

2006

The Truman/MacArthur Controversy: A Study in Presidential Power

Lance B. Lewis
Fort Hays State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholars.fhsu.edu/liberal_studies



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lewis, Lance B., "The Truman/MacArthur Controversy: A Study in Presidential Power" (2006). *Master of Liberal Studies Research Papers*. 2.
http://scholars.fhsu.edu/liberal_studies/2

This Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at FHSU Scholars Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master of Liberal Studies Research Papers by an authorized administrator of FHSU Scholars Repository.

The Truman/MacArthur Controversy:
A Study in Presidential Power

HIST 674 CA: Independent Study

By

Lance B. Lewis

In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree

Master of Liberal Studies
Concentration in History

Fort Hays State University
Summer 2006 Semester

American wars are fought by the military but overseen and controlled by civilians. The United States has long had a history of civilian control of the military, with responsibility directly vested within the executive branch of the federal government, specifically within the presidency. Among other duties and powers of the office of president of the United States, the United States constitution specifies that the president shall be the commander in chief of the armed forces, and presidents have exercised that constitutional power to oversee the strategic conduct of the military, particularly during times of war.¹ But using that inherent power by specifically removing commanding officers in the field during a time of war has rarely been exercised, in large part because presidents have historically allowed military field commanders to make tactical decisions and to manage their subordinates in the field as long as they follow broad strategic policies set by civilian authority.

Presidents have, however, directly dismissed officers from military commands, and both Abraham Lincoln during the American Civil War and Harry S. Truman during the Korean War removed commanding generals from the field. The American Civil War was the first war in which the president very actively intervened in tactical command decisions. Frustrated by the loss of so many battles early in the war, Lincoln in 1862 named General Henry Halleck as a presidential military advisor and general in chief of

¹ Though in practice, this control has been exercised by the president through the Department of War and the Department of the Navy, and after 1947, through the Department of Defense. This role is outlined in Article II, Section 2 of the United States constitution, "The President shall be Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, and of the Militia of the several States, when called into the actual Service of the United States." National Archives, "Constitution of the United States of America", http://www.archives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/constitution_transcript.html Richard Haynes suggests that the Founding Fathers in this clause simply wanted to be sure that the president would ultimately be superior to any military authority and that the source of this authority would be unquestionable, so as to prevent military coups. Richard Haynes, *The Awesome Power: Harry S. Truman as Commander in Chief*. (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1973). However, the Legislative branch of the U.S. government retains the power to formally declare war.

the Union armies, but Halleck proved to be indecisive and Lincoln concluded that he needed to direct military operations himself. In 1862 and 1863, Lincoln notably removed several generals from command of the Union Army of the Potomac, including George B. McClellan, John Pope, Ambrose Burnside, and Joseph Hooker, though Lincoln did so largely because he was searching for sustained military success. In doing so, Lincoln was criticized for micro-managing the war and interfering in affairs in which he had little experience or expertise.² In 1864, with Ulysses S. Grant named to command of all Union armies, direct control of military operations passed from Lincoln to Grant, though Lincoln continued to pay close attention to how strategy played out in the field.³

Lincoln's actions, as Herman Hattaway has suggested, significantly expanded the powers of the presidency in the role as commander in chief and influenced subsequent presidents who demonstrated a similar resolve in dealing with military matters.⁴ Unlike Lincoln, in the nearly one hundred years between the American Civil War and the Korean War, neither William McKinley, Woodrow Wilson nor Franklin Roosevelt actively intervened in the removal of military commanders in the Spanish-American War,

² Lincoln's conduct of the war has been described by many authors, including, for example, David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995); and James McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001). Lincoln never had to interfere in naval affairs to the extent that he did with the Army.

³ David Herbert Donald argues that with the appointment of Grant as commander of all Union armies, Lincoln essentially created a modern command structure in which the president was removed from active daily involvement in military planning and decision-making but continued to exercise strategic control. David Herbert Donald, *Uniting the Republic 1860-1877*, in Bernard Bailyn, Robert Dallek, David Davis, David Donald, John Thomas and Gordon Wood, *The Great Republic: A History of the American People*. vol. 1. (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1992), 625-626.

⁴ Herman Hattaway, "Lincoln's Presidential Example in Dealing with the Military", *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, 7,1. <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jala/7/hattaway.html>. However, Richard Haynes suggests that the expansion of presidential power as commander in chief began not with Lincoln but with James K. Polk, though he acknowledges that Lincoln effectively established the principle of presidential control of the entire military apparatus during times of war. See also, Walter LaFeber, "The Constitution and United States Foreign Policy: An Interpretation", *The Journal of American History*, 74, 3, (December, 1987), 695-717. LaFeber indirectly touches on presidential power as commander in chief in the context of presidential power in the area of foreign policy.

the First World War or the Second World War, leaving those decisions to commanders in the field. They did however, like Lincoln, exercise firm control over the strategic direction of the war.⁵

But aside from Lincoln's removal of George B. McClellan, perhaps the most controversial example of a president removing a commanding general was that of Harry S. Truman's 1951 removal of Douglas MacArthur as supreme commander of the United Nations forces in the Korean War.⁶ This removal capped a simmering dispute between Truman and MacArthur and caused a wave of indignation against Truman throughout the U.S., in large measure because of MacArthur's near-mythic status as a war hero and military genius and the perception that Truman and his administration were micro-managing a war in which the military forces of the United Nations were unnecessarily constrained by narrow objectives set by civilian planners in Washington, D.C.⁷ Historians have ever since studied the confrontation between Truman and MacArthur – often referred to as the Truman/MacArthur controversy - in terms of MacArthur's actions, the directives issued by the Truman administration, the nature of presidential authority and civilian control of the armed forces, and the emergence of the concept of a limited war.

⁵ See for example, Hattaway, "Lincoln's Presidential Example"; Haynes, *The Awesome Power*; LaFeber, "The Constitution and United States Foreign Policy"; and Robert Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

⁶ Though it must be pointed out that Lincoln removed McClellan in part because of lack of military success in the field, which was not the case with MacArthur. MacArthur had presided over the landings at Inchon and though he had suffered a defeat in the immediate aftermath of Chinese intervention in the last two months of 1950, had by the time of his removal his troops had driven the North Korean and Chinese forces back to the 38th parallel.

⁷ This criticism often took the form of accusing Truman and his advisors of being "soft" on communism and not recognizing the military genius of MacArthur. Truman himself anticipated a tremendous reaction to MacArthur's removal, writing in his diary on April 10, 1951, "Quite an explosion. [It] Was expected but I had to act. Telegrams and letters of abuse by the dozens." In Robert Farrell, *Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry S. Truman*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 211.

Harry S. Truman and Douglas MacArthur were a study in contrasts prior to their clash of wills in the Korean War. MacArthur, the grandson of a Supreme Court justice and son of a general who had won the Congressional Medal of Honor, had been a storied figure ever since his service in the First World War, where he became the youngest brigadier general in the U.S. Army as chief of staff to and later, commander of, the 42nd “Rainbow” Division.⁸ MacArthur served as commandant of West Point after the First World War and as Army Chief of Staff in the early 1930s. In 1935, he began serving as an advisor to the armed forces of the Philippines, and officially retired in 1938, but when the Second World War broke out, was recalled to active duty by Franklin D. Roosevelt.⁹ MacArthur was appointed supreme commander of the Southwest Pacific Theater and in 1944 was promoted to the rank of General of the Army, one of only five men to hold five star rank.¹⁰ MacArthur became the military governor of occupied Japan during the post-war period, and from this position, was appointed supreme commander of the United Nations forces after the Korean War began in 1950. In his time as U.N. military commander, MacArthur began to publicly disagree with the Truman administration’s policies regarding the conduct of the war, culminating in a letter to Republican House Minority Leader Joseph Martin that was critical of the administration’s strategy and was later released to the public, and a public statement that mocked Chinese military strength and destroyed the chance for early cease-fire talks with the Chinese. Given what he perceived as insubordination, an inappropriate attempt to undermine foreign policy and in light of his directive that all statements were to be cleared through Washington, Truman

⁸ Douglas MacArthur, *Reminiscences*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ The others holding this rank were: Generals George C. Marshall, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Hap Arnold and Omar Bradley. Bradley received the rank after the Second World War, in 1950.

removed MacArthur from his military commands on April 11, 1951. Though Truman's decision was highly unpopular with the American public, MacArthur returned to the United States and never again held a military command.

