



**Directorate of  
Intelligence**

~~Secret~~

25X1

# **The South Korean Military: A Changing Role in Politics?**

25X1

**An Intelligence Assessment**

~~Secret~~

*EA 87-10030  
November 1987*

*Copy 200*

**Page Denied**



**Directorate of  
Intelligence**

**Secret**






25X1

# **The South Korean Military: A Changing Role in Politics?**



25X1

**An Intelligence Assessment**

This paper was prepared by   
 Office of East Asian Analysis. Comments and  
queries are welcome and may be directed to the  
Chief, Northeast Asia Division, OEA, 



25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

Secret

[Redacted]

25X1

**The South Korean Military:  
A Changing Role  
in Politics?** [Redacted]

25X1

25X1

**Scope Note**

Our judgments on the military's role in South Korean politics are based largely on impressionistic reporting [Redacted]

25X1

[Redacted] rather than on hard data. [Redacted]

25X1

25X1

[Redacted]

this paper assesses trends in military thinking and speculates on the factors that may change the military's role in the 1990s. [Redacted]

25X1

Secret

EA 87-10050  
November 1987

Secret



25X1



**The South Korean Military:  
A Changing Role  
in Politics?** 

25X1

**Key Judgments**


*Information available  
as of 9 November 1987  
was used in this report.*

The charged political atmosphere in South Korea as it prepares for the country's first direct presidential election since 1971 spotlights once again the role of the military, historically a key actor in politics. The fact that military officers have justified intervention at two critical junctures in the past, by citing domestic unrest and the threat from the North, makes us wary that they could do so again. At this point in the campaign, however, we believe that, as long as the election process remains on track and domestic disturbances are under control, the Army will not derail the transition. Many of the same attitudes that guided past military forays into politics will influence the thinking of the officer corps as it evaluates the political scene:

- The military's perception of itself as the ultimate guardian of national security continues to convince many officers that they have the right to veto political developments—including election outcomes—that could threaten that security.
- Distrust of civilian leaders' abilities to protect the national interest has led many officers to believe the country is best served when retirees from their ranks hold public office—including the presidency.
- Bread-and-butter issues also color military attitudes, and   many officers see an extension of military influence through ruling-party candidate Roh Tae Woo's election as a way to protect their wealth and status.

25X1  
25X1

Notwithstanding the deep-seated views that incline the officer corps toward intervention, countervailing trends in military thinking—highlighted by military opposition to a declaration of martial law during protests in June—suggest that the military elite has grown reluctant to interfere directly in the political process:

- A tarnishing of the military's image—the result of its close association with the highly unpopular rule of President Chun Doo Hwan and the Army's brutal suppression of riots in Kwangju in 1980—has convinced many officers that South Koreans have grown antagonistic toward them and complacent about the North Korean threat.  senior officers argued against martial law to quell protests in June because they believed they could not sustain such a role in the face of strong popular opposition.


25X1

Secret



25X1

- Public pressure for democratization has also affected senior officers, who recognize that they cannot easily turn back Korea's political clock.

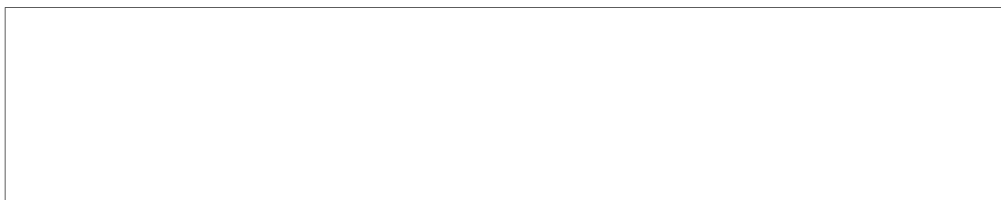
 many junior officers share the desire for a genuinely apolitical military, and that their superiors, while seeking to maintain their political clout, do not want to jeopardize the democratization process.

