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Crisis in Command:

The Truman – MacArthur Controversy

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After the United States defeated Japan in World War II, the Soviet Union and the United States temporarily divided Korea, with the 38th parallel as the political frontier between the two. The Soviets created the People's Democratic Republic of North Korea, while the Americans set up the Republic of South Korea. Soon, the two sides clashed when the North invaded the South in the summer of 1950 with the goal of reuniting the country by force and driving the South Korean army into the sea.ⁱ

President Harry Truman did not view the invasion as an internal Korean matter. Rather, he put the fight into the paradigm of the Cold War where the outcome of the war had huge international ramifications. For good or ill, the President anticipated General Dwight Eisenhower "domino theory": that is, if one ally falls, more will follow as Communists sweep the world. After Asia fell, then would come Europe, and the United States would live in a much more hostile world. America's Cold War military mission of containing Communism had been successful in Europe where the U.S. and the Soviets had reached an uneasy stalemate by 1949, that meaning that the United States had stopped Soviet expansion. Truman hoped to develop a similar strategy for Asia, one that eventually led to Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954.ⁱⁱ

Rather than go before Congress to ask for war, Truman used the United Nations (UN) as his vehicle. The UN allowed him to use a "police action" to save South Korea and to return the border to the 38th parallel. Americans provided about 50 percent of fighting men, South Korea, 43 percent. Several other allies contributed to the war, especially in logistics, in serving as general staff, and in developing hospitals and providing medical staff. Truman placed General Douglas MacArthur in command, not realizing that the two would face off later over politics and the strategy of the war as it changed because of conditions on the ground.

To say that the Truman-MacArthur controversy involved many complex issues is an understatement. Nothing like it has ever happened in American history not before, not since. Yes, presidents have relieved (or fired) generals in times of war and in times of peace, but none reached the bombshell nature of and the political furor that develop over MacArthur's dismissal.ⁱⁱⁱ

In some part, the furor can be explained by looking into the backgrounds of the two antagonists.

MacArthur practically became a living legend for his service throughout his army years, during which the general became a victim of his own hubris, his own ego, that eventually grew to the size of the Goodyear blimp. Give or take a couple of months, the general served in the United States Army in many capacities for a total of 48 years except for brief hiatus in the Philippines where he became The Field Marshal of the Philippine Army (1937-1941). A look into MacArthur's rise is warranted. Born in 1880, the general attended West Point from 1899 to 1903 and graduated at the top of his class. He saw his first action in the United States occupation of Veracruz during the crisis with Mexico just prior to World War I. His commander, General John J. Pershing, nominated him for a Medal of Honor after he had led a dangerous reconnaissance mission. In World War I, he fought on the western front, received promotions and medals, and came out of the war as a one-star, as a brigadier general.

After the war, MacArthur held various posts and became the army's youngest major general in 1925. Now he was a two-star. In 1930 command promoted him to chief of staff for the United States Army. In 1932, he commanded the troops in Washington, D.C., that routed the Bonus Army protesters. A reactionary in his politics, he announced that he had saved American democracy after he vanquished the veterans of World War I and forced them out of the nation's capital. During the New Deal era, MacArthur oversaw the work of the Civilian Conservation Corps that was supervised by the American Army. He retired in 1937; whereupon, he began his new career in the Philippines as the Field Marshal of the Filipino army. Recalled to active duty in 1941, his past record was such that he became commander of the U.S. Army in the Far East. Headquartered in the Philippines, General MacArthur saw a series of disasters befall his forces early on. On December 8, 1941, he lost his Air Force when Japanese pilots bombed his airfield. Shortly, the Japanese Army successfully invaded the Philippines, that event forcing MacArthur and his family to evacuate Corregidor and to escape to the safety of Australia. Soon, he was named Supreme Commander of the Southwest Pacific Area. After two more years of fighting, the United States and its allies successfully concluded the war. As he had promised, the general had returned to the Philippines where he accepted the Japanese surrender on September 2, 1945.^{iv}

President Harry Truman, who would eventually relieve MacArthur, had a background very unlike

that of the general.

A Missourian born in 1884, Truman grew up in Independence. As an adult, he became a prosperous farmer. In World War I, he served as a regiment's battery commander, at one point quelling a mutiny by just talking sternly to his men. The war brought out his leadership qualities that he would carry into the White House after the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Yet, Truman saw himself as a citizen soldier and had no desire to remain in service as a career officer. He was a rock-ribbed civilian.

