

After Douglas MacArthur's infamous dismissal from his position as General in the Korean War, United States President Harry Truman stated, "I fired MacArthur because he wouldn't respect the authority of the president. I didn't fire him because he was a dumb son of a bitch, although he was" (Hamby 303). Although this would usually be considered a bold and rather brazen statement for a president to make about a general, for Truman this was nothing uncommon. Truman and MacArthur had many personal disputes that were made public; neither, evidently, put much effort into hiding their hatred for one another. The strain between the two leaders became even more apparent during the first years of the Korean War. A hot war in the early stages of the Cold War, the Korean War commenced when the Soviet-backed North failed to hold free elections, exacerbating tensions between it and the US-backed South. The 38th parallel increasingly became a disputed area, until finally North Korean forces invaded the South on June 25, 1950. General Douglas MacArthur, Chief of Staff of the US Army during the 1930s who also played a crucial role in the Pacific Theater throughout World War II, was unanimously recommended by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to be Commander of the Korean War (James 436). Throughout the duration of the war, the Joint Chiefs of Staff began to have their doubts about MacArthur—his beliefs contradicted many of those of President Truman, increasing already existing hostility between the Commander In Chief of the U.S. Army and the Commander-In-Chief of the UN command. However, even though they had personal disagreements, the ultimate breaking point in the tenuous relationship between Truman and MacArthur was tactical, not personal. MacArthur's push to advance beyond the 38th parallel and eradicate Communism entirely compelled Truman to unceremoniously fire him to ensure that China would not be provoked and the war would end in a Korea with an uneasy truce that would have fateful geopolitical implications in the years to come.

General Douglas MacArthur's military upbringing as well as successes in wars prior to the

Korean War gave him a reputation that made him an appropriate candidate for the head of the US Army. MacArthur was often described as “tall and handsome” (Kenney 11)—he was a formidable figure that was admired and respected by American citizens. MacArthur was described by one of his generals as “the picture of dignified self-confidence... [he had] eloquence and conviction in his voice... the logic of his arguments made it difficult for those who had come prepared to heckle him” (Kenney 25-26). MacArthur was admired by those working under him, saying that he “leads—he does not drive... you never feel that he has given you a direct order to do something” (Kenney 63-64). The son of a colorful father, MacArthur was surrounded by military his entire life. At 19, he entered the military academy at West Point, finishing head of his class, prompting his future success as a General. MacArthur’s first taste of military success came in 1905, when, during the Russo-Japanese war, he took part in a charge imperative to the success of the war at the Battle of Mukden (Kenney 14). Capturing a key Russian position, MacArthur’s reputation of being a “reckless exposure to danger” (Kenney 16) began. The news of his success spread, resulting in Hoover’s appointment of MacArthur to the Chief of Staff of the US Army on November 21, 1930. At age 50, he became the youngest man to ever hold that position, illustrating the consensus among military officials that he was fit to hold higher-authority positions, even though he was known for being demanding and impulsive, as demonstrated in the Russo-Japanese War.

MacArthur’s brass became apparent when working under President Roosevelt, Truman’s predecessor. Under Roosevelt, MacArthur was given a budget of \$196 million to distribute for military use. However, during an appointment with Roosevelt, Truman explained how he would have to cut rations for soldiers in half in order to stay within the appointed budget, threatening Roosevelt with his influence over public opinion, something Roosevelt valued greatly as a President with a second term

election to consider (Clayton 23). Roosevelt granted MacArthur more money from the national budget to ensure that soldiers were getting their proper rations and to save himself from having to deal with more social unrest. MacArthur's manipulative strategy in acquiring more of the national budget was indicative of his growing influence within the government, something that Truman would feel threatened by in years to come.

MacArthur's authoritative role in the military during Truman's presidency clashed with Truman's power; the two being diametrically opposed affected the way Truman communicated with MacArthur. Truman, the son of a Missouri farmer, did not attend college. While his friends attended the local state University, Truman took courses towards a law degree at night but never completed his degree (Hamby 17-18). During World War I, Truman was denied entry into the US Military Academy at West Point because of his poor eyesight (Hamby 18), but eventually worked his way up until he was named a captain of the army. Truman, a true Jacksonian Democrat, valued the common man's role in government, and used this in his platform when running for Vice President with Roosevelt in 1945 (Hamby 19). After Roosevelt's sudden death in April 1945, Truman decided to keep the members of Roosevelt's cabinet, but made it clear that he would be the one making decisions; he made a special effort to ensure that he was ultimately the one who controlled the decisions made in government (Hamby 20). It was the violation of that very principle that would later compel Truman to take drastic action.

The fear of being looked at as "one of those crazy politicians" (Pearlman 2) who was responsible for losing the war altered how Truman approached his relationship with MacArthur, whom he clearly despised. Truman was prone to deliver blistering personal attacks against MacArthur, including a rant in 1945 about "Mr. Prima Donna, Brass Hat Five Star MacArthur" (Pearlman 2). Surprisingly, however, after the Korean War he wrote that he "leaned over backward in our respect for

the man's military reputation" (Pearlman 2) when discussing his appointment for Chief of Staff, explaining how he was simply "one of the outstanding military figures of our time." (Pearlman 2). Truman explained how he, as well as the rest of his administration, was blinded by MacArthur's military reputation from seeing the true nature of his leadership when granting him higher authority in the military. However, Truman recognized that MacArthur deserved the utmost respect, even if they had their own personal disagreements.

Truman's foreign policy objectives for both the Korean War and the Cold War were codified in the top-secret National Security Council Paper No. 68 (NSC-68) . Signed by Truman in the first year of the war, NSC-68 established clear goals for the Truman administration, calling for increased peacetime military spending. The policy of containment had become a prevalent issue during the war, with the US viewing the Korean War as " Communism's scheme to dominate the world" (Dvorchak 35). With this paper, Truman noted that "the nation must be determined, at whatever cost or sacrifice, [to defend democracy] at home or abroad" (Dvorchak 35). Because it became imperative for the US government to defend democracy, Truman began to ask Congress for more funds and soldiers; within a few years, the US had begun to spend 15% of the gross national product on the military alone (Dvorchak 36). Calling for more troops and money to be put into the military, NSC-68 heightened the importance of military within the government, which gave MacArthur, the leader of the military, more influence than he had before.

The introduction of the NSC-68 highlighted the fundamental disagreement between the two men; the policy of containment and how it should be applied. Unlike MacArthur, Truman wanted to focus on containing Communism rather than eliminating it. On March 12, 1947, Truman addressed Congress and elucidated what is now known as the Truman Doctrine. In this speech, Truman declared

it to be the foreign policy of the United States to support any country that was threatened by Communism, stating that, “it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressure” (The Truman Doctrine). However, Truman made it very clear that he did not want to eliminate Communism completely, rather, he wanted to protect free nations from Communism by helping them, “maintain their freedoms” (Truman). MacArthur, however, did not agree with Truman’s policy of containment, and instead believed that the best option in Korea was to completely eliminate Communism in Korea (Dvorchak 41). MacArthur argued in a letter to Representative Joseph W. Martin, “If we lose the war to Communism in Asia the fall of Europe is inevitable, win it and Europe most probably would avoid war and yet preserve freedom” (Dvorchak 55), expressing his concern for not completely overthrowing Communism in Asia. The fundamental difference between Truman and MacArthur’s approaches to Communism and containment created the rift that ultimately led to MacArthur’s dismissal. Being one of the major motives for the US’s involvement in the war, containment was a tactical disagreement between the two of the highest importance. The fundamental differences between their approaches hindered communication and trust between the two, and prompted the failures in Korea that would