25X1



25X1

Over the longer term, we believe the Army's changing perception of its role will alter the military's threshold for overt political action. In the 1990s, the rise of a new generation to command positions and possible improvements in North-South relations also could lessen the chance for coups justified on the basis of "national security."



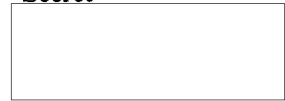
25X1



25X1

Secret

Secret



25X1

**Contents**

	<i>Page</i>
Scope Note	iii
Key Judgments	v
The Army and Politics	1
A Look at Military Attitudes: What Has Stayed the Same . . .	1
. . . And What Views Have Changed?	5
The Military in the 1990s: What Lies Ahead for Korea and the United States?	7

25X1

**Appendixes**

A.	What Might Prompt Direct Military Intervention?	9

Secret

Secret



25X1

---

**Domestic Political Events Involving  
South Korea's Army**

**April 1960**

*Student uprisings protesting reelection of President Syngman Rhee . . . he declares martial law, but soldiers refuse to shoot . . . Rhee resigns, Prime Minister heads interim regime.*

**May 1961**

*Major General Park mounts coup against interim government after student protests, labor unrest, and economic downturn . . . Park forms ruling council and promises return to civilian rule . . . runs for his first presidential term in 1963.*

**October 1972**

*Park declares martial law after students protest tighter political controls . . . oversees drafting of new Constitution containing an indirect presidential election system . . . martial law lifted after he is elected under new system.*

**October 1979**

*Security Chief assassinates Park . . . Prime Minister heads interim government, declares martial law . . . Defense Security Commander Maj. Gen. Chun Doo Hwan investigates Park's death.*

**December 1979**

*Chun mounts coup against the senior military claiming some are implicated in Park's death . . . consolidates control in military . . . begins manipulating weak interim government.*

**Spring 1980**

*Student and labor unrest escalate, economy hits bottom . . . Chun directs government to declare martial law, arrests opposition leader Kim Dae Jung . . . Chun crushes riots in Kwangju.*

**Summer 1980**

*Prime Minister resigns . . . Chun elected President . . . military supports Chun's election after he begins reforms, promises only one term.*



25X1

Secret



Secret




25X1


### The South Korean Military: A Changing Role in Politics?




25X1

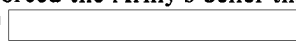
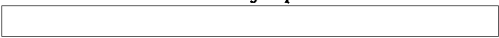
#### The Army and Politics

The South Korean Army has been trained and disciplined primarily as a professional military force, but the reality of the North Korean threat has given it a rationale for intervening directly in domestic politics at two critical junctures since 1960 (see inset). In 1961, the turmoil of a bitterly fought election after the ouster of Syngman Rhee, including considerable social and economic dislocation, prompted Maj. Gen. Park Chung Hee to seize power from the fledgling parliamentary government. In 1980, then Maj. Gen. Chun Doo Hwan used student and labor protests to justify ousting the weak government that took over after President Park's assassination in 1979. In both cases, military leaders with political ambition tapped widespread concern among senior officers over the dangers of political instability to build consensus for a military coup. 

We do not know whether the political situation in South Korea once again holds the seeds for military intervention on the scale of 1961 or 1980. Ruling-party presidential candidate Roh Tae Woo's dramatic concessions to the political opposition in June 1987 (see inset, "The Military and Roh's Proposal") defused a crisis that some observers believed threatened to draw in the military for a third time, but the atmosphere remains charged. Indeed, many South Koreans are not optimistic, expecting renewed turmoil as they prepare for a presidential election this December, the transition in February, and the Olympics next summer 

As always, the Army will watch for escalating student demonstrations, labor unrest, or other political turns that by its lights might invite North Korean aggression. As important, when they consider a possible ruling-party defeat in the country's first direct presidential election since 1971, will be senior officers' views of themselves as the custodians of the military's interests and the future of the officer corps. 

