could unravel the country, leading to the military taking over the country. Once a President is elected, the Yushin Constitution would limit their term and this would allow the President to “focus his duties on reform,” but there needed to be amendments if they wanted

⁸⁰ Thomas P.H. Dunlop. Interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, July 12, 1996, Arlington, VA, adst.org, 167.

⁸¹ CIA CREST, “North Korea Politics,” CIA-RDP81T00700R000100050007-2, November 16, 1976, 1.

⁸² Department of State, “Korea Focus – Secretary’s Discussion with Foreign Minister Park Tong-Jin November 3, 1979,” 8 November 1979, 200501785, 1-2.

⁸³ Department of State, “Korea Focus – Secretary’s Discussion with Foreign Minister Park Tong-Jin November 3, 1979,” 1-2.

⁸⁴ Department of State, “Korea Focus – Secretary’s Discussion with Foreign Minister Park Tong-Jin November 3, 1979,” 2.

⁸⁵ Department of State, “Korea Focus – Secretary’s Discussion with Foreign Minister Park Tong-Jin November 3, 1979,” 2.

their term extended to oversee the changes.⁸⁶ Ambassador Holbrooke was concerned about the country descending into chaos, an event that could “lead to [...] the other three evils.” Meanwhile, Secretary Vance inquired about EM-9 and the political prisoners detained due to it. Park responded that this subject would be broached with acting President Choi at their next meeting.⁸⁷ Ambassador Holbrooke impressed to Foreign Minister Park that the death of Park Chung Hee and the questions surrounding it raised comparisons, for him, to the Kennedy Assassination, and the conspiracy theories surrounding that death. The focus needed to be on dispelling rumors quickly.⁸⁸

On 14 November, Ambassador Gleysteen sent a memorandum noting that he was “struck by the absence of observable grief” regarding the death of President Park, who was not being “praised for his contributions” as Gleysteen expected.⁸⁹ The Koreans informed Gleysteen that “Park served his point,” but his “authoritarian political policies were beginning to obscure his economic and social accomplishments.”⁹⁰ The Korean people were “tired of eighteen years of one-man rule” and were “relieved Park has left the scene before more serious damage was done.” Instead of being disgusted by it, the people viewed the assassination as “ridding the country of a dictator” since Park “had it coming to him.”⁹¹

Ambassador Gleysteen noted in an assessment a month after Park’s death the following regarding the internal situation in Korea. He was “impressed by the intelligence and composure” of the South Korean people and the government at that time. There was a “healthy consensus” that the political structure of the government needed to be “liberalized,” but Park’s death had not “brought a spirit of Christian charity into Korean politics.” The core issue was “dangerous disagreement” over how extensive and quickly liberalization should occur. Instead of a consensus, “extremist demands” were being “quickly suppressed by excessively nervous police.” Acting President Choi presented the public with a “sensible procedure for orderly reform” but there had been no “definition in its terms.” Choi also planned to step down after a year after presiding over both constitutional and electoral reform. No matter what he did, Choi was in a political quagmire, constrained by being a neutral leader, having

⁸⁶ Department of State, “Korea Focus – Secretary’s Discussion with Foreign Minister Park Tong-Jin 3 November 1979,” 3.

⁸⁷ Department of State, “Korea Focus – Secretary’s Discussion with Foreign Minister Park Tong-Jin 3 November 1979,” 3.

⁸⁸ Department of State, “Korea Focus – Secretary’s Discussion with Foreign Minister Park Tong-Jin, 3 November 1979,” 11.

⁸⁹ Department of State, “Surprisingly few mourn Park Chung Hee,” 14 November 1979, E935, 12.

⁹⁰ Department of State, “Surprisingly few mourn Park Chung Hee,” 2.