Unlike the patrician MacArthur, who came from a prominent family, Truman was a plainspoken, middle-class Midwesterner who had come from farming stock and had known financial hardship in his life. While MacArthur had enjoyed a prominent military career for four decades before his dismissal in 1951, Truman had been a local political figure in Independence Missouri (serving as a county judge for Jackson County) and then a relatively unknown U.S. Senator from Missouri for ten years prior to becoming vice president and then president. While in the Senate, he spent little time involved with foreign affairs, concentrating instead on domestic policies. What national prominence he did have came from his chairmanship of the Senate Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program, a committee created in 1941 to investigate how military contracts and programs were being carried out, and how federal dollars were being spent. The committee came to be known as the "Truman Committee", and was widely credited with saving hundreds of millions, if not billions of dollars in the war effort.¹¹ After serving for less than three months as vice president, Truman succeeded to the presidency following the death of Franklin Roosevelt in April 1945. Truman presided over a very difficult period, both in terms of domestic and foreign policy, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, and won a difficult fight for election to a full term in 1948.

¹¹ There are a number of biographies of Truman that describe his early life up to the point where he became president. These include lengthy works by Alonzo Hamby, *Man of the People: A Life of Harry S. Truman*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Farrell, Robert, *Harry S. Truman: A Life*. (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1994); and David McCullough, *Truman*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992). All three authors offer further discussion of the role of this committee and Truman's chairmanship.

Following a North Korean invasion of South Korea in June 1950, Truman made the decision to intervene with U.S. military forces, believing that the invasion was motivated by Soviet support and thus intervention was necessary to contain communist expansionism in the Far East. After leaving the presidency in January 1953, Truman retired to his hometown of Independence Missouri, and continued for the rest of his life to defend his decision to remove MacArthur from command during the Korean War.

The Korean War as Limited Conflict

The conflict that would become known as the Korean War had its origins in the creation of a new post-war world following the end of the Second World War. The Korean peninsula, occupied by the Japanese following the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905, became a Japanese protectorate in November 1905. The Japanese occupied Korea for the next forty years, using the Korean peninsula as a base for their invasion of Manchuria (northern China) in 1931. After the Soviet Union entered the Second World War against Japan in August 1945, Soviet troops moved from Manchuria into the northern half of the Korean peninsula to expel Japanese troops stationed there.¹²

Following the Japanese surrender to Allied forces in August 1945, the U.S., in the face of rising tension between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, made the decision to place occupation troops in Korea as a counter to Soviet ambitions in the Far East. Recognizing that Soviet troops were already in the northern half of the Korean peninsula, the U.S. government proposed that the country be temporarily divided at the 38th parallel into separate occupation zones.

¹² At the Yalta conference in February 1945, Joseph Stalin agreed that the Soviet Union would enter the war against Japan within two to three months after the defeat of Germany. The fighting in Europe ended in May 1945 and the Soviet Union declared war on Japan on August 8, 1945. Martin Gilbert, *The Second World War*. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1981).

But the division of Korea was to prove permanent. Prior to the Second World War, the Japanese presence in Korea had served as a counterweight to Soviet influence in the Far East, but the defeat of Japan created a vacuum into which the Soviet Union (and after 1949, communist China) quickly moved. U.S.-Soviet tensions immediately following the war and in the beginning of the Cold War resulted in the U.S. and the Soviet Union encouraging the formation of separate governments in their respective occupation zones: a Communist government led by Kim Il Sung in the north, and a democratic government led by Syngman Rhee in the south. By 1948, the two zones had become North Korea and South Korea, with the U.S. and its allies supporting the south and the Soviet Union and China supporting the north.¹³ With each Korea coveting governance of the entire peninsula and mounting small attacks against the other across the 38th parallel, the stage was set for open military conflict.

In the south, Rhee's military capability remained relatively weak. The U.S. and its allies had rapidly demobilized following the end of the Second World War, and neither the U.S. or Great Britain (greatly weakened by the war, the British government simply could not afford to maintain even a semblance of its wartime military strength or overseas commitments) could or would supply Rhee's demands for a larger military capability, in part because of their own limited military budgets and because of fears that the unpredictable Rhee would use them aggressively.¹⁴ Further, U.S. policymakers did not view the Korean peninsula as within their strategic defensive perimeter, being more

¹³ Both Max Hastings and Clay Blair provide a more detailed description of the formation of the two Koreas in the years from 1945 – 1950. Clay Blair, *The Forgotten War: America in Korea, 1950-1953*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); and Max Hastings, *The Korean War*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987). See also Bruce Cumings, ed., *Child of Conflict: The Korean-American Relationship, 1945 – 1953*. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983); and Peter Lowe. *The Origins of the Korean War*. (London: Longman Press, 1987).

¹⁴ Hastings, *The Korean War*.

concerned with the tension between communist China and nationalist Taiwan.¹⁵ Dean Acheson, U.S. Secretary of State from 1949 – 1953 in the Truman administration, declared in a speech in January 1950 that the defensive perimeter of the U.S. in the Far East ran from the Philippines in the south to the Aleutian Islands in the north, a statement for which Acheson was later severely criticized.¹⁶ However, in North Korea, the Soviet Union armed the North Koreans with their latest military technology, particularly a strong force of tanks and modern jet fighters and provided training for their troops.

On June 25, 1950 (June 24th in the U.S.), North Korean forces invaded South Korea, with the North's well-trained and well-equipped troops quickly capturing Seoul and pushing South Korean forces aside. Truman, at home in Missouri, was alerted to the invasion by Acheson, but did not immediately return to Washington. Truman did, however, direct Acheson to immediately seek United Nations action on the invasion, and to begin gathering his advisors for a meeting to discuss the invasion and a U.S. response.

¹⁵ As Melvyn Leffler notes, the U.S. in its post-Second World War planning from 1945 – 1948 envisioned a comprehensive system of overseas military bases that would allow the projection of power and the rapid movement of military equipment (and troops, if need be) to the site of hostilities. This system included a ring of bases in the Pacific that included installations in the Philippines, Okinawa, Japan and the Aleutian islands. Of particular importance were airfields from which the U.S. could intercept attacks against the U.S. and deliver atomic weapons via aircraft. Leffler writes, "Control of the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean through overseas bases was considered indispensable to the nation's security regardless of what might happen to the wartime coalition. So was control over polar air routes". But U.S. ambitions were curbed by budgetary and political constraints following the war. There was simply not enough money, men or material to establish and supply all of the bases that were desired. In addition, some nations refused to grant the U.S. exclusive rights to bases on their territory or limited the number of American personnel that could be stationed on their territory. This lack of military resources that were available, particularly near the Korean peninsula, left U.S. forces in the opening months of the Korean War poorly trained, equipped and supplied, though the lack of training was in part due to the character of the first troops committed, many of whom came directly from long-time occupation duty in Japan. Melvyn P. Leffler, "The American Conception of National Security and the Beginnings of the Cold War, 1945-48." *The American Historical Review* 89, 2 (April 1984): 346-381, 352.

¹⁶ Republicans in Congress later suggested that Acheson's public exclusion of Korea from this defensive perimeter encouraged the North Koreans to attack, confident that the U.S. and its allies would not intervene. However, as Robert Donovan suggests, Acheson's speech was based on previously established administration policy, and furthermore, this defensive perimeter was the same as MacArthur had outlined some months earlier. Robert J. Donovan, *Tumultuous Years: The Presidency of Harry S. Truman 1949 – 1953*. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1982), 136-137.

Acheson requested an emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council, which on June 25th, unanimously passed a resolution condemning the invasion and calling for the immediate withdrawal of North Korean forces.¹⁷

Truman returned to Washington the next day, and meeting with his advisors on the evening of June 25th, decided that the U.S. (under the guise of the U.N.) must counter North Korean aggression. Thus, within forty-eight hours of the North Korean invasion, the United Nations had for the first time ordered a sovereign nation to cease its aggression, and the United States had decided that it must meet communist aggression with military force, if need be. Truman explained the rationale behind this decision, writing in his memoirs that:

I felt certain that if South Korea was allowed to fall Communist leaders would be emboldened to override nations closer to our own shores. If the Communists were permitted to force their way into the Republic of Korea without opposition from the free world, no small nation would have the courage to resist threats and aggression by stronger Communist neighbors. If this was allowed to go unchallenged it would mean a third world war, just as similar incidents had brought on the second world war. It was also clear to me that the foundations and the principles of the United Nations were at stake unless this unprovoked attack on Korea could be stopped.¹⁸

This decision to meet communist aggression on the Korean peninsula, though it was a reversal of the previous attitude of indifference toward Korea, was consistent with

¹⁷ The 9-0 vote was possible only because the Soviet delegate to the Security Council was absent, as the Soviets were boycotting the council to protest the U.N.'s refusal to seat Communist China instead of Nationalist China (Taiwan).

¹⁸ Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman. Volume Two: Years of Trial and Hope*. (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1956), 333.

the developing U.S. policy of containment and consistent with the Truman Doctrine of 1947, in which Truman announced that it would be U.S. policy to assist peoples who were resisting armed subjugation.