#### A Look at Military Attitudes: What Has Stayed the Same . . .


Military officers appear to be guided by many of the same attitudes in 1987 that set the stage for their past forays into South Korean politics. Perhaps most important, in our judgment, is their view that they—not a civilian leadership—remain the ultimate *guardian of national security*, with the corollary that deterrence of North Korean aggression depends on maintaining political and social stability. Efforts by P'yongyang since the Korean war to destabilize the South have reinforced the Army's belief that it must remain on guard.<sup>1</sup>  this sense of threat as well as mission have, in turn, strengthened the view that the Army should have veto power over government actions that could jeopardize national security. 



25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

 both junior and senior officers continue to use the term "political instability"—without elaboration—as a catchphrase to justify a direct military role in politics:

-  military officers generally recognize the danger posed by an unpopular President Chun's extending his term, one officer said last year that the Army would support such a move if widespread political unrest—and the ensuing threat of North Korean aggression—required it 

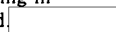
25X1

25X1

- When describing what would prompt Army leaders to follow orders for martial law during protests in June 1987, a senior officer referred to the military's role as the "last rampart" of national security,

25X1

25X1

<sup>1</sup> North Korean efforts to spark political chaos in the South have ranged from a commando raid on the presidential Blue House in 1968—foiled by security guards—to the Rangoon bombing in 1983—when 18 senior South Korean officials were killed. 

25X1

25X1

Secret

---

***The Military and Roh's Proposal***

*In his speech on 29 June 1987, ruling Democratic Justice Party (DJP) Chairman Roh Tae Woo said that meetings with prominent South Koreans had convinced him that Seoul had to meet opposition and dissident demands for a direct presidential election system and lifting of political controls.*

<b><i>Issue</i></b>	<b><i>Promised Action</i></b>	<b><i>Progress</i></b>	<b><i>The Military's View</i></b>
<i>Presidential election system</i>	<i>Scrap indirect presidential election system . . . revise Constitution after agreement between DJP and opposition.</i>	<i>DJP and opposition drafted new charter in September . . . passed National Assembly and approved by national referendum in late October.</i>	<i>Although most officers favored existing system as guaranteeing a DJP win, many supported the move initially as way to stifle unrest.</i>
<i>Presidential election law</i>	<i>Rewrite election law to ensure a fair election.</i>	<i>Revision of presidential election law passed by Assembly.</i>	<i>Many officers expected the DJP to stack the new law in its favor.</i>
<i>Political rights</i>	<i>Restore all Kim Dae Jung's rights suspended in 1980 . . . release political detainees.</i>	<i>Kim's rights restored in July . . . government has released 2,000 political violators and suspects.</i>	<i>Strong military opposition to the move . . . concern that Kim and other "Communists" released will foment unrest.</i>
<i>Basic rights</i>	<i>Reform Constitution to bolster basic rights, including ensuring human rights and limiting prisoner detention.</i>	<i>New rights include writ of habeas corpus, workers' rights to strike and bargain collectively.</i>	<i>Concern freer environment has opened the way for student and labor unrest . . . fear the situation will worsen.</i>
<i>Free speech</i>	<i>Abolish Basic Press Law, which permits censorship of media.</i>	<i>Law still on books but not enforced . . . change pending that retains controls on sensitive security issues.</i>	<i>Adds to concerns about political climate.</i>
<i>Local autonomy</i>	<i>Expand self-government by forming local legislative councils.</i>	<i>Discussion of system under way but final action may be put off until next year.</i>	<i>Unknown.</i>
<i>Political dialogue</i>	<i>Increase interparty talks to avoid social conflict.</i>	<i>Opposition taking part in a dialogue for implementing reforms.</i>	<i>Probably views this as acceptable as long as DJP does not appear to be conceding to too many opposition demands.</i>
<i>Social purification</i>	<i>Reinvigorate efforts to bring "common criminals" to justice.</i>	<i>Unknown.</i>	<i>Not likely to object to this provision.</i>

25X1

Secret

[Redacted]