After the war, Truman opened a men's store in Kansas City.

Interested in politics, he emerged as a reform Democrat in the 1920s. In 1922 he became a member of the Prendergast machine and joined the race to choose a county judge (of Jackson County). In this first political foray, Truman was victorious. As a judge, his most notable moment came when he single-handedly broke-up a rural Ku Klux Klan meeting. In 1934 he joined the senatorial race during which he campaigned as a Franklin D. Roosevelt-New Deal supporter; he won the race; and he went to Washington, D. C. After supporting most of the bills in FDR's agenda, During World War II he headed the bureau that investigated wartime corporate fraud and other business abuses. Then, He joined FDR's ticket in 1944, becoming president less than six months later when Roosevelt died of a massive cerebral hemorrhage. On his first day in office, Truman told the press pool that he felt like "the moon, the stars, and the planets" had fallen on him.^v

With the war won, MacArthur--like Truman--faced new challenges. First, he became the military governor of Japan. His goal was to turn a fascist, militaristic country into a little United States in the Far East. Although he was most conservative politically, MacArthur gave the Nipponese a constitution that outlawed war and reforms along the line of the New Deal before his duty in Japan ended.

When the North Koreans attacked South Korean, Truman gave MacArthur a new task. He assumed command of the United Nations forces committed to the struggle. Early on, the North Korean army won victory after victory until the allies were almost pushed into the sea. But MacArthur's men held at the Pusan Perimeter, a small strip of land on coastal South Korea. MacArthur changed the course of the war with his masterful plan to flank the North Koreans by landing a force at Incheon. That strategy forced

the enemy into a retreat that turned into a rout.^{vi}

Yet, the general could not stay out of politics. On August 26, 1950--in a statement to the 51st National Encampment of the Veterans of Foreign Wars--MacArthur criticized Truman's policy towards Formosa (Now Taiwan) as not being strong enough, supportive enough.

Hoping to defuse the political time bomb that was MacArthur, Truman's civilian and military advisors asked the president to talk to the general face-to-face. On a tight schedule, the president met MacArthur on Wake Island, on October 14, 1950. Early on, Truman did not want to make the trip, believing that it was just a public relations ploy, but, bottom line, he listened to his advisors. The negotiations between two strong-willed men became something of a political circus, the beginning of which found two planes circling the Wake airfield, each man waiting for the other to land first and thereby admit he was the inferior who would wait for his superior. Yet, later, both men believed their meeting was a success. Truman added much to the occasion by awarding MacArthur a fourth oak leaf cluster to his Army Distinguished Service Medal.

Although Truman and MacArthur had handled their immediate differences, less than a month later, the general was issuing more media statements, this time criticizing Truman's Korean War policies. The statements continued through November and December and largely focused on Truman's limited-war strategy. Justifying his policies, the president told his advisors that he was trying to stop World War III, not start it. Yet, his hopes appeared dashed on November 25 when Red China poured thousands of men into North Korea, forcing the American Army into a long fighting retreat.^{vii} Rumor had it that MacArthur had allowed reconnaissance forces to cross the Yalu River--the border between China and North Korea--to get detailed information about North Korean forces in Southern China even after Chinese leaders warned that they would intervene militarily if their country's border was violated. After finally establishing a stable front, the American Army began a new offensive and had recaptured Seoul by March of 1951 while MacArthur continued to talk to the media at will.

Hoping to rein in MacArthur, Truman issued a directive on December 6, 1950. Henceforth, all military men and diplomats had to clear public statements through the State Department. Specifically, they

were not to make statements about military strategy or diplomatic efforts to any media, including radio, television, magazines, and newspapers. The president's directive did not stop the general from talking. On March 20, 1951, the Joint Chiefs forwarded MacArthur information to include in drafting a cease-fire proposal to present to China. Instead of drafting such a document, the general wrote his own ultimatum ordering the Chinese to admit that MacArthur's forces had defeated them and that Chinese forces must surrender to him, personally, or face imminent military consequences—including a possible nuclear attack. Upon learning what MacArthur had done, Truman said that he wanted "to kick the general into the North China Sea."