The nearest American military forces were in Japan, and on June 29th, MacArthur flew to South Korea to assess the situation. He reported back to Washington that the only way to resist the communist invasion was to immediately commit American ground forces, taking them from the occupation troops stationed in Japan. MacArthur, in his report to Washington, called for an overwhelming commitment of military force. As Max Hastings notes, MacArthur, “urged the [Truman] Administration that the American commitment should be made on the most powerful possible scale...MacArthur was not sketching a plan for the expulsion of the North Koreans from the South. He was demanding resources sufficient to inflict absolute defeat upon North Korea.”¹⁹ With this initial request, the seeds of conflict between Truman and MacArthur were planted. Consistent with the doctrine of containment, Truman and his military advisors envisioned ejecting North Korean forces from South Korea, a limited military objective. But MacArthur, a life-long soldier, saw his purpose as defeating the enemy. MacArthur later wrote in his memoirs that, “I set out to chart the strategic course which would make victory possible. Not by the wildest stretch of imagination did I dream that this tradition [of complete victory] might be broken”²⁰

But in the first months of the war, ejection of North Korean forces proved impossible. U.N. forces were simply too weak and North Korean forces too strong. MacArthur, as the senior military official stationed in Asia, was formally designated

¹⁹ Hastings, *The Korean War*, 68.

²⁰ MacArthur, *Reminiscences*, 335.

Supreme Commander of the United Nations forces in early July. And, in the opening months of the war, his command did become a multi-national force. More than a dozen nations sent troops and military equipment to fight in the war, though all of these non-U.S. forces together were a very small percentage of total military strength.²¹ Chiang Kai-shek also offered troops, but this offer was rejected by the Joint Chiefs of Staff as too provocative to mainland China. But with many of the ground forces of the U.N. command hastily gathered from occupation garrisons or scraped together from overseas posting, MacArthur's troops simply could not hold back the well-trained, well-equipped North Koreans. In the first two months of the war, North Korean forces quickly overwhelmed U.N. forces, pushing them back into the "Pusan Perimeter" at the southern tip of South Korea. It was also during this time period that MacArthur visited Chiang Kai-shek in Formosa, praising his leadership and his resistance to communism, an action which was an implicit criticism of the decision not to accept his offer of ground troops and upset Truman, who felt it was too provocative to mainland China.²²

By the beginning of September 1950 U.N. forces had finally set up a defensive perimeter which held fast against North Korean attacks. MacArthur, against the advice of his military advisors, decided to counterattack by staging a risky amphibious assault on the northwestern border of South Korea in order to outflank and trap the North Korean forces in a pincer movement. MacArthur's landing at the port of Inchon on September 15 was a brilliant move that succeeded in recapturing Seoul and driving the North Koreans

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Michael D. Pearlman, *Truman and MacArthur: The Winding Road to Dismissal*. In *Korean War Anthology*, Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. Government Printing Office. <http://purl.access.gpo.gov/GPO/LPS59107> MacArthur later sent a message to be read at the Veterans of Foreign Wars annual convention that praised Chiang Kai Shek and contradicted Truman administration policy, and was forced to retract it publicly.

back across the 38th parallel by the end of the month. The communists had been ejected from South Korea, accomplishing the limited objectives initially set by the Truman administration.

However, once the United Nations forces accomplished this objective, the need to resolve questions of future strategy became evident, both in Tokyo (MacArthur's headquarters) and in Washington. Should U.N. forces pursue the communists across the 38th parallel? The basic tension that would eventually lead to MacArthur's dismissal was established – a limited war to expel communist forces from South Korea and contain communism versus a war leading to “total” victory and occupation of North Korea as a defeated nation.²³ In that the Korean War was the first major war under the Cold War doctrine of containment and with both the United States and the Soviet Union now in possession of atomic weapons, Truman and his advisors were determined not to allow the conflict to spread beyond the Korean peninsula.

This determination was driven by two concerns: first, if Chinese forces intervened in the war, that the United Nations forces might be overwhelmed by the numerical superiority of the Chinese and second, that a spreading conflict might trigger nuclear war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. In effect, these two forces, particularly the threat of nuclear war, forced the Truman administration to fight a limited war, with strategic (and in some cases, tactical) decisions made in Washington and limitations placed on command decisions taken in the field.

This concept of a limited war was a radical departure from previous wars in which American military forces and their commanders had nearly always been unhindered in terms of military action taken to defeat enemy forces. But the advent of atomic weapons

²³ *Ibid.*

changed the very concept of war itself. As John Lewis Gaddis has suggested, the fact that both superpowers possessed atomic weapons meant that, “War *has* [author’s italics] to become an instrument of policy, regardless of differences in culture, ideology, nationality, and personal morality, because with weapons that powerful the alternative could be annihilation.”²⁴ In addition, the war took place in the anxious atmosphere of the post-war period when the U.S. (and its western allies) and the Soviet Union were eying each other warily across the Iron Curtain in Europe and where American policymakers were sensitive to any movement or development that could be interpreted as Soviet expansionism. Given the reality of Soviet expansionism in Europe, Philip West contends that the Korean War can only be viewed in the context that American conduct of the war was understandably undertaken with the assumption that the Soviets (using North Korea as a “puppet” state) might now be involved in expansionism on the Korean peninsula.²⁵ Thus the uncertainty, bordering on clumsiness, of American strategy and policy during the Korean War must be understood within the context of the war as the first post-nuclear conflict involving the superpowers and within the wary hostility of the first few years of the Cold War. There was simply no precedent for a limited war.

Despite the apparent threat of a larger war that dictated a limited theater of operations, MacArthur felt that allowing North Korean forces a sanctuary behind the 38th parallel could not be tolerated and therefore, military operations had to be undertaken north of this artificial boundary. The counterargument was that if U.N. forces invaded North Korea and defeated them militarily, it would presumably also have to topple Kim

²⁴ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History*. (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 58. This viewpoint is certainly not a new one, as John Spanier reached the same conclusion in his work published over forty years ago. John Spanier, *The Truman-MacArthur Controversy and the Korean War*. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1959).

²⁵ Philip West, “Interpreting the Korean War.” *The American Historical Review*, 95, 1 (Feb, 1989): 80-86.

Jong Il's regime, an action which neither the Soviet Union or China were likely to tolerate, since the North Korean border was shared by China and the Soviet Union. A working paper prepared by the National Security Council (NSC 81) proposed a compromise: only South Korean forces were to be allowed to cross the 38th parallel and then only to achieve tactical objectives.²⁶ But the Joint Chiefs of Staff condemned this order as unrealistic, and NSC 81 was redrafted as NSC 81/1, which directed that U.N. forces could cross the 38th parallel, but should not be deployed in areas close to the northern border of North Korea.

The belief that pressing an attack across the 38th parallel and reunifying Korea would inflict a serious defeat for Soviet expansionism finally convinced Truman that crossing into North Korea was worth the risk of a larger war.²⁷ On September 27, 1950, the Joint Chiefs of Staff gave the go-ahead for MacArthur to cross the 38th parallel, but forbade him to cross the Yalu River (which forms the northern border of North Korea) into either Chinese or Soviet territory, or to use air power across the Yalu River.²⁸ South Korean forces crossed the 38th parallel on September 28, 1950, and on October 7th, American forces crossed the parallel.

With U.N. forces pushing into North Korea, Truman now decided that it was necessary to meet MacArthur face to face, and it was agreed that the two men would meet at Wake Island on October 15, 1950. Though ostensibly the purpose of the

²⁶ Hastings, *The Korean War*.

²⁷ James Matray, "Truman's Plan for Victory: National Self-Determination and the Thirty-Eighth Parallel Decision in Korea", *The Journal of American History*, 66, 2 (Sept, 1979): 314-333. There were, however, strong objections to this decision by analysts such as George Kennan and Paul Nitze in the Department of State, who argued that the move was too provocative and would bring about Soviet or Chinese intervention.

²⁸ But this directive itself was amended two days later by Secretary of Defense George C. Marshall, who told MacArthur he should feel "unhampered tactically and strategically" if he went north of the 38th parallel. William Manchester, *American Caesar, Douglas MacArthur, 1880-1964*. (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1978), 599.

meeting was to discuss the situation in Korea, the decision was perceived by some as largely political in that Truman wanted, as Donald McCoy suggests, "...to show him [MacArthur] who was boss, [and] to benefit politically from association with the hero of Inchon..."²⁹ Both men later remembered the conference quite differently, particularly with regard to the question of Chinese intervention in the war now that U.N. and South Korean forces had crossed into North Korea. MacArthur remembered that, "...the possibility of Chinese intervention was brought up almost casually. It was the general consensus of all present that Red China had no intention of intervening."³⁰ Truman in his memoirs asserted that, "The general assured me that victory was won in Korea. He also informed me that the Chinese communists would not attack."³¹ Though he was not at the conference (and had opposed Truman traveling to meet MacArthur) U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson, concluded in his memoirs that, "In the large meeting, the General expressed optimistic views that the end of the fighting was close...and that the Chinese would not intervene."³² Max Hastings argues that the conference was ultimately a disaster for the Truman administration in that Truman and his advisors eagerly accepted MacArthur's rosy predictions about the war, while MacArthur's contempt for the political overtones of the conference increased his confidence in his own military genius and capability.³³ It was a portent of troubles to come.