Closely associated with this self-proclaimed role as guardian of stability is the conviction among many officers that *civilians have failed to fashion policies to protect the country from external attack*. The judgment, in our view, reflects the legacy and biases of Korea's political culture, with its militaristic heritage; long history of strong, one-man rule; and 35 years of Japanese occupation until 1945. Many Koreans believe that civilian mismanagement of the government led to the North Korean invasion in 1950. In military ranks the sense remains strong that similar malfeasance required the interventions by Park and Chun to rescue the nation. [Redacted]

[Redacted] Korea Military Academy (KMA) graduates in particular see military leaders today as best qualified to run the government. [Redacted] the KMA faculty indoctrinates cadets with the notion that many university students do not take the North Korean threat seriously—a view of civilians that officers later appear to project onto university-educated politicians and bureaucrats. The monopoly of leadership roles held by KMA graduates makes their political attitudes especially important. Although they constitute a minority of Army officers, KMA graduates are disproportionately influential in military decision making—[Redacted] over 80 percent of active duty general grade officers are academy graduates. [Redacted]

We believe this elitist attitude plays a major role in shaping military thinking on the succession and the question of intervention. [Redacted] [Redacted] at all levels believe the country's—as well as the military's—interests will be best served if Chun's successor comes from retired officer ranks. This attitude appears to be the linchpin of military support for ruling-party candidate—and retired General—Roh Tae Woo. When asked by US officials who else might be qualified to run the country, most

officers list retired KMA graduates, such as Defense Minister Chong Ho Yong, who are active in politics. [Redacted] staff officers at the Defense Ministry who have been among the strongest advocates of an apolitical military stumble on the issue of genuine civilian leadership. [Redacted] many of these officers are saying the country will not be ready for a “truly” civilian leader until Roh serves a full presidential term. [Redacted]

Just as the military views its own as best suited to govern, the Army deeply *distrusts the opposition's abilities to run the country*. Since 1960, senior military officers have been suspicious of leaders Kim Dae Jung and Kim Young Sam—who have dominated opposition ranks—and their concerns are probably even stronger now as an election approaches in which either one, or both, of the Kims will challenge the ruling camp. We suspect fear about reprisals under an opposition leadership accounts for much of the military's concern. [Redacted] some officers believe an opposition-led government would attempt to hold the military responsible for suppressing the bloody Kwangju riots in 1980 and use the issue to purge the officer corps. [Redacted]

[Redacted] the military is particularly concerned that, as president, Kim Dae Jung would introduce policies similar to those he called for in his 1971 presidential campaign, including immediate reunification with the North and decreased military spending. Indeed, [Redacted] that even junior officers—too young to remember Kim's former political agenda—view him as a dangerous radical whose leadership would likely plunge the country into chaos. [Redacted]

Our lack of solid evidence on plans to deal with Kim makes it impossible to distinguish between hardline posturing and preparations for action, but military talk [Redacted] [Redacted] are considering their options should Kim win. Some senior officers have pointedly told US officials the

25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

225X1



**... And What Views Have Changed?**

Notwithstanding the entrenched attitudes and interests that buttress the military's rationalization of its political role, there are signs that senior officers are increasingly reluctant to become directly involved in the political process. These crosscurrents emerging in military perceptions and thinking complicate any effort to make "straight line" projections of the Army's political behavior based on what happened in 1961 and 1980. [redacted]

In our judgment, *worry among officers over the military's poor public image*—a result of the Army's close association with an unpopular Chun and its role in suppressing the riots at Kwangju (see inset)—bears on their view of political intervention. [redacted]

[redacted] senior officers are aware of popular distrust of the military's intentions and would avoid intervening directly in politics unless the public supported the move. Over the past seven years, public antipathy toward the Army has made most senior officers sensitive to rebuilding their reputation as professionals. We believe most officers are counting on Chun's departure from office to ease the criticism they have shouldered during his tenure. [redacted]

Beyond the albatross of Chun's unpopular rule, [redacted]

