

Truman, MacArthur, and the Korean War

During the Korean War, General Douglas MacArthur challenged President Harry S. Truman's authority as foreign policy leader and commander in chief of the armed forces. This resulted in the first major test of civilian control of the military in American history.

[General Douglas MacArthur](#) was an American military hero. Like his father, a Civil War hero, MacArthur won the Congressional Medal of Honor, the nation's highest military honor. Brilliant as well as brave, MacArthur graduated first in his class from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Leading the 42nd Division in World War I, he was wounded three times. During World War II, he served in the Pacific theater, operating first in the Philippines. When his troops faced overwhelming opposition, he was ordered to Australia. Before leaving, he issued a famous promise, "[I shall return](#)." He put together an island-hopping strategy, which led to American forces recapturing the Philippines in 1944. By the war's end, MacArthur was supreme allied commander in the Pacific. His counterpart in the European theater was General Dwight D. Eisenhower. Following the war, MacArthur served as military governor of Japan for five years, getting rid of militarist influences and setting up a constitutional democracy.

[Harry S. Truman](#) also served his country as a soldier. Enlisting in the Army in World War I, he rose to the rank of captain and headed an artillery unit in France. He returned home to Missouri following the war, worked briefly in business, and entered politics. In 1934, he was elected to the U.S. Senate. President Franklin D. Roosevelt picked him as his running mate in 1944, replacing Vice President Henry Wallace for Roosevelt's fourth term in office. Inexperienced and unknown to most Americans, Truman assumed the presidency when Roosevelt died suddenly in 1945. As president, Truman immediately faced many difficult situations. He negotiated the German surrender. He decided to drop the atomic bomb on Japan. To stop Soviet expansion, he instituted a policy of containing communism. As part of this policy, he set up the Marshall Plan to send economic aid to Europe, and he established the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to provide military security for Europe. In 1946, the Republicans gained control of Congress, and Truman seemed likely to lose the next election. Yet in the 1948 presidential election, Truman pulled an upset victory.

In 1950, war broke out in Korea. During this war, a major confrontation took place between Truman and MacArthur over the conduct of the war. MacArthur was the top commander of the American and other U.N. forces in Korea. Truman, as president, was MacArthur's superior. The U.S. Constitution designates the civilian president as the commander in chief of the armed forces and the one who sets American foreign policy.

North Korea Attacks

[Korea](#) had been a Japanese possession since 1910. Following the defeat of Japan in 1945, Soviet troops occupied Korea north of the 38th line of latitude (usually referred to as the 38th parallel). American troops occupied the area south of this line. By agreement, both Soviet and American forces withdrew from Korea in 1948. By this time, Korea as a practical matter had separated into two countries. North Korea, which bordered China, had become a Communist state heavily armed by the Soviet Union. South Korea maintained close ties with the United States, which still occupied nearby Japan under the command of General MacArthur.

In 1949, the [Chinese Civil War](#) ended. Victorious Chinese Communist forces drove the anti-Communist Nationalist Chinese off the China mainland to the island of Formosa (now called Taiwan). Soon after the victory of the Communists in China, news arrived that the Soviet Union had tested an atomic bomb.

President Truman's containment policy sought to stop Communist aggression, especially against Europe and Japan. But Truman administration officials made public statements that seemed to exclude Formosa and Korea as areas to be defended by the United States.

To the surprise of both Truman and MacArthur, North Korea attacked South Korea across the [38th Parallel](#) on June 25, 1950. Moving quickly, and without seeking a declaration of war from Congress, President Truman ordered U.S. air and naval forces to attack targets north of the 38th parallel. He also authorized General MacArthur to send American

ground troops from Japan to support the rapidly collapsing South Korean Army.

Several days after the invasion began, the United Nations passed a resolution calling for its members to aid South Korea in repelling the attack and restoring peace. This resolution should have been vetoed by the Soviet Union. But the Soviets were boycotting the United Nations for refusing to admit Communist China. Eventually, more than a dozen U.N. member nations under the overall command of General MacArthur entered the Korean War.

By the fall of 1950, the war was going badly for South Korea and its allies. The North Korean Army had cornered American, South Korean, and other U.N. troops in a small area around the southern port of Pusan. Defeat seemed inevitable.