Worse developments came fast. On April 5, 1951, Republican House Minority Leader Joseph W. Martin, Jr., read Congress—and the national public—a letter MacArthur had written to him, pasting Truman once again for his limited war strategy. Two days later, a national magazine published an article quoting the general while the president was consulting his civilian and military advisors in meetings spread over a two-day period. Included were talks with General George Marshall, Secretary of Defense; Dean Acheson, Secretary of State; General of the Army Omar Bradley; diplomat W. Averell Harriman; and others. They unanimously agreed that MacArthur must be relieved.

For one, General Marshall called MacArthur's actions and words "unprecedented" in the history of the American military. On April 11, 1951, Truman recalled MacArthur on the grounds that the general could not give wholehearted support to the policies of his civilian government. The president then replaced MacArthur with Lieutenant General Matthew B. Ridgway. Later in his life, Truman told, in laymen's words, why he relieved MacArthur. "I fired him because he did not respect the authority of the President. I did not fire him because he was a dumb son-of-a-bitch although he was, but that's not against the law for generals. If it was, half to three-quarters of them would be in jail."^{viii}

Whatever Truman's opinion of the general, the general public and conservative politicians wined and dined MacArthur when he returned to the United States. On April 18 came a ticker-tape parade in San Francisco. On April 19, 1951, he addressed a joint session of Congress and gave his "old soldier" speech, to the applause of all present. On April 22 came a ticker-tape parade in New York City that—at the

time--was the largest in the history of the city. On April 25, the general appeared and spoke at Soldier Field in Chicago to an audience of 50,000, all applauding his words. Truman later appeared there, and the crowd booed him.

MacArthur had the support of many national politicians, mostly Republicans, who had chafed under the Democrats' rule since 1933. One, Senator Robert Taft, called for Truman's impeachment on the grounds that he was unfit for office, morally and mentally. America was in great danger, he said, adding that the United States was "led by a fool who is surrounded by knaves." Congress held hearings from May 3 to June 25 that delved into MacArthur's dismissal, hearings that accomplished nothing.

All of this said, after the proverbial dust settled, what have we? We have a legendary general with a super-ego who tried to override the decisions of the nation's Constitutional Commander-in-chief. In a sense, MacArthur had demanded total control over his military decisions and the subordination of anything or anyone to the contrary. That, Truman could not allow, for he would have established a terrible precedent that other, less honorable, generals might seize upon and turn to personal advantage. Instead, Truman upheld the Constitution which stipulates that a civilian will always control the military.^{ix}

Endnotes

i. When the UN, and therefore the United States, entered the Korean War, South Korea was staring at utter defeat. The North Koreans had pushed the South Korean forces to the southern tip of the Korean peninsula where they were hanging on by a thread--see Edwin P. Hoyt, *The Pusan Perimeter* (New York: Jove books, 1984); Uzal W. Ent, *Fighting on the Brink: Defense of the Pusan Perimeter* (Paducah: Turner Publishing, 1996); Craig E. Blohm, *Strategic Battles [in Korea]* (San Diego: Lucent Books, 2004). There are many books on the history of the Korean War, or on a topic that include some coverage of the war. Some of the most informative general studies include: Dean Acheson, *The Korean War* (New York: Norton, 1971); John Toland, *In Mortal Combat* (New York: Quill, 1991); Allan Reed, *Understanding is Better than Remembering* (Manhattan, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1997); Russell Gugeler, *Combat Actions in Korea* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1970); anonymous: *The United States Army in the Korean War* (5 vols.; Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, the United States Army, 1987-1992); Chae Han Kook, *et al*, *The Korean War* (Seoul: Korea Institute for Military History, 1997); Jon Halliday, *Korea: The Unknown War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988); T. R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War: The Classic Korean War History* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey, 1963); Isidor F. Stone: *The Hidden History of the Korean War* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1952); Roy E. Appleman, *South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu: June-November, 1950* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1961); Richard Whelan, *Drawing the Line: The Korean War, 1950-1953* (Boston: Little and Brown, 1990); Chum-Kon Kim, *The Korean War, 1950-1953* (Seoul: Kwangmyong, 1973); Robert Leckie,