[redacted] senior officers are worried that public cynicism toward the military has prompted many Koreans to question the government's warnings about the threat from North Korea. [redacted] senior officers fear that a frequent use of the external threat to justify unpopular domestic policies—such as harsh crackdowns on dissidents over the past year—has led South Koreans to lower their guard. Even in its own ranks, the military hierarchy is concerned that junior officers—too young to remember the Korean war—are sympathetic to antigovernment slogans and complacent about the North. [redacted]

We believe uneasiness about the consequences of a tarnished image abroad has prompted officers to see direct intervention in politics more negatively than in the past. [redacted] many feared—probably correctly—that South Korea would have lost the right to host the 1988 Olympics if the Army had intervened

---

***The Legacy of Kwangju***

*The military's reputation was badly damaged by the Army's role in suppressing riots in the provincial city of Kwangju in 1980. The riots began when then Prime Minister Choi Kyu Ha—under pressure from Chun and the military—declared nationwide martial law to cope with student unrest. When local police failed to contain the riots, Chun dispatched special forces, and a bloody battle ensued. The official count put civilian deaths at over 200, while dissident and human rights groups claimed the number was well over 1,000. Kwangju's residents responded with a full-scale insurrection, seizing weapons and firing on police and military forces. Chun eventually used regular Army troops from the 20th Division to retake the city with little additional bloodshed. Although the government conducted an investigation, and the Prime Minister eventually resigned, Seoul has never accepted responsibility for the incident or punished the officers responsible.* [redacted]

25X1

25X1  
25X1

25X1

[redacted] immediately after Kwangju indicated deep public bitterness toward the government and the military for the bloodshed. The US Embassy reported in June 1980 that civilians who were already questioning the military's intentions after Chun's headquarters coup in 1979—and his dominance of the weak Choi government—became even more distrustful of military leaders. [redacted]

25X1  
25X1

25X1  
25X1

25X1  
25X1

[redacted] many senior officers see Chun's inability to shake the stigma of Kwangju as his greatest failure. Many view his departure from politics as the only way for the military to remove the taint of Kwangju and regain public trust. [redacted]

25X1

[redacted] Contacts of the US Embassy indicate, however, that emotions continue to run high on the issue, suggesting public antipathy may continue well into the post-Chun era. In Kwangju, in particular, most citizens remain bitter toward the government and the military, as well as the United States—because Chun used troops from the 20th Division, which is under the Combined Forces Command. [redacted]

25X1  
25X1

25X1

25X1  
25X1



In sum, the military's evident reluctance to intervene in politics unless it can count on popular support, heightened concern for its image at home and abroad, and sensitivity to US views, in our judgment, will offer strong competition to the type of pressures that led officers to move in 1961 and 1980. Without a major threat to their or the nation's interests, we do not believe military leaders will take action to derail South Korea's first direct presidential election in 16 years. Nonetheless, past experience shows that a decision to act will be difficult to discern. [redacted]

[redacted]

**The Military in the 1990s: What Lies Ahead for Korea and the United States?**

We believe senior officers already are adjusting their approach to politics as they seek to retain power in a country that increasingly demands civilian supremacy. Ruling-party leaders—and retired generals, such as Chong Ho Yong—are seeking more acceptable ways to maintain a military hand in politics. For example, Chong as early as two years ago counseled Roh that he must distance himself from Chun to win popular support for his potential candidacy, instead of relying on Chun's financial and political machine to deliver the election. [redacted]

In any event, we believe the military's criteria for intervention will continue to evolve. The reality of a system built on politicized promotions and a firmly entrenched patron-client format designed to weed out young officers unwilling to play politics is certain to offer considerable resistance to quick or broad-range change in military views. Nonetheless, generational pressures in the lower officer ranks for an apolitical military have already made a coup harder to mount, and we expect that younger officers will carry forward some legacy of support for a professional military as they enter senior positions. [redacted]

A change in North-South relations over the next decade may also reshape military thinking. In our view, a durable modus vivendi between the North and South—for example, the development of an active dialogue, lowered military tensions, and agreements on economic and cultural exchanges—would make it harder for the military to use national security as a rationale for intervention. Even so, if military leaders continue to see P'yongyang as posing a sustained challenge to South Korea's survival—no matter what foreign policy initiatives a civilian government undertakes—we believe they are highly unlikely to divest themselves of their option to exercise a direct role in politics. [redacted]