But General MacArthur devised a bold and risky [plan](#). The North Koreans had taken most of the Korean peninsula. He proposed landing troops from the sea at the port of Inchon far behind enemy lines. The troops would cut off enemy communications and supply lines, retake Seoul (the capital), and "hammer and destroy the North Koreans."

But Inchon seemed an improbable site. The approach was narrow and could be easily mined. The currents ran swift and made it hazardous for landing troops. Mud flats prevented any amphibious landing. The landing would have to be made on one of the three days each month when the tide covered the mud flats. Once ashore, the troops would have to climb sea walls and cliffs. The enemy could defend the port from the heights surrounding it. For all these reasons, many of the high command opposed an Inchon landing and proposed other sites.

But MacArthur believed that because Inchon was such an awful place for a landing, his troops would take the enemy by surprise, which they did on [September 15](#). At the same time, the besieged U.N. troops in the south around Pusan also attacked. The combined forces drove the North Koreans above the 38th parallel in 15 days.

Next came perhaps the most fateful decisions of the Korean War. Pressed by MacArthur, Truman authorized him to pursue the North Korean troops north of the 38th parallel. The United States succeeded in getting a new U.N. resolution. It called for the destruction of the North Korean Army and the reunification of Korea under a democratic government.

American troops led the offensive beyond the 38th parallel, pushing the North Koreans toward the Yalu River, which separated Korea from Communist China. Despite assurances by the United States that U.N. troops would stop at the Yalu, the Chinese government warned that any foreign forces north of the 38th parallel posed a threat to China's security.

China Enters the War

Over the weekend of October 15-17, President Truman flew to Wake Island in the Pacific to [meet](#) General MacArthur for the first time. The most important question that Truman asked MacArthur was whether he thought China would enter the war. The general confidently replied that the Chinese would not enter the fighting, and the war would be over by Christmas.

Anxious to wrap up the war, MacArthur ordered American and other U.N. troops to press on to the Yalu River. In doing this, he ignored the warnings of the Communist Chinese as well as a directive by military planners in Washington to send only South Korean troops into the provinces bordering China.

On November 25, 1950, nearly 200,000 [Chinese soldiers poured across the Yalu River](#), forcing U.N. forces into a full retreat to the south. MacArthur demanded authority to bomb Chinese bases north of the Yalu in China itself. But fearing a widening of the war and possible entry of the Soviet Union, Truman and his advisors refused. Instead, they ordered him to organize a phased and orderly retreat. On December 29, Truman administration officials informed MacArthur that the United States had abandoned the goal of reunifying Korea.

MacArthur was infuriated at what he considered the Truman administration's sell-out of Korea. MacArthur proposed

his own plan for victory. He wanted a complete blockade of the Communist Chinese coastline. He wanted to bomb industrial sites and other strategic targets within China. He wanted to bring Nationalist Chinese troops from Formosa to fight in Korea. Finally, he wanted the Nationalists to invade weak positions on the Communist Chinese mainland.

Appalled that MacArthur's plan could launch World War III, Truman and the top military leaders in Washington quickly rejected it. But MacArthur continued to publicly argue for his plan. He also criticized the "politicians in Washington" for refusing to allow him to bomb Chinese bases north of the Yalu River. He did all this in spite of an order from his superiors in Washington not to make any public statements on foreign or military policy without first getting approval from the Department of State or Defense. MacArthur was on a collision course with his commander in chief.

Truman Fires MacArthur

When the Chinese offensive stalled just south of the 38th parallel in the spring of 1951, Truman began to work on a peace proposal. This would have re-established the original border between North and South Korea and removed all foreign troops from both countries.

A few days after MacArthur received notice of Truman's peace proposal, he announced his own terms for ending the fighting. In a public statement, again without getting any clearance from Washington, MacArthur taunted the Chinese for failing to conquer South Korea. He then went on to threaten to attack China unless the Chinese gave up the fight. He even said he would meet the enemy military commander to arrange how to end the war.

