

Background Essay on the Korean War



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In 1945, the scars of World War II across the world were still fresh. The fear of having to engage in another world war was very real. A mere two years after the end of WWII, the **Cold War** began. The **United Nations**, which was formed to provide a forum to prevent future wars, included the membership of the Soviet Union, the United States, the United Kingdom and 57 other countries. The US adopted a firm stance to contain the spread of **communism**, which was being aggressively promoted by the USSR.

The Korean War began when the North Korean People's Army (NKPA) crossed the 28th parallel into South Korea. Adhering to its policy of containment, the United States could not ignore the threat of communism in Asia, but neither the president nor the public wanted a long, drawn out war. President Truman hand selected General Douglas MacArthur to lead the U.S. troops in South Korea. MacArthur arrived at his post a World War II hero, having successfully led multiple troops through the war. Following his victories in WWII he had become the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers in Japan. MacArthur was revered and highly praised in the United States.

The general assured the president that the Korean War would be short-lived and that the American troops would be home by Christmas. MacArthur was initially successful in driving back the North Korean forces over the 38th parallel. He made a controversial move, however, when he continued to push the North Koreans further north and suggested bombing cities in China that were thought to be aiding the North Korean troops. In pushing for a larger conflict, MacArthur downplayed the risk of inciting a massive war in Asia.

President Truman's main concern was saving as many lives as possible, even if that meant signing a ceasefire along the **38th parallel**. General MacArthur did not think a ceasefire was an appropriate solution. The two men clashed. For Truman, the war represented an opportunity to stop the spread of communism into South Korea. For MacArthur, the war was an opportunity to liberate the North from communist control, and aggressive action was required.

MacArthur thwarted Truman's attempt to negotiate a ceasefire when the general ordered his troops to invade North Korea and push the NKPA up past the 38th parallel. This was not the first time the general had ignored direct orders from his Commander in Chief. On April 11, 1951, President Truman officially relieved Douglas MacArthur of his command. Word of his firing spread quickly, and the American public found the news upsetting. Truman felt that his decision was just because MacArthur had overstepped his authority, defied direct orders from his superior and interfered with Truman's hope of ending the Korean War quickly.

Was President Truman right in firing MacArthur? If you were President Truman, would you have fired General Douglas MacArthur? Use the documents provided to generate your own perspective on this event, paying close attention to the context of the Korean War.

Vocabulary

- **Cold War** - a state of political hostility between countries characterized by threats, propaganda, and other measures short of open warfare. It was the state of political hostility that existed between the Soviet countries and the US-led Western powers from 1945 to 1990.
- **United Nations** - an international organization formed in 1945 to increase political and economic cooperation among member countries. The organization works on economic and social development programs, improving human rights and reducing global conflicts.
- **Communism** - a political and economic system in which the major productive resources in a society—such as mines, factories, and farms—are owned by the public or the state, and wealth is divided among citizens equally or according to individual need.
- **Non-communism** - being against the idea of a society where there is a common control of all production, and everything is shared and belongs to all.
- **38th parallel** - this line of latitude was used as the pre-Korean War boundary between North Korea and South Korea.
- **Joint Chiefs of Staff** - consist of the chiefs of staff of the US Army and Air Force, the commandant of the US Marine Corps, and the chief of US Naval Operations. This group's chairman, selected from one of the branches, is the highest-ranking military adviser to the president of the US.

Historical Background for Teachers



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The scandal between President Truman and Douglas MacArthur sparked a major controversy within the public and political domain of the United States. It is important to note that President Truman and General MacArthur only met face-to-face once, during their meeting at Wake Island on October 14, 1950. This meeting led to many conspiracy theories about what was discussed between the two. Back at home, General MacArthur was a shining beacon of hope. They believe the general would lead the troops to victory, eradicate communism, and keep the soldiers safe.

General MacArthur repeatedly ignored direct orders. A chance for a ceasefire was ruined when he pushed the troops up north near the Chinese Border. He also called for the use of atomic weapons on China. On August 17, 1950, General MacArthur addressed the VFW on the issue of Formosa. He discussed a stance of military aggression towards Formosa and was against the ideas of President Truman. Truman sent MacArthur a statement directing him to withdraw his statement.

When President Truman relieved General MacArthur of his command, people were outraged. Congressmen and politicians alike found themselves caught in the middle of the scandal. MacArthur never directly made negative statements toward the president, he used senators and other politicians to spread his ideas. Congress member Joseph W. Martin read a letter he received from Douglas MacArthur to congress on March 20, 1951. Word of this act quickly spread. Eventually, many politicians, including Robert Taft, called for the impeachment of President Truman.

Ordinary citizens flooded the White House with letters both congratulating and criticizing the president's decision. President Truman received a letter containing a Purple Heart from William Banning. In this letter Banning wrote:

“Mr. Truman, as you have been directly responsible for the loss of our son’s life in Korea, you might just as well keep this emblem on display in your trophy room as a memory of one of your historic deeds. Our major regret at this time is that your daughter was not there to receive the same treatment as our son received in Korea. Signed, William Banning”

It is important to compare the situation with modern times. Many other presidents have relieved Generals of their command, yet they were not scrutinized nearly as badly as President Truman. For example, President Barack Obama relieved General Ralph Baker of his command. While President Obama was criticized by the public and the media, this action did not reach the same level as the Truman/MacArthur scandal.