25X1  
25X1  
25X1

Evolving attitudes in the South Korean military carry clear benefits for Washington. Indeed, recognition in the Army of popular desires for democratic change and civilian supremacy has already diminished the prospects for coups launched primarily to achieve the personal ambitions of politically minded officers. [redacted]

25X1

Nonetheless, even under the best of circumstances—steady progress toward a more open democratic system without serious domestic unrest—we expect the political signals from the South Korean military to be mixed. Tension between old and new attitudes also may complicate communication between South Korean military leaders and US officials. Senior officers who recognize US concerns about military intervention are certain to reassure their US counterparts. But they could obscure or omit deep-seated attitudes that are likely to continue to weigh heavily in shaping the thinking and behavior of the Army's leadership. Under such circumstances, Washington is certain to find it more difficult to detect the signs of a military coup. [redacted]

25X1  
25X1

25X1

## Appendix A

### What Might Prompt Direct Military Intervention?

Changing attitudes within the military, evident in June when the Army argued against martial law, suggest the threshold for direct intervention in politics is rising. The path toward democracy Roh set last summer is uncharted, however, and the stakes are high for all the key actors in the transition. For some presidential candidates, December's direct election might offer the final opportunity to win power. We believe the volatility of the political situation, [redacted]

[redacted] warrants consideration of what could make the military decide to step in:

- *Escalation of Student and Labor Unrest.* In our view, a repeat of the widespread dissident protests that occurred in June—when thousands of South Koreans opposed Chun's cancellation of the constitutional revision effort—could prompt many senior officers to reverse their opposition to martial law. Although the widespread student protests that many observers predicted this fall failed to materialize, [redacted] moderate and radical groups alike have continued to plan strategy. [redacted] many dissident organizations lack strong political organizations and are considering using demonstrations to influence the election outcome. In light of recent progress the political parties have made in forging agreement on a direct presidential election, we believe most officers would view renewed dissident protests as an effort to destabilize the government. A resurgence of labor unrest in the politically charged atmosphere this fall—workers may be tempted to make additional demands with election campaigns under full swing—could also force the military's hand. [redacted]

- *Impending Ruling-Party Defeat.* It has become increasingly clear that Kim Dae Jung's candidacy represents the main potential provocation that could bring military intervention before election day. Faced with an impending victory by Kim Dae Jung, senior officers could calculate that a preemptive

strike would be less politically risky for them and their institutional interests than a postelection coup, when they would have to move against South Korea's first democratically elected president on the eve of the Olympic Games.

The problems of a *postelection environment* could also prompt military intervention:

- *A Contested Election and Widespread Demonstrations.* A seriously tainted ruling-party victory that raised opposition charges of election fraud might produce military action—with officers fearing North Korean aggression in the face of widespread unrest and a government without legitimacy. Indeed, politically minded officers might be tempted to try to step into the breach, calculating they would meet little public resistance to their move to prevent a badly tainted president-elect from taking office.
- *An Opposition Victory and Government Disarray.* An opposition victory that ushers in a badly factionalized coalition government—not out of the question given the rivalry between the Kims—could prompt the military to act. Any sign that the new government intended to extract wholesale retribution from the military for alleged crimes under the Chun government might also lead military leaders to consider a coup.
- *Radical Violence in the Aftermath of a Fair Election.* Although this development may be the least likely, the US Embassy suggests that some minority faction in the radical movement might try to launch violent demonstrations in an effort to draw military intervention and mar South Korea's first democratic transition. Radical dissidents, who favor revolutionary change, might hope such a move would prevent a clean election from handing them a major political setback. Many South Koreans might initially support a military role in this case, but questions among senior officers about how, when, and whether, to return the government to civilian rule before the Olympics could erode public support.