⁹¹ Department of State, “Surprisingly few mourn Park Chung Hee,” 2.

to manage reform in a short period of time, and having to ease the constraints of both martial law, EM-9, and government censorship whilst being attacked by all sides for whatever decision he took.⁹²

Gleysteen noted that the core power brokers in South Korea were the military, as they could wield “almost all raw power” as well as “veto over any development and drag out the process of liberalization,” though that was something they had not yet done. The opposition remained “divided,” but would “almost surely play a larger role.” Meanwhile, the dissident numbers were “tiny” but could seek to use the students to “most likely trigger trouble.”⁹³ In the end, the outcome for South Korea was “impossible to predict” but it was “unlikely” that the country would be “ripped apart by chaotic disorder or blessed with an easy transition to representative government.” Only if the country deteriorated would the military step in with a coup “in the name of self-preservation.”⁹⁴ However, Gleysteen noted “we have not been able to find signs of such a military move.” Such a coup was “not very likely unless there is substantial erosion of public order.” Gleysteen saw the threat of a military coup as “low,” since it would be “highly unpopular” throughout South Korea.⁹⁵

On 29 November, Gleysteen attributed South Korea’s ability to survive its first month post-assassination to the “surprising vigor [of] Korean institutions,” the Korean people’s awareness of “the North Korean threat,” and their ability to balance between “overreaching themselves or scaring military elements into a military takeover.” Right now, the government “seems committed to lifting EM-9, freeing political prisoners, and easing censorship.”⁹⁶ Gleysteen did not see any danger in Choi seeking to “perpetuate himself in office,” and believed that he would be an “easy” target for being “pushed around” by the competing political forces. Gleysteen was more “optimistic” about Korea’s future than he had been a month before, but what still needed monitoring was the “extreme wing of the dissidents/opposition” who were “unwilling to experiment with compromise.”⁹⁷ Despite the early optimism, the State Department’s hopes would not come to pass following the “12/12 incident,” a military coup carried out by General Chun Doo-hwan, who would then rule South Korea from 1980-1988.

⁹² Department of State, “Ambassador Political Assessment One Month after Park Assassination,” 29 November 1979, E998, 1-2

⁹³ Department of State, “Ambassador Political Assessment One Month after Park Assassination,” 2

⁹⁴ Department of State, “Ambassador Political Assessment One Month after Park Assassination,” 2

⁹⁵ Department of State, “Ambassador Political Assessment One Month after Park Assassination,” 2

⁹⁶ Department of State, “Ambassador Political Assessment One Month after Park Assassination,” 4-6.

⁹⁷ Department of State, “Ambassador Political Assessment One Month after Park Assassination,” 4-6.

There are two overarching and repeated issues that can be seen across intelligence documents, memoranda, internal discussions, interviews, and memoirs: surprise at the assassination, and the suspicion that it was orchestrated by North Korea. Numerous officials across the State Department and Department of Defense noted that they did not see a coup coming, as they had no intelligence or warning from the U.S. IC. In spite of emerging evidence, the Department of Defense maintained the view that the origin of the coup was North Korean.

Reactions within U.S. Government Regarding Park Chung-hee’s Death

Individual	William G. Gleysteen, Jr
Position	U.S. Ambassador to South Korea
Reaction	<p>“Stunned by the events”⁹⁸</p> <p>Initial reaction was that Park had been killed in a “military coup” but more “plausible possibility” was that Kim Jae-gyu had “eliminated the President.”⁹⁹</p> <p>“Uncertainty surrounding the events leads to “skepticism” about the “official explanation” as “certain aspects were implausible.”¹⁰⁰</p> <p>[Gleysteen notes] he has been “vaguely accused” of “telling individuals or groups” that the Park government would “last for more than one year,” which was taken as a sign for a coup to be carried out.¹⁰¹ Neither “[Bob] Brewster, [CIA Station Chief of Seoul] or Gleysteen had “slightest premonition” that Kim would turn against Park.¹⁰²</p> <p>A threat of a military coup after Park’s death was “low” because it would be “highly unpopular” through South Korea.¹⁰³</p>
Individual	Cyrus Vance
Position	U.S. Secretary of State
Reaction	Unknown if the death was a “well-placed coup,” “limited elimination of a leader,” or a “bizarre incident.”

⁹⁸ Department of State, “Ambassador’s Call on Acting President,” 27 October 1979, E855, 1-2.

⁹⁹ “Telegram from the American Embassy in Seoul to the Secretary of State, ‘Initial Reflections on Post-Park Chung Hee Situation in Korea’”, 28 October 1979, Wilson Centre Digital Archive, NLC-16-13-2-23-3, Remote Archives Capture (RAC), Jimmy Carter Library. Obtained by Charles Kraus. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/122099>, 1.