²⁹ Donald McCoy, *The Presidency of Harry S. Truman*. (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1984), 240. With upcoming congressional elections, Truman very much wanted to be seen with MacArthur, though both Acheson and Marshall urged Truman not to go to MacArthur. MacArthur also perceived that the meeting was merely a political ploy.

³⁰ MacArthur, *Reminiscences*, 362.

³¹ Truman, *Memoirs*, 365.

³² Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation, My Years in the State Department*. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1969), 457.

³³ Hastings, *The Korean War*, 122-124.

As U.N. and South Korean forces pushed deeper into North Korea, capturing Pyongyang, MacArthur told reporters that the war was virtually finished, despite evidence that the Chinese had begun moving troops and supplies to the northern border of North Korea, and his private concerns about the security of the supply lines to his armies.³⁴ Nonetheless, on October 24, 1950, MacArthur ordered the X Corps and the Eighth Army to continue their advance deeper into North Korea. Nervous about this action, the Joint Chiefs of Staff expressed their concern in a message to MacArthur, citing their September 27th order regarding movements across the 38th parallel and limiting the use of non-South Korean forces near the Yalu River. MacArthur, in his reply, reassured the Joint Chiefs that he was proceeding with caution, but that the weakness of South Korean forces made it impossible not to use U.N. forces.³⁵ Intelligence reports and contact between U.N. and Chinese forces now suggested that Chinese troops were massing along the border, but MacArthur dismissed or ignored these reports, convinced, as Matthew Ridgway later recalled, that China was a “paper tiger.”³⁶

But MacArthur’s confidence was not shared by everyone. Ever fearful of Chinese intervention, Dean Acheson attempted to reassure the Chinese that MacArthur’s forces

³⁴ Manchester, *American Caesar*.

³⁵ Dean Acheson argues that MacArthur simply “brushed aside” this cable, despite the dangers of possible Chinese intervention. Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, 467. Matthew Ridgway, in his memoirs, suggested that MacArthur “deliberately disobeyed” the JCS directive of September 27, 1950 in using non-Korean forces along the Yalu River. Matthew Ridgway, *The Korean War*, (New York: Doubleday and Co, 1967), 61. After the Chinese onslaught had begun, Ridgway, while sitting in a December 3, 1950 meeting of the JCS regarding the state of affairs in Korea, responded to General Hoyt Vandenburg, who had complained that MacArthur would not obey orders from the JCS, that the JCS had the authority to relieve commanders who would not obey orders. Ironically, within a few days, Ridgway would be in command of the Eighth Army, succeeding General Walton Walker, who had been killed in a jeep accident.

³⁶ Ridgway, *The Korean War*, 75.

would not cross the Yalu, and Truman himself issued a public statement that there was no intention to carry the war into China proper.³⁷

But the Chinese did intervene, attacking both South Korean and U.N. forces in late October and throughout the month of November 1950. MacArthur, who had separated the two major military groups under his command, the Eighth Army and the X Corps, was faced with an enemy in strength attacking his forces that were scattered across North Korea and did not have direct communication with each other.³⁸ Realizing now the seriousness of the situation, MacArthur ordered on November 6 that the Yalu River bridges be bombed, but the Joint Chiefs rescinded this order the next day, instructing MacArthur to postpone any bombing within five miles of the Yalu River. The resulting reply from MacArthur was the first tangible evidence of a growing rift between him and the military and civilian command structure in Washington. MacArthur, enraged by this restriction, responded with a note that stunned the Joint Chiefs, arguing that:

This movement not only jeopardizes but threatens the ultimate destruction of the forces under my command...Every hour that this is postponed will be paid for dearly in American and other United Nations blood...I trust that the matter be immediately brought to the attention of the President as I

³⁷ Manchester, *American Caesar*, 600. Despite these attempts at public assurances that MacArthur's force would not cross the Yalu into China proper, William Stueck suggests that MacArthur's actions provoked the Chinese and forced Mao's hand. In effect, Stueck argues that Chinese intervention had been contingent on whether or not MacArthur's forces would continue their movement toward the Yalu River. William Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History*. (Princeton, N.J., 1995). Quoted in Melvyn Leffler, "The Cold War: What Do "We Now Know" *The American Historical Review* 104, 2 (April 1999): 501-524, 510.

³⁸ North Korea is roughly bisected by a mountain range that runs from north to south. The Eighth Army was on the western side of the mountain ranges; the X Corps on the eastern side. Both commanders, Walton Walker and Edward Almond, reported directly to MacArthur, but there was little coordination between the two forces at this stage of the war.

believe your instructions will result in a calamity of major proportion for which I cannot accept the responsibility...³⁹

This note, in dramatic fashion, challenged the authority of the Joint Chiefs and contained the implicit *demand* by MacArthur that the matter be brought to the attention of Truman, who surprisingly overturned the Joint Chiefs but specified that bombing only be done to the middle of the Yalu River (thus avoiding the Chinese side of the river), an order that was impossible to carry out, given the imprecise nature of high-altitude bombing. MacArthur also requested that fighter planes be allowed to enter Chinese airspace to pursue planes that were flying from Chinese airfields to carry out “hit and run” attacks on U.N. forces. This request was vehemently opposed by the allies fighting with the U.S., and MacArthur’s request was denied, which infuriated him, as it allowed enemy fighters a sanctuary in which they could not be attacked.⁴⁰ Relations between MacArthur, in Tokyo, and the administration in Washington were now clearly strained.

In late November, Chinese troops attacked in massive numbers and drove U.N. and South Korean forces back across the 38th parallel. Though some units were severely mauled in the Chinese offensive, U.N. forces conducted an organized retreat, fighting several delaying actions that allowed the X corps to be evacuated by sea and the Eighth Army to retreat across the 38th parallel intact. Still, it was a major defeat for U.N. forces.

MacArthur at this stage of the war seemingly lost his confidence. His communications with Washington grew more pessimistic and he argued that the U.N. command now faced a new kind of war. He demanded significant reinforcements,

³⁹ Truman, *Memoirs*, 375.

⁴⁰ MacArthur in his memoirs, characterized these two decisions as part of a larger movement to restrict his military authority, writing that, “I felt that step-by-step my weapons were being taken away from me.” MacArthur, *Reminiscences*, 365.

believing that a defensive line containing the enemy was impossible to fix without the addition of more troops. However, Matthew Ridgway, who had succeeded Walton Walker as commander of the Eighth Army after Walker was killed in a jeep accident in late December 1950, stabilized the lines and rebuilt the shattered morale of the U.N. forces without additional reinforcements, contradicting through his actions MacArthur's pessimistic statements and pleas.⁴¹ U.N. forces began offensive operations again in February 1951.

From the end of November through the beginning of the new year, MacArthur continued to criticize the conduct of the war. Increasingly frustrated by what he saw as political interference with military requirements necessary to defeat the North Koreans and their Chinese allies, MacArthur now openly began to deflect blame for the defeat at the hands of the Chinese and privately and publicly criticize what he saw as defeatist policies that threatened his ability to prevail in the conflict. MacArthur, responding to criticism of his push over the 38th parallel and the division of his forces, lashed out at his critics, accusing war correspondents of reporting irresponsibly and acting unpatriotically, accusing European critics of shortsightedness and telling the press that Washington had given the enemy a safe refuge in Manchuria, which represented an enormous handicap to his military commands.⁴² Back in Washington, Truman was growing increasingly annoyed with MacArthur's public statements, and on December 5th, Truman issued an order that no public statements concerning foreign policy were to be released without clearance from the Department of State. A second order the next day specifically directed

⁴¹ Ridgway made certain that X Corps and the Eighth Army engaged in ongoing communication and coordinated their efforts.

⁴² See Manchester, *American Caesar*, 611-614, and MacArthur, *Reminiscences*, 367-382.

overseas officials, including military officers, to refrain from direct communication with press officials in the U.S.⁴³

MacArthur's criticism of the administration's conduct of the war continued unabated in the new year. In the first two months of 1951, MacArthur recommended accepting reinforcements from Chiang Kai-shek, instituting massive air attacks against mainland China and clamping a naval blockade against the Chinese coast. These suggestions were rejected in Washington, prompting MacArthur to again respond that his ability to conduct the war was being unduly hampered, and that his forces, without reinforcements and attacks against mainland China, would be forced to evacuate the peninsula. But events proved MacArthur wrong. By the middle of March 1951, the military situation in Korea had been stabilized, Seoul had been retaken, and Chinese and North Korean forces driven back to the 38th parallel.⁴⁴ Given the military conditions that now existed in Korea, Truman and his advisors consulted with their U.N. allies, who agreed that it was time to pursue a negotiated cease-fire as the first step in ending the fighting. On March 20th, a message to this effect was sent to MacArthur, who replied by issuing a press statement on March 24, 1951 that mocked the Chinese military and its industrial power, and suggested that, "The enemy, therefore, must be now be painfully aware that a decision of the United Nations to depart from its tolerant effort to contain the war... would doom Red China to the risk of imminent military collapse."⁴⁵

⁴³ In his memoirs, Truman admits that these orders were issued to send the message to MacArthur that his public statements blaming the administration for the situation in Korea were "out of order." Truman, *Memoirs*, 384.