25X1  
25X125X1  
25X1  
25X125X1  
25X1

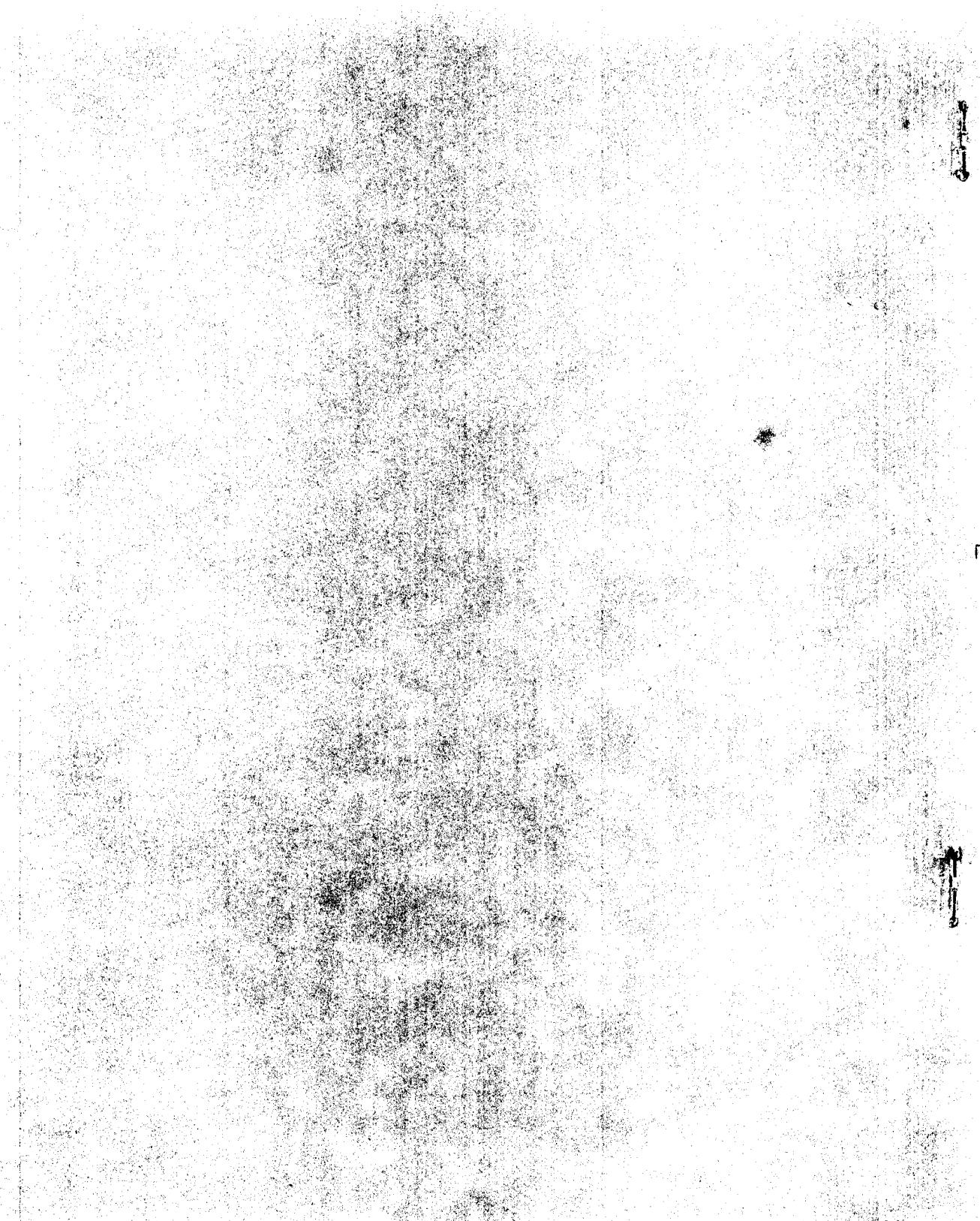
[redacted] 25X1



**Page Denied**

Next 2 Page(s) In Document Denied

**Secret**



**Secret**