¹⁰⁰ Department of State, “Situation in Seoul as of Noon, Sunday, October 28,” 28 October 1979, E866, 1

¹⁰¹ Department of State, “U.S. Embassy Seoul to Department of State *Charges of U.S. Complicity in President Park’s Death*,” 19 November 1979, in William G. Gleysteen, Jr, *Massive Entanglement, Marginal Influence: Carter and Korea in Crisis*, 209

¹⁰² William G. Gleysteen, Jr, *Massive Entanglement, Marginal Influence: Carter and Korea in Crisis*, 61

¹⁰³ Department of State, “Ambassador Political Assessment One Month after Park Assassination,” 2

Individual	William Clark, Jr
Position	Political counsellor in the Seoul Embassy
Reaction	<p>There was “considerable confusion” and “not apparent” that Kim Jae-gyu was the assassin.</p> <p>Clark notes it was Bob Brewster, CIA station chief, who was “the first to know” about Park’s death.¹⁰⁴</p> <p>“Koreans ... always see plots of one kind or another”</p> <p>At the time, not “any of us understood why Kim did it” but it was “hard to accept” that a “single gunman did it” without a “widespread plot.”¹⁰⁵</p> <p>As Kim Jae-gyu was “hung ... without ever giving a full explanation” this left us never knowing “what went through his mind.”¹⁰⁶</p>
Individual	David Blakemore
Position	State Department Korea desk officer in Washington D.C.
Reaction	<p>The assassination event was like the “ROK Corall” and it was “frightening” due to North Korea being “difficult to predict.”¹⁰⁷</p> <p>The death was seen as a “great surprise to everyone” and viewed as the potential spark for a “Seoul Spring” (Prague Spring of 1968)¹⁰⁸</p>
Individual	Clement Zablocki
Position	Chairman of the House International Relations Committee
Reaction	Asked Amb. Gleysteen if there was “blood on American hands” or “CIA involvement.” ¹⁰⁹
Individual	Thomas ‘T.C.’ Pinckney
Position	Brigadier General and Director of the East Asian Pacific Region within the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense
Reaction	Viewed the most likely theory was “impassioned argument explanation” due to the “temperament of the KCIA and security chief.” No evidence of a “military coup” but one should not “rule out the possibility.” ¹¹⁰ However, for what really happened, “we do not know and may never know” ¹¹¹

¹⁰⁴ William Clark Jr, Oral History, Interviewed by Thomas Stern, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, 74-75.

¹⁰⁵ William Clark Jr, Oral History, Interviewed by Thomas Stern, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, 75-76.

¹⁰⁶ William Clark Jr, Oral History, Interviewed by Thomas Stern, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, 76.

¹⁰⁷ David Blakemore, Oral History, Interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History, 45

¹⁰⁸ David Blakemore, Oral History, Interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History, 45

¹⁰⁹ William G. Gleysteen, Jr, *Massive Entanglement, Marginal Influence: Carter and Korea in Crisis*, (Washington D.C., Brookings Institute Press, 2000), 58.

¹¹⁰ T.C. Pickney, “Korean Situation an Future U.S. Policy,” 27 October 1979, R4 14-M-0720, 1-2, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/22885-document-11-information-memorandum-drafted>.

¹¹¹ T.C. Pickney, “Korean Situation an Future U.S. Policy,” 27 October 1979, R4 14-M-0720, 1-2, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/22885-document-11-information-memorandum-drafted>.

Individual	John A. Wickham
Position	General, Commander of USFK
Reaction	<p>“No intelligence reports or indications” that a coup had been plotted.¹¹²</p> <p>He thought the primary culprit was North Korea due to their past assassination attempts on Park Chung-hee.¹¹³</p> <p>In a meeting with Defense Secretary Harold Brown, General David C. Jones, Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, Nat Sec Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, Dept of State representatives, and CIA staff officers, the intel officers “could not provide any additional information” regarding the assassination.¹¹⁴</p> <p>All principal figures (see quote above) were “shocked” by the event.¹¹⁵</p> <p>No “immediate intelligence” existed regarding North Korea’s reaction to Park’s death.¹¹⁶</p> <p>The DoD theory was an “alarming possibility” that North Korean agents had infiltrated and killed Park.¹¹⁷</p>
Individual	Lew Byong-hyon
Position	General within the Republic of Korea Army; Deputy Commander of the Combined Forces
Reaction	<p>Told the U.S. embassy that it was Cha Chi-chol, not Kim Jae-gyu who was the real assassin.¹¹⁸</p> <p>Kim Jae-gyu killed Park due to his history of “a series of personal failures,” tenure at KCIA marked with “incompetence” and he was “temporarily deranged” at the time of killing.¹¹⁹</p>
Individual	Kim Seong-jin
Position	South Korean Minister of Culture and Information
Reaction	The U.S. quick response to Park’s death left the Korean people “uncertain” regarding the U.S. role. ¹²⁰