⁴⁴ By now, the Truman administration, ever fearful of a wider war, had decided that a return to the status quo (i.e., division at the 38th parallel) was an acceptable outcome to the war. See Hasting, *The Korean War*, 194-195.

⁴⁵ Truman, *Memoirs*, 442, 447.

The Chinese were furious, and MacArthur's statement effectively killed any hope of a negotiated settlement in the near future. But there was another blow that fell within days. On March 20, 1951, MacArthur had written a letter in response to a request by Republican Congressman Joe Martin, the Minority Leader in the U.S. House of Representatives, for his views on Martin's remarks given in February in which Martin was highly critical of the administration's decision not to use Nationalist Chinese troops in the war. MacArthur's reply, in which he was openly critical of the administration and made the famous statement that, "There is no substitute for victory", was read by Martin on the floor of the House and released to the press on April 5th (though without MacArthur's permission). This letter, coupled with MacArthur's statement of March 24th, infuriated Truman, who later wrote in his memoirs that the March 24th statement, "was in open defiance to my orders as President and the Commander in Chief", and, "MacArthur's letter to Congressman Martin showed that the general was not only in disagreement with the policy of the government but was challenging this policy in open insubordination."⁴⁶

The public release of the Martin letter was the last straw for Truman. Though Truman later admitted that he had already made up his mind to dismiss MacArthur prior to Martin's public release of the letter, he nevertheless consulted several times his civilian advisors and with the Joint Chiefs about MacArthur's actions before he relieved MacArthur on April 11, 1951 from all military commands, releasing a statement to the press at a hastily called early morning press conference.⁴⁷ The statement read in part:

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 442.

⁴⁷ The orders were prepared on April 10th, and the actual order of dismissal was to have been hand delivered to MacArthur in Tokyo by Secretary of the Army Frank Pace. However, its transmission was delayed and on the night of April 10th, Truman was informed that his decision to dismiss MacArthur had

With deep regret, I have concluded that General of the Army Douglas MacArthur is unable to give his wholehearted support to the policies of the United States Government and of the United Nations in matters pertaining to his official duties....I have decided that I must make a change of command in the Far East. I have, therefore, relieved General MacArthur of his commands and have designated Lieutenant General Matthew B. Ridgway as his successor.⁴⁸

On April 16, 1951, MacArthur departed Tokyo and returned to the United States. Though he was hailed as a hero and greeted with jubilation in several cities around the U.S., he would never again hold a military command. Truman, on the other hand, endured a reaction that was overwhelmingly negative. He was burned in effigy and calls were made for his impeachment. Thousands of letters and telegrams, most of them critical, poured into the White House. The Senate held hearings over the conduct of the war and MacArthur's dismissal. But Truman's decision stood.

Despite the uproar over MacArthur's dismissal, the Korean War went on for two more years until an armistice was finally signed in June 1953. By then, Douglas MacArthur had retired from the Army and settled into quasi-retirement and Harry S.

been leaked to the press, prompting the release of a public statement to the press in an early morning press conference on April 11, 1951. MacArthur himself learned of his dismissal from an aide who heard the news reported over the radio. The manner in which he was relieved stung MacArthur. Later, when MacArthur and Ridgway met in Tokyo, where Ridgway was to take over the commands that MacArthur had held, MacArthur confided to Ridgway that a friend of his who knew Truman suggested the president was mentally ill and would not live much longer. Dennis D. Wainstock, *Truman, MacArthur and the Korean War*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 127. See also Stanley Weintraub, *MacArthur's War: Korea and the Undoing of an American Hero*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 335-342, and Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, for a description of the muddled events leading up to MacArthur's dismissal.

⁴⁸ Truman, *Memoirs*, 449.

Truman was no longer in office, the war having effectively ended any chance for his re-election in 1952.⁴⁹

Presidential Power and the Removal of MacArthur

What ultimately led to Truman's removal of MacArthur? The simple answer is that the dismissal resulted from tension between a president and his advisors who were strategically focused on fighting a limited war that would not become a larger conflict, and a military professional who could not abide by the limitations that were put upon his ability to conduct the war in order to achieve a complete military victory. That tension built until it eventually led to MacArthur acting in open defiance of his military and civilian commanders, a situation Truman simply could not tolerate. MacArthur's military successor, Ridgway, similarly characterizes the decision as basic defiance, suggesting that:

The real, basic issue was neither the wide divergence of views between Mr. Truman and General MacArthur on enlarging the Korean War, nor the clash of two strong personalities. It was simply, as General Marshall pointed out in his testimony before the Senate Committee, the situation of a local Theater Commander publicly expressing his disagreement with a policy which superior authority had repeatedly communicated to him in the clearest terms.⁵⁰

But such simplistic answers do little to explain the larger context of Truman's decision to remove MacArthur from command. Truman's dismissal of MacArthur was

⁴⁹ Though the 22nd amendment to the U.S. constitution, ratified in 1951, now limited presidents to two terms in office, Truman was specifically exempt from this requirement. But he chose not to run, in large part due to his unpopularity over the stalemate that had developed in the Korean War. McCoy, *The Presidency of Harry S. Truman*.

⁵⁰ Ridgway, *The Korean War*, 142.

only part of the ongoing struggle taking place within Washington regarding the concept of limited war. The U.S. had never been faced with a situation such as was found in Korea – where the intersection of military strategy and foreign policy dictated the need for much closer civilian and military control of both strategic and tactical command decisions made in the field. Both MacArthur and Truman (and his advisors) were, in effect, groping for a civilian-military relationship that would be effective in this new environment. For Truman, the very new experience of fighting a limited war meant that new controls on the military were needed, and these emerged in a climate of much more intimate civilian control over the battlefield. For MacArthur, given his long experience in military command and his experiences in the Southwest Pacific Theater in the Second World War, where his battlefield strategy and decisions were largely left to him and designed to result in a “total” victory for the U.S. and its allies, such intimate control was anathema. It seems in retrospect almost inevitable that a clash between MacArthur and Truman would arise.

Ever since the events of late 1950 and early 1951, historians have debated the Truman/MacArthur controversy, particularly the events that led up to the dismissal itself and the impact on presidential power and authority. The controversy has been described both as the outcome of escalating miscommunication on the part of the Truman administration that left MacArthur confused and dissatisfied with his military options, and as the inevitable need for Truman to reassert civilian control over the military in light of MacArthur’s challenge to this authority. In defense of MacArthur, D. Clayton James contends that the controversy did not represent so much a challenge to civilian authority as it represented the culmination of a series of miscommunications and an atmosphere of

personal animosity toward MacArthur.⁵¹ James suggests that ultimately there was no threat to civilian authority in that MacArthur, though he publicly disagreed with the president and the administration, understood the “necessity for civilian control and the traditions and history of the American military”.⁵² When Truman as commander in chief directed that orders dismissing MacArthur and appointing Ridgway be drawn up, this was done without incident, which James suggests, made it clear that, “his power as commander in chief was secure and unchallenged.”⁵³ James also argues that many of the principal advisors surrounding Truman knew little about MacArthur and some, like Dean Acheson, were openly hostile to MacArthur, urging his dismissal even before the events of March and April 1950. Further, James argues the Joint Chiefs of Staff were all younger men who were intimidated by MacArthur and who failed in keeping MacArthur on a “short lease” by allowing him too much leeway and accommodating his previous deviations from stated policy or standing orders.

Other historians have argued, however, that MacArthur’s dismissal was the result not of miscommunication and personal animosity, but rather, as Roy Flint has asserted, the, “extension of presidential authority in wartime into the technical realm of the professional soldier”.⁵⁴ The boundary between foreign policy as an intellectual and strategic concept and warfare as an extant tool of foreign policy had become so blurred that civilian control of events on the field of battle became necessary to an extent never

⁵¹ D. Clayton James. “In Defense of MacArthur: Miscommunication and Mistreatment.” In John W. Chambers II and Kurt G. Piehler, eds., *Major Problems in American Military History*. (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1999).

⁵² *Ibid*, 400.

⁵³ Though the counterargument is that MacArthur, particularly in his message of March 24th, in which he mocked the Chinese and destroyed any chance of negotiations between China and the U.N. command at that stage in the war, was challenging both civilian control of the military and the authority of the president as commander in chief and this forced Truman’s hand.