Conflict: The History of the Korean War, 1950-1953 (New York: Putnam, 1962); Clay Blair, *The Forgotten War: America in Korea, 1950-1953* (New York: Time Books, 1987); Burton I. Kaufman, *The Korean Conflict* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999); Bevin Alexander, *Korea: The First War We Lost* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1993). The war was hard on the common soldiers. They suffered a lack of supplies, including food and ammunition; in winter, some froze to death for lack of proper winter cloths; some died in mobile hospitals, awaiting treatment for their wounds; and some died because of the stupidity of their superior officers. For the common soldiers' problems, see Boris Spiroff, *Korea: Frozen Hell on Earth* (New York: Vantage Press, 1995).

ii. For more on Truman's reasoning see Elizabeth E. Spalding, *The First Cold Warrior: Harry Truman, Containment and the remaking of Liberal internationalism* (Lexington: Kentucky University Press, 2006). George Kennan was the "father" of the Containment doctrine. See For more on the containment doctrine, see Edwin C. Rozwenc and Kenneth Lindfors, *Containment and the Origins of the Cold War* (Boston: Heath, 1967); Hugh Ross, ed., *The Cold War: Containment and Its Critics* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1963). Also related to containment is William W. Stueck's *The Road to Confrontation: American Policy Toward China and Korea, 1947-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of Norton Carolina Press, 1981); Laurel F. Franklin, *George Kennan: An Annotated Bibliography* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997); John L. Harper, *American Visions of Europe: Franklin D. Roosevelt, George Kennan, and Dean G. Acheson* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Glenn D. Paige, *1950: Truman's Decision: The United States enters the Korean War* (New York: Chelsea House, 1970). For more on SEATO, see Joseph M. Luns, *The Western Alliance: Its Future and Its Implications for Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1985). Luns's book dealt with the future, but the book includes a history summary.

iii. For an in-depth studies on the controversy, see Richard Lowitt, *The Truman-MacArthur Controversy* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1967); John W. Spanier, *The Truman-MacArthur Controversy and the Korean War* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1959); Richard H. Rovere, *The General and the President [and control of American Foreign Policy]* (New York: Farrar, 1951).

iv. For more on MacArthur's life and military career, see Douglas MacArthur, *Reminiscences* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964); Courtney Whitney, *MacArthur: His Rendevous with History* (New York: Knopf, 1956); William S. Phillips, *Douglas MacArthur: a Modern Knight-errant* (Philadelphia: Dorrance, 1978); Norman H. Finkelstein, *The Emperor General: A Biography of Douglas MacArthur* (Minneapolis: Dillon Press, 1989). Eugene L. Razor has compiled a bibliography on the general: *General Douglas MacArthur, 1880-1964* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994).

v. For more on Truman, including his pre-presidential and post-presidential years, see Harry S. Truman, *Memoir of Harry Truman* (vols. 2; Garden City: Doubleday, 1955-1956); Harry S. Truman, *The Autobiography of Harry S. Truman*, ed. Robert H. Ferrell (Boulder: Colorado Associated University Press, 1980); (Merle Miller, *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Berkley, 1974); Robert J. Donovan, *Tumultuous Years: The Presidency of Harry S. Truman, 1949-1953* (New York: Norton, 1982); Margaret Truman, *Harry S. Truman* (New York: Morrow, 1972)

vi. For details on MacArthur's brilliant decision to land at Inchon landing, see Michael Langley, *Inchon Landing: MacArthur's last Triumph* (New York: Times Books, 1979).

vii. For more on China's entry into the war and Truman's dismissal of MacArthur, see James McGovern's *To the Yalu: from the Chinese Invasion of Korea to MacArthur's Dismissal* (New York: Morrow, 1972); Russell Spurr, *Enter the Dragon: China's Undeclared War against the United States in Korea, 1950-1951* (New York: H. Holt, 1989).

viii. For more on Truman's reasons for firing MacArthur, see Trumbull Higgins, *Korea and the Fall of MacArthur: a Precis in Limited War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960); Stanley Weintraub, *MacArthur's War: Korea and the Undoing of an American Hero* (New York: Free Press, 2000); Matthew B. Ridgway, *The Korean War; How we met the Challenge; How all-out Asian War was averted; why MacArthur was dismissed; Why Today's War Objectives must be Limited* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967).

ix. Keith D. McFarland has produced a good bibliography of the Korean War: *The Korean War, an Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1986).