¹¹² John A. Wickham, “The Assassination and the Aftermath,” 29 October 1979, 14-M-0722, 1-2, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/22886-document-12-cable-sso-korea-sso-dia-subject>

¹¹³ John A. Wickham, “The Assassination and the Aftermath,” 1-2

¹¹⁴ John A. Wickham, *Korea On The Brink: From the “12/12 Incident” to the Kwangju Uprising, 1979-1980*, (Washington DC: National Defense University Press, 1999), 7.

¹¹⁵ John A. Wickham, *Korea On The Brink: From the “12/12 Incident” to the Kwangju Uprising, 1979-1980*, 7.

¹¹⁶ John A. Wickham, *Korea On The Brink: From the “12/12 Incident” to the Kwangju Uprising, 1979-1980*, 7.

¹¹⁷ John A. Wickham, *Korea On The Brink: From the “12/12 Incident” to the Kwangju Uprising, 1979-1980*, 9, 12.

¹¹⁸ T.C. Pickney, “Korean Situation an Future U.S. Policy,” 1-4,

¹¹⁹ John A. Wickham, “The Assassination and the Aftermath,” 1-2,

¹²⁰ Department of State, “ROK Situation Report October 27 1430 Hours,” 27 October 1979, E860, 1-2.

As stressed by Ambassador Gleysteen, the assassination of Park was a total shock across the Department of State, Defense, and key figures within the Carter Administration. The initial uncertainty over who did what and who was the culprit is understandable, given the chaos and varying accounts given by South Korean officials. The Department of Defense's initial choice to view the culprit as North Korea is also totally understandable, as there was a history of assassination attempts against Park by North Korean agents. There were no discussions, at least in Wickham's memoir, of when this analytical assumption changed, once further confirmation of Kim Jae-gyu as the culprit came.

Comparisons to the Lin Biao Coup?

The author was unable to find any declassified intelligence documents within the CIA's CREST archival database regarding their insight or internal communications regarding Park Chung-hee's assassination or discussions about Kim Jae-gyu. Despite not having access to such documents—providing they do exist—the assassination of Park Chung-hee by an internal threat actor bears some parallels to the attempted coup by Chinese Minister of Defense Lin Biao against Premier Mao Zedong in 1971. The sheer genuine shock that comes across throughout the documents and interviews regarding this event shows that it too was never projected as a remote possibility or considered as a viable threat worth monitoring.

As for the Lin Biao comparison, the CIA repeatedly stated in 1970 that Lin Biao's devotion to Mao was "dog-like," he had "absolute faith in Mao," his faith was a "cynical exploitation of the old man's insatiable vanity," and he was no different than "Stalin's sycophants."¹²¹ Nor would Mao "change his mind" regarding Lin, as he was a "reliable revolutionary successor," and that to "conclude otherwise" would mean Lin had engaged in a "35 year [...] complete deception."¹²² As for the threat of a coup within China, the CIA believed it to be low, since the Chinese had created an "elaborate system of mutual surveillance" to prevent it from occurring. The CIA rated this anti-coup system as "probably reliable."¹²³ For a conspiracy to be successful in China, it would require the cooperation of several officials across numerous strategic centers, who would be "very difficult" to recruit without exposing the plot.¹²⁴ By the summer of 1971, just before the coup, there was no evidence to suggest the CIA had lost confidence in Lin or that a coup threat was rising.¹²⁵

¹²¹ CIA CREST, "Lin Piao and the Great Helmsman: POLO XXXIX." CIA-RDP85T00875R001000010038-5, 21 January 1970, I, 2-3, 5, 9-10.

¹²² CIA CREST, "Lin Piao and the Great Helmsman: POLO XXXIX." 5, 9-10.