⁵⁴ Roy K. Flint, “In Defense of Truman: MacArthur Had Limited Vision as a Theater Commander”, *Ibid*.

realized in earlier conflicts. In that the Korean War was the first conflict in which this boundary became so blurred, both Truman and his advisors and MacArthur were in the relatively unexplored territory of closely coordinating and controlling the tactical actions of a battlefield commander within the context of global policy and strategy. This coordination and control was, as Flint suggests, something that Truman and his advisors understood, particularly in the wake of the initial defeat of U.N. forces by the Chinese in late 1950, and following MacArthur's argument that military logic dictated a much wider war to cripple the flow of men and material across the Yalu River and defeat the Chinese. MacArthur, in his role as a military commander in a specific theater, and in his conception of victory as total defeat of the enemy, never understood this need for such intimate coordination and control, and the resulting conflict ended in his dismissal.

There is also the argument that Truman acted solely to preserve presidential power and authority. This power and authority was two-fold: first, that Truman and his advisors acted consistently in terms of the authority of the executive branch to formulate foreign policy, and secondly that Truman acted consistently in terms of his authority as commander-in-chief of the armed forces.

As regards foreign policy, Dean Acheson in his memoirs wrote that MacArthur's actions and the administration's sluggish response to MacArthur's public criticism of foreign policy damaged American credibility abroad. Acheson notes, "What lost the confidence of our allies were MacArthur's costly defeat, his open advocacy of widening the war at what they rightly regarded as unacceptable risks, and the hesitance of the Administration in asserting firm control over him."⁵⁵ MacArthur was, however not alone in his criticism of U.S. foreign policy. Donald McCoy suggests that by the end of 1950,

⁵⁵ Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, 527.

the defeat of U.N. forces in Korea had raised significant domestic doubts about foreign policy in terms of containment, asserting that, “Few Americans doubted the existence of the dangers [of communist expansionism] of which he [Truman] spoke. What many had come to doubt by the end of 1950 was the efficacy of the Truman administration’s policies in dealing with communism”.⁵⁶ This is consistent with Walter Lafeber’s view that with bipartisan support between 1947 and 1950 that allowed for the creation of the Marshall Plan and NATO, “Truman rode the crest of the resulting consensus until stalemate in the Korean War, the possibility of a long inconclusive struggle with China and the Soviets’ explosion of their first atomic bomb opened the administration to virulent attack.”⁵⁷ The Senate hearings that were held following MacArthur’s dismissal were, in this context, part of a larger examination of U.S. foreign policy following the start of hostilities in Korea. Foreign policy, as it was promulgated in the overall context of containment, had been largely economic and political prior to the start of the Korean War, but now that policy was being tested in a military conflict, with Truman and his advisors recognizing the limitations of military action as an instrument of foreign policy, and MacArthur publicly suggesting that military action was *the* instrument of foreign policy on the Korean peninsula.

In terms of the constitutional power of the president as commander-in-chief, MacArthur had been insubordinate to his civilian superiors and Truman was right to

⁵⁶ McCoy, *The Presidency of Harry S. Truman*, 248. At the time, it must have been easy to conclude that Truman’s foreign policy was not working. David Fromkin, however, suggests that “victory” in the Cold War was won “by the long-term strategy sent in motion by the first Truman administration”. David Fromkin, *In the Time of the Americans: FDR, Truman, Eisenhower, Marshall MacArthur. The Generation that Changed the World*. (New York: Random House, 1995), 702. McCoy’s text was published in 1984, prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union; Fromkin’s text was published in 1995.

⁵⁷ LaFeber, “The Constitution and United States Foreign Policy: An Interpretation.”, 714. LaFeber, in his article, traces the development of growing executive power in the area of foreign affairs from the early days of the U.S. to the mid 1980’s.

dismiss him, a view that was supported by the Joint Chiefs of Staff when they met together on April 8, 1951 at the request of Truman, who asked Omar Bradley, chairman of the group, to ascertain their opinions on the possible relief of MacArthur. As Bradley later reported at the Senate hearings following MacArthur's dismissal, the Joint Chiefs agreed that MacArthur had violated the December 6, 1950 directive that Truman had sent to all government agencies and overseas personnel, which included military personnel, instructing them to clear any public statements with the Department of Defense, Department of State, and the White House; and that MacArthur's actions were threatening the concept of civilian control of the military.⁵⁸ In addition, a survey of journalists conducted shortly after the dismissal, revealed that the majority believed Truman was correct in relieving MacArthur, both because he publicly expressed his disagreement with national policy and because the constitutional right of the commander-in-chief to remove insubordinate military officers had to be preserved.⁵⁹ Further, as Richard Haynes characterizes it, "Truman came to accept a military stalemate which preserved South Korean sovereignty...MacArthur could accept no alternative to complete victory. Since Truman neither could nor would relinquish his authority as commander in chief...MacArthur had to go."⁶⁰

In retrospect, a number of Truman's civilian advisors also characterized their support of his dismissal of MacArthur in terms of preserving presidential authority. Dean Acheson makes this clear in his memoirs. In oral history interviews conducted by the

⁵⁸ Following MacArthur's dismissal, the Senate held a number of hearing to investigate Truman's actions. Over a series of forty-two days, MacArthur and twelve other witnesses, including George Marshall, Omar Bradley, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, testified. As David McCullough notes, Marshall, Bradley and the Joint Chiefs of Staff all felt the dismissal was necessary because of the threat to the principle of civilian control of the military and the challenge to presidential power. McCulloch, *Truman*, 854.

⁵⁹ The survey of 332 journalists was conducted by Elmo Roper and Louis Harris, and the results reported in the *Saturday Review of Literature* on July 14, 1951. Haynes, *The Awesome Power*, 256

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 262.

Harry S. Truman Presidential Library in the 1970s, several of Truman's advisors voiced this opinion. George Elsey, an administrative assistant in Truman's White House, recalls:

Oh, no question but what it was necessary...As to the wisdom of the decision, or the necessity for the decision, absolutely no question in my mind. I think that President Truman's stature as President was enhanced. It was necessary. He had to do it. No President could tolerate that kind of behavior on the part of a subordinate military commander.⁶¹

John Muccio, as Ambassador to South Korea from 1949 – 1952, was intimately involved in the administration's actions and policies during the Korean War. He was present at the Wake Island conference and had spent considerable time with MacArthur. When asked if he felt MacArthur should have been dismissed, Muccio also supported Truman's action, stating:

Truman was so absorbed by the Korean action that every time I got home and went in to see him, or just to pay my respects, he invariably asked me innumerable questions. When I finally got home [from Korea] in May of 1952, he asked practically nothing about Korea, but got on the subject of MacArthur. And [Truman] ended, "I should have fired him a year earlier." I certainly agree with President Truman a hundred percent, for any officer of the United States doing what he did, [with his] complete

⁶¹ George Elsey, interview by Jerry Hess. *Oral History Interviews*, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence Missouri. April 9, 1970. <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/oralhist/elsey6.htm>, para. 288.

disregard of directions from the Commander in Chief, he should have been removed long – much earlier.⁶²

Dean Rusk, at the time an Assistant Secretary of State, also supported the view that Truman saw the decision not as one of a battle of wills, but rather concern about the presidency, writing that, “I am convinced that 95 percent of Truman’s decision to fire MacArthur hinged on the relationship of the president as the Commander in Chief to his generals and on civilian control of the military.”⁶³

But how did Harry S. Truman himself characterize his reasons for dismissing MacArthur? Though his writing and utterances after he left the presidency create the impression that he took the decision suddenly and on his own, this was, in fact, not the case. Truman was careful to gauge the support of his closest advisors, and wanted their opinions and recommendations before he acted. He met with Acheson, Bradley, Marshall and Averill Harriman on April 6, 1951 and asked for their views while not revealing anything about his intentions. At that meeting, both Harriman and Acheson agreed that MacArthur had to be immediately relieved of command.⁶⁴ However, Marshall was fearful of the impact on relations with Congress, and Bradley wanted time to discuss the matter with the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Truman asked the four to think further about the situation and they met again the next morning, when Truman asked Bradley to meet with the Joint Chiefs of Staff to ascertain their views. Truman asked the four to meet again on Monday morning and give him their final recommendations. All

⁶²John Muccio, interview by Jerry Hess. *Oral History Interviews*, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence Missouri. February 18, 1971, <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/oralhist/muccio2.htm>

⁶³ Dean Rusk, as told to Richard Rusk, *As I Saw It*. (New York: Norton, 1990). Quoted in McCullough, *Truman*, 855. Richard Neustadt, in his study of presidential power and leadership, also suggests that Truman had to take drastic action in having to dismiss MacArthur as a last resort. He wrote, “Truman could no longer have retained MacArthur without yielding to him the conduct of the war”. Richard Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Politics of Leadership*. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1960), 31.