MacArthur's announcement was an ultimatum to China. It completely torpedoed Truman's diplomatic efforts to negotiate a cease fire. America's allies wondered who was really in charge of U.S. foreign and defense policy. Truman was stunned. "By this act," he later wrote, "I could no longer tolerate his insubordination." A few days later, MacArthur's Republican Party supporters in Congress released a letter from him in which he declared, "There is no substitute for victory."

Truman met for several days with his top advisors. In the end, they all agreed that MacArthur had to go because "the military must be controlled by civilian authority in the country."

Truman acted quickly without giving MacArthur the chance to reconsider his views or to resign. His [dismissal](#) was final and complete. The hero of the war in the Pacific against the Japanese was stripped of his command of U.N. troops in Korea, his command of all U.S. forces in East Asia, and his position as the head of the American occupation of Japan. MacArthur's half-century of military service had ended.

In a written [public statement](#), Truman acknowledged MacArthur "as one of our greatest commanders." But he went on to explain that "military commanders must be governed by the policies and directives issued to them in the manner provided by our laws and Constitution."

Public reaction was overwhelmingly against the firing of MacArthur. Republican congressional leaders invited him to address Congress on his views about how to conduct the war. The Republicans also called for a congressional investigation of American foreign policy in Asia and even discussed "possible impeachments."

Tens of thousands of telegrams opposing MacArthur's dismissal flooded the White House. President Truman himself was booed at a baseball game. A Gallup Poll, however, revealed that despite MacArthur's enormous popularity, only 30 percent of the public agreed with his view of expanding the war to Communist China.

MacArthur returned to the United States and was welcomed by huge emotional crowds. In his televised [address to Congress](#), he repeated his message that, "In war, indeed, there can be no substitute for victory."

Later, appearing before a joint House and Senate committee, MacArthur argued that the fight for Korea was the critical test of America's resolve to stop Communist aggression. Failure to stop it in Asia, he said, would surely lead to future

defeats in Europe and elsewhere in the world. But under questioning, MacArthur admitted that he did not know much about America's foreign and defense policies outside of Asia or how they might be affected by expanding the Korean War.

Truman administration officials and military leaders also testified before the congressional committee. They contradicted MacArthur's judgment that an attack on China would not draw in the Soviet Union. They further stated that the United States would have to bear most of the fighting because our allies opposed an expanded war in Asia.

MacArthur had tried and failed to win the Republican nomination for president in 1944 and 1948. In 1952, taking advantage of his popularity as a critic of Truman's Korean War policies, he tried again. But this time he was beaten by another war hero, [Dwight D. Eisenhower](#). After winning the presidency, Eisenhower largely adopted Truman's peace plan. He negotiated a cease fire in 1953 that re-established the [border](#) between North and South Korea at the 38th parallel.

Later, as MacArthur realized that nations could exterminate each other with nuclear weapons, he denounced war. On his death bed in 1964, he warned President Lyndon Johnson not to send American ground troops to Vietnam or anywhere on the Asian mainland. This was the final ironic twist in the life of the general who had once called for America to go to war against China.

For Discussion and Writing

1. How did Truman and MacArthur differ over how to end the Korean War? Who do you think was right?
2. Why did Truman fire MacArthur?
3. Georges Clemenceau, the leader of France during World War I, once said, "War is entirely too important to be left in the hands of the generals." What did he mean by this? Do you agree or disagree with him? Why?

A C T I V I T Y

Should Civilians Control the Military?

In the United States, civilians control the military. The U.S. Constitution makes the president the commander in chief of the military. Civilians head the U.S. Department of Defense and the individual service branches. Congress makes the armed-forces budget and conducts investigations and makes recommendations on military issues. Civilian courts review military judicial actions.

This civilian control has sometimes been tested. The Truman-MacArthur confrontation was perhaps its greatest test. Another was the Vietnam War. Many military leaders felt hampered by restrictions placed on them by the president and civilians in the Defense Department. But although they grumbled, they did not challenge civilian control.

In this activity, students examine the value of civilian control of the military.

1. Form small groups.
2. Each group should:
 - a. Discuss and make a list of the pros of civilian control of the military.
 - b. Discuss and make a list of the cons of it.
 - c. Decide whether it favors civilian control of the military.
 - d. Prepare to report to the class on its decision and the reasons for it.
3. Have the groups report and hold a class discussion.