¹²³ CIA CREST, "Lin Piao and the Structure of Power," RSS. No. 0049/70/ CIA-RDP85T00875R00100010041-1; December 1970, i-iii, 58-59.

¹²⁴ CIA CREST, "Lin Piao and the Structure of Power," RSS. No. 0049/70/ CIA-RDP85T00875R0010010041-1; December 1970, i-iii, 58-59.

¹²⁵ CIA CREST, "Annex: Mao's China, 1962-71," CIA-RDP85T00875R001000010044-8, 1971, 81, 88

In its internal review of how Lin Biao's coup had occurred, the CIA simply concluded that any signs of the coup, and Lin's fall from Mao's favor, were "obvious in hindsight."¹²⁶ The CIA did not see any reason to improve how its analytical tradecraft was used to assess coup threats.¹²⁷ No signs of a coup were ever acknowledged by the Chinese team until after the fact, nor was Lin's loyalty ever found to be in question until after his disappearance. In the end, the CIA concluded in a 9 November 1972 Presidential Daily Briefing that the "actual facts surrounding" Lin's death in September 1971 "may never be known."¹²⁸

As there are no documents from the CIA, the present author cannot make any judgement as to how the CIA viewed the internal threats to Park or Kim Jae-gyu. It would not be surprising if the CIA simply did not consider coup threats inside South Korea to be viable, or if they did not see the need to review and monitor the internal threats to Park. From the documents, memoirs, and interviews, neither did the State Department or Defense view the coup threat as serious, or as something that was a remote possibility. Regarding the view that North Korea was a possible culprit in the assassination, there are no documents that show whether Bob Brewster viewed them as a valid culprit. It appears the Department of Defense was the only institutional element in the U.S. government that seriously entertained this as a possibility.

There has since been a lot more information uncovered and released about this critical moment in South Korean history, and an understanding is growing of how the U.S. government viewed the death of Park, as well as the chaos of trying to figure out who the actual culprit was. Of all the U.S. government agencies, the State Department was the most optimistic regarding South Korea's ability to take a positive path after Park's death, before General Chun dashed those hopes with a coup a few months later. There are still further questions surrounding what the CIA knew, which cannot be answered until the Agency releases the files surrounding Park's death.

Potential Repeat of the Iran/SAVAK Organizational Issue

In a 21 November 1980 meeting with Zbigniew Brzezinski, assistant to the President for national security affairs, and Donald Gregg, National Security Council Staff member for East Asia, Kim Kyong Won, Secretary General of the Blue House, said that he did

¹²⁶ CIA CREST, "The Purge of Lin Piao's "Conspiratorial Clique"" a Tentative Reconstruction: POLO XLVIII," CIA-RDP85T00875R001000010047-5, 5 July 1972, a-41.

¹²⁷ CIA CREST, "The Purge of Lin Piao's "Conspiratorial Clique"" a Tentative Reconstruction: POLO XLVIII," a-5.

¹²⁸ CIA CREST, "The President's Daily Brief," CIA-RDP79T00936A011300080001-3, 9 November 1972, A1 – A4.

not want Korea to “become another Iran” after President Park’s assassination.¹²⁹ It is possible that the CIA could be withholding documentation regarding its analysis and post-mortem of Park’s assassination if they were experiencing a repeat of the same issue that they had in predicting the fall of the Shah of Iran. The CIA tasked Robert Jervis and John P. Devlin to carry out an intelligence post-mortem to understand why the CIA failed to predict the Iranian Revolution.¹³⁰ They found that one of the key reasons why the CIA missed the growing internal threats to the Shah was the fact that the CIA was reliant upon the Shah’s intelligence agency, the SAVAK, for their human intelligence inside Iran. The SAVAK only gave the CIA information that hid the major internal threats that could lead to his downfall.¹³¹ Jervis found that in the CIA’s analysis of Iran, analysts failed to realize that the crisis was quite severe. They discounted the crisis because the Shah had not cracked down on it; their mistake was further compounded by the fact that “all foreign intelligence services believed that [the] Shah was strong and decisive.”¹³² The CIA station in Tehran was not a large one, and it produced “little political intelligence.”¹³³ The lack of staff dedicated to Iran was not unexpected, given that the focus of the CIA’s expertise and resources was the Soviet Union.¹³⁴