⁶⁴ See Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, and Truman, *Memoirs*, for their accounts of these meetings.

four on Monday, April 9, 1951, recommended that Truman should immediately relieve MacArthur of his commands, and only then did Truman ask that the orders relieving MacArthur and appointing Ridgway as his successor be drawn up for his approval.⁶⁵

A number of Truman's own words, both contemporary accounts in his diary and letters, and in later accounts in oral histories, books and his memoirs, suggest that he saw the decision as one of necessity in terms of presidential prerogative as commander in chief of the armed forces and of preserving civilian control of the military. MacArthur was in Truman's view, insubordinate, and had to be removed from command. Not to do so would damage the presidency, in terms of its constitutional role as commander in chief and would threaten the long American tradition of civilian control of the military.

The views are outlined in a number of Truman's written comments. As he was considering the advice of his advisors and what action he should take, Truman characterized MacArthur's actions as insubordination, writing in his diary on April 6, 1951 that:

MacArthur shoots another political bomb through Joe Martin, leader of the Republican minority in the House [of Representatives]. This looks like the last straw. Rank insubordination....I call in Gen. [George C.] Marshall, Dean Acheson, Mr. [Averill] Harriman and Gen. [Omar] Bradley before Cabinet to discuss situation. I've come to the conclusion

⁶⁵ Though Truman wrote in his memoirs that he had already decided to fire MacArthur before these meetings, Truman's actions in this decision seem consistent with what a number of writers have noted about Truman's predilection for gathering a good deal of input and recommendations before making decisions. But Truman, ever the politician, must have also realized that he might need public support from his most important advisors, which he received during the Senate hearings into his dismissal of MacArthur. The testimony of advisors such as Marshall and Bradley supporting Truman's actions did much to quiet congressional outcry over the dismissal.

that our Big General in the Far East must be recalled. I don't express any opinion or make known my decision.⁶⁶

Truman further reiterated his opinion that he had to do address the situation in order to preserve the concept of civilian control of the military in a letter he wrote on April 10, 1951 to David Noyes. Truman wrote that, "under the circumstances I could do nothing else and still be President of the United States. Even the Chiefs of Staff came to the conclusion that civilian control of the military was at stake and I didn't let it stay at stake very long."⁶⁷ Richard Haynes also notes that many of Truman's private letters written during the few weeks after his dismissal of MacArthur focus on his being forced to act in order to preserve presidential authority as commander in chief.⁶⁸

Truman's intentions were also evident in his statement to the press that was released on the early morning of April 11th. While the statement acknowledged the importance of ongoing debate about public policy, it also made clear that Truman valued the tradition of civilian control of the military, noting that, "It is fundamental, however, that military commanders must be governed by the policies and directives issued to them in the manner provided by our laws and constitution. In time of crisis, this consideration is particularly compelling."⁶⁹

Thus, in his written statements at the time of MacArthur's dismissal, and in his private correspondence, Truman repeatedly emphasized the necessity to exercise his constitutional authority and preserve civilian control of the military. Though Truman did not hold MacArthur in high regard, as evidenced by some of his private comments about

⁶⁶ Farrell, *Off the Record*, 210.

⁶⁷ Letter, Harry S. Truman to David Noyes, April 10, 1951. *President's Secretary's File*, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Missouri. Quoted in Donovan, *Tumultuous Years*, 355.

⁶⁸ Haynes, *The Awesome Power*.

⁶⁹ Truman, *Memoirs*, 449.

the general, it does appear that when it came time to make the decision to dismiss MacArthur that Truman put personal feelings aside and made the decision based on his authority as commander in chief.

The belief that he had to act as he did permeates Truman's later writing as well. After leaving the White House, Truman was able to write in more detail about his actions. In his memoirs, Truman writes, upon learning of MacArthur's communiqué of March 24, that:

This was a most extraordinary statement for a military commander of the United Nations to issue on his own responsibility. It was an act totally disregarding all directives to abstain from any declarations on foreign policy. It was in open defiance of my orders as President and as Commander in Chief. *This was a challenge to the authority of the President under the Constitution....*By this act MacArthur left me no choice – I could no longer tolerate his insubordination. [italics added]⁷⁰

Truman gives further explanation in his memoirs, writing about the essential character of civilian control of the military in terms of “free government”, and suggesting that allowing MacArthur to continue to defy civilian authority would have been tantamount to violating the presidential oath to preserve and defend the constitution. He also, in hindsight, praised the actions of Congress in terms of their hearings, writing that, “the combined [Senate Armed Services and Foreign Relations] committees concluded, as they had to conclude if the Constitution was to maintain its meaning, that the Commander

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 441-442. However, MacArthur, in his memoirs, suggested that Truman's decision was motivated by politics, writing that his removal was, “...fraught with politics, as he was apparently of the belief that I was conspiring in some underhanded way with the Republican [congressional] leaders.”, MacArthur, *Reminiscences*, 389. Donald McCoy also suggests that Truman was angry with MacArthur for entering the political area in his March 20, 1951 letter to Martin. McCoy, *The Presidency of Harry S. Truman*.

in Chief was entirely within his rights if he thought it necessary to remove a military commander.”⁷¹

Richard Haynes, in his study of Truman as commander in chief, noted that Truman often commented on the dismissal and what it meant after it happened:

He believed that MacArthur did not deliberately set out to challenge his authority as commander in chief, but that his actions did endanger the principle of civilian control which Truman considered fundamental to the existence of a free society. As he wrote to the president of the University of Virginia: “I regret very much that the action had to be taken but the civilian control of the military was at stake and I simply had to do something about it.” Or, in a similar vein, to the mayor of Peterson, New Jersey: “In time, people will realize and understand that military commanders must be governed by the policies and directives issued to them in the manner provided by our laws and Constitution.”⁷²

As he aged and moved further from intense involvement in politics, Truman often referred to MacArthur and his decision in earthier, less measured tones. In a series of interviews in the early 1960s, Truman alluded to his actions and to MacArthur in a less diplomatic manner, answering when asked in an interview to tell in his own words why he had fired MacArthur that, “I fired him because he wouldn’t respect the authority of the President. That’s the answer to that. I didn’t fire him because he was a dumb son of a bitch, although he was.”⁷³ And later, when asked by the same interviewer about any

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 451.

⁷² Haynes, *The Awesome Power*, 262-263.

⁷³ Miller, Merle. *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman*. (New York: Berkley Books, 1973), 308.

fears that MacArthur might become a martyr and thus Truman's actions might have helped propel him into the presidency, Truman answered, "I didn't give a damn what became of him. He disobeyed orders, and I was Commander in Chief, and either I was or I wasn't. I acted as Commander in Chief and called him home."⁷⁴

Regardless of what Truman and his advisors felt, Truman's actions as commander in chief must ultimately be viewed within a larger historical context in terms of foreign policy and presidential power. Truman and MacArthur's clash came at a time when a fundamental dissonance between the U.S. and its allies and the Soviet Union and its allies existed, and the policy of containment that had been crafted over the five years since the end of the Second World War was the foundation of U.S. foreign policy. In that sense, Truman's decision to intervene in the Korean War was not a decision based on military strategy or even on the maintenance of a defensive perimeter, but rather a decision based on an expansive definition of containment – that communist aggression had to be contained by economic aid, political alliances and, if need be, by military force, or else the policy of containment was nothing more than a hollow shell. Truman also believed that the fledging United Nations had to act against aggression as well if it was to be taken seriously as a instrument of global policy (though it seems likely that even if the U.N. had not condemned the invasion and authorized the use of force, the U.S. would have gone ahead on its own). But the decision to intervene militarily so as to contain communist expansionism, and the formation of a multi-national U.N. force *necessarily* meant that the Korean conflict would be fundamentally different than previous conflicts. The Truman administration was in fact struggling to establish military oversight and policy doctrines because it was a unique environment in which they were dealing for the first time with

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 335

the possibility of a nuclear conflict, with overseeing a multi-national force (albeit dominated by the U.S.), and in addition, with a new military infrastructure, as the recently-formed Department of Defense and Joint Chiefs of Staff had never functioned on a war footing before. In retrospect, the difficulty in managing the Korean War should come as no surprise. As the war ground on, Truman and his advisors recognized that they were breaking new ground; but MacArthur, given his experience as a theater commander in the Second World War and his experience as a virtually unencumbered proconsul in post-war occupied Japan, never seemed to have recognized that distinction.

The Korean War was the first military test of the policy of containment and as such, became a very different conflict than the Second World War. It was to prove a severe test, for as Donald McCoy has argued, the initial defeat of U.N. forces by the Chinese generated a great deal of anxiety about the efficacy of U.S. foreign policy that was publicly displayed in the congressional hearings following MacArthur's dismissal. Given that the war ended in an armistice that simply kept in place an artificial boundary, it can be judged a successful test of containment. There was ultimately no change in the two Koreas that had been created after the Second World War, and military action demonstrated to the Soviets and the Chinese, and to U.S. allies in Europe, that the U.S. was willing to fight to blunt communist expansionism. But in hindsight, the Chinese intervention and the ultimate stalemate that came out of the Korean War helped foster the conditions of limited war and increased civilian oversight that failed with such disastrous results in Southeast Asia less than twenty years later.

The Truman-MacArthur controversy should also be viewed within the context of presidential power and authority. The presidency changed enormously during the tenure

of Franklin D. Roosevelt, as its powers expanded in parallel with the unprecedented events of the Great Depression and the Second World War. The presidency that Truman suddenly inherited in 1945 was a very different one than that which Franklin Roosevelt inherited in 1933. Yet, despite the changing nature of the presidency, the immense challenges of bringing the war to a successful conclusion and of dealing with both the domestic and international conditions of the immediate post-war era would have taxed any president; that Truman's tenure was often so stormy is, in retrospect, no surprise.

But Truman, as Richard Haynes notes, was a man of strong convictions who had read a great deal of history and who had a very clear idea of what the presidency was and how the presidency should function. He realized that the United States could no longer stand apart from the rest of the world and believed that it should be involved in international affairs and that the United Nations could be an instrument for building world peace. He lacked the grace and charismatic qualities of his immediate predecessor, but had the ability to make and abide by decisions. Both Jean Monnet, the French intellectual who became the father of the European Union, and Dean Acheson recognized this innate quality.⁷⁵ Truman also had an expansive view of the presidency in that he felt whatever domestic or foreign policy authority that was not constrained or prohibited by the constitution was fair game for the presidency. In a book edited and published after his death by his daughter Margaret, Truman lists the various qualities of a president:

First and most important, in my view, is the fact that a president must be strong, particularly where there's the temptation, as there so often is, to

⁷⁵ Monnet wrote, "Truman was certainly no ordinary man...the essential reason was a quality with which he was exceptionally well endowed: the ability to decide." Jean Monnet, *Memoirs*. (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1978), quoted in J. Robert Moskin, *Mr. Truman's War: The Final Victories of World War II and the Birth of the Postwar World*. (New York: Random House, 1996), 355-356.

look the other way and do nothing because the matter at hand is unpopular or unpleasant or difficult to attempt or accomplish...And that means, of course, a president who can make up his own mind, who isn't afraid of controversy, who doesn't allow himself to be held back by some of the limitations other people try to place on the presidency, and who doesn't allow himself to be held back by certain limitations in the Constitution.⁷⁶

Truman viewed the role of commander in chief as yet another function of the presidency, and saw that role as the execution of military policy, and as dealing with and making decisions on policies and recommendations that were presented to him by the new military infrastructure that had come into being during his presidency in the form of the Department of Defense, the National Security Council, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He was, as Richard Haynes has suggested, basically willing to trust this military apparatus but always retained the responsibility of making final decisions once he had heard the opinions and recommendations of those in the military command structure.⁷⁷

Truman's exercise of presidential authority as commander in chief was, however, shaped by the *ad hoc* and evolutionary nature of military policy and foreign policy during the Korean War. There was no precedent for directing and fighting a war in which the use of nuclear weapons by either side was a possibility; nor was there any precedent toward implementing a policy of containment using military force. No president had been forced to make executive decisions under these conditions and so the way in which the war unfolded was by necessity somewhat evolutionary. It is perhaps a credit to

⁷⁶ Margaret Truman, ed., *Where the Buck Stops: The Personal and Private Writings of Harry S. Truman*. (New York: Warner Books, 1989), 81.

⁷⁷ Haynes, *The Awesome Power*.

Truman and his military and civilian advisors that the war never expanded beyond the Korean peninsula.

Truman, despite the trials and tribulations of his presidency and the challenge of fighting a new kind of war, always understood that *he* was the president and that the “buck stopped” with him, particularly in his role as commander in chief. Like his predecessor Abraham Lincoln, Truman did not hesitate to exercise that power and relieve a popular general from military command. And, as with Lincoln’s dismissal of McClellan, Truman’s dismissal of MacArthur was unpopular, but his authority to act as he did was never seriously challenged. The Truman-MacArthur controversy may remain controversial and a subject of continued historical analysis, but the finality of Truman’s dismissal of MacArthur is one aspect of that troubled time that reinforced the notion of civilian control of the military and the power of the American presidency in the modern world.

Bibliography

Primary sources:

Acheson, Dean. *Present at the Creation. My Years in the State Department*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1969.

Elsey, George. Interview by Jerry Hess. *Oral History Interviews*, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence Missouri. April 9, 1970,
<http://www.trumanlibrary.org/oralhist/elsey6.htm>

MacArthur, Douglas. *Reminiscences*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964.

Muccio, John. Interview by Jerry Hess. *Oral History Interviews*, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence Missouri. February 18, 1971,
<http://www.trumanlibrary.org/oralhist/muccio2.htm>

Ridgway, Matthew B. *The Korean War*. New York: Doubleday and Co, 1967.

Truman, Harry S. *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman. Volume Two: Years of Trial and Hope*. New York: Doubleday and Company, 1956.

Secondary sources:

Bailyn, Bernard, Dallek, Robert, David, David, Donald, David, Thomas, John and Gordon Wood, *The Great Republic: A History of the American People*. Vol. 1, Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1992.

Blair, Clay. *The Forgotten War: America in Korea, 1950-1953*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987.

Cumings, Bruce. ed. *Child of Conflict: The Korean-American Relationship, 1945 – 1953*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983.

Dallek, Robert. *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.

Donald, David Herbert. *Lincoln*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995.

Donovan, Robert J. *Tumultuous Years: The Presidency of Harry S. Truman 1949 – 1953*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1982.

Farrell, Robert. *Harry S. Truman: A Life*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1994.

- Farrell, Robert. *Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry S. Truman*. New York: Harper and Row, 1980.
- Flint, Roy K. "In Defense of Truman: MacArthur Had Limited Vision as a Theater Commander." In Chambers II, John W. and Piehler, G. Kurt. eds., *Major Problems in American Military History*. New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1999.
- Fromkin, David. *In the Time of the Americans: FDR, Truman, Eisenhower, Marshall MacArthur. The Generation that Changed the World*. New York: Random House, 1995.
- Gaddis, John Lewis. *The Cold War: A New History*. New York: Penguin Press, 2005.
- Gilbert, Martin. *The Second World War*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1981.
- Hamby, Alonzo. *Man of the People: A Life of Harry S. Truman*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Hastings, Max. *The Korean War*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987.
- Hattaway, Herman. "Lincoln's Presidential Example in Dealing with the Military", *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, 7, 1.
<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jala/7/hattaway.html>.
- Haynes, Richard. *The Awesome Power: Harry S. Truman as Commander in Chief*. Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1973.
- James, D. Clayton. *In Defense of MacArthur: Miscommunication and Mistreatment*. In Chambers II, John W. and Piehler, G. Kurt. eds., *Major Problems in American Military History*. New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1999.
- LaFeber, Walter. "The Constitution and United States Foreign Policy: An Interpretation." *The Journal of American History*, 74, no. 3, (December, 1987): 695-717.
- Leffler, Melvyn P. "The American Conception of National Security and the Beginnings of the Cold War, 1945-48." *The American Historical Review* 89, no. 2 (April 1984): 346-381.
- Leffler, Melvyn P. "The Cold War: What Do "We Now Know"?" *The American Historical Review* 104, no. 2 (April 1999): 501-524.
- Lowe, Peter. *The Origins of the Korean War*. London: Longman Press, 1987.
- Manchester, William. *American Caesar. Douglas MacArthur, 1880-1964*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1978.

- Matray, James. "Truman's Plan for Victory: National Self-Determination and the Thirty-Eighth Parallel Decision in Korea." *The Journal of American History*, 66, no. 2 (September, 1979): 314-333.
- McCoy, Donald R. *The Presidency of Harry S. Truman*. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1984.
- McCullough, David. *Truman*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992.
- McPherson, James. *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001.
- Miller, Merle. *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman*. New York: Berkley Books, 1973.
- Moskin, J. Robert. *Mr. Truman's War: The Final Victories of World War II and the Birth of the Postwar World*. New York: Random House, 1996.
- National Archives, "Constitution of the United States of America."
http://www.archives.gov/national-archivesexperience/charters/constitution_transcript.html
- Neustadt, Richard. *Presidential Power and the Politics of Leadership*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1960.
- Pearlman, Michael D. "Truman and MacArthur: The Winding Road to Dismissal." In *Korean War Anthology*, Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. Government Printing Office.
<http://purl.access.gpo.gov/GPO/LPS59107>
- Spanier, John W. *The Truman-MacArthur Controversy and the Korean War*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1959.
- Truman, Margaret. ed., *Where the Buck Stops: The Personal and Private Writings of Harry S. Truman*. New York: Warner Books, 1989.
- Wainstock, Dennis D., *Truman, MacArthur and the Korean War*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999.
- Weintraub, Stanley. *MacArthur's War: Korea and the Undoing of an American Hero*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000.
- West, Philip. "Interpreting the Korean War." *The American Historical Review*, 95, no. 1 (February, 1989): 80-86.