Interview Subject no. 1, who worked in the CIA’s Foreign Broadcast Information Services (FBIS) Korea Desk from 1974-1989, stated that management and the rest of the CIA routinely ignored and disregarded the Korean teams because they did not have any information coming out of the country (classified or otherwise). This is because Korea was “not a central focus [...] nor a concern.”¹³⁵ It was not just the CIA, but also the State Department that gave a lack of priority to the Korean Peninsula. Ambassador Daniel O’Donohue, during his time as political officer in Seoul (1960-64) and Korea Desk Officer in Washington (1964-66), pointed out that the State Department’s Korea Desk was on the total “fringes,” and that the State Department management only cared if a “major incident” occurred, such as “North Korea

¹²⁹ National Security Council, “MEMCON With Kim Kyong Won,” 21 November 1980, 8024442, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/media/22890/ocr>, 2.

¹³⁰ CIA CREST, “Analysis of NFAC’s Performance on Iran’s Domestic Crisis, Mid-1977–November 1978,” CIA-RDP86B00269R001100110003-4, 21.

¹³¹ CIA CREST, “Analysis of NFAC’s Performance on Iran’s Domestic Crisis, Mid-1977–November 1978,” 21; “Memorandum for Dr. Bowie, Subject: Earlier Estimate on Iran,” CIA-RDP98S00099R000501010032-8, NFAC 3769-79, 18 July 1979, 6.

¹³² Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranians Revolution and the Iraq War*, (Cornell University Press, Washington: D.C.: 2010), 24-25.

¹³³ Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranians Revolution and the Iraq War*, 24-25.

¹³⁴ Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranians Revolution and the Iraq War*, 21-22.

¹³⁵ Interview with author, 6 September 2023

invading.” Otherwise, O’Donohue was told that he was “not allowed to contact the Sixth Floor”¹³⁶, where the office of the Assistant Secretary of East Asia for the Department of State was located. This clearly shows the low priority given to Korea across multiple government institutions.

Conclusion

Kim Jae-gyu’s family have maintained for decades that the official explanation for his motivations—namely that he was a traitor who simply wanted to overthrow the President—is wrong.¹³⁷ All we have, for now, is Kim’s final statement: “the purpose of the Oct 26th revolution was to restore free democracy and prevent further bloodshed.”¹³⁸ There are still documents missing from the CIA’s declassification collections that could be critical in evaluating how they viewed the situation and whether they were caught off guard by Park’s death. What has been released by other U.S. government agencies and memoirs shows that, overall, every key player was surprised by the event, and internal South Korean threats were not previously considered in analysis. Surprise was the most consistent theme, as well as the chaos of trying to figure out who the culprit was and whether North Korea was involved in the assassination.

Future research can be carried out once further U.S. government documents are declassified, either by the Department of State or the CIA, to see whether these documents change our understanding of how the U.S. government handled the assassination of President Park. However, what can be drawn from the existing evidence is the fact that, due to a heavy reliance on the KCIA and its known issues, the CIA and the U.S. government were largely, it appears, in the dark with regard to the coup and were caught by surprise. This case serves to highlight the threat of internal coups when it comes to the stability of a country, and highlights the need for future analysts to take these into account. As has been said by various U.S. government officials, internal threats were never taken seriously in South Korea. North Korea was quickly blamed, without any alternative analysis of other potential options.

¹³⁶ Daniel O’Donohue, Interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, May 28, 1996, Arlington, VA, adst.org, 22-23, 35.

¹³⁷ Kang Jin-kyu, ‘Family of South Korean Dictator’s Assassin Seek Treason,’ *Agence France-Presse*, 3 December 2020, <https://www.courthousenews.com/family-of-south-korean-dictators-assassin-seek-treason-acquittal>

¹³⁸ Song Seung-hyun, “Assassin of military strongman Park Chung Hee granted retrial 45 years later,” *The Korea Herald*, 19 Feb 2025, <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10423987>

Ethics Note

The interviews conducted for this article stem from this author's doctoral research at the University of Edinburgh. All interview subjects consented to being interviewed and were anonymized. The PhD proposal received an approval from Edinburgh University's Departmental Research, Ethics, Integrity and Governance on 15 March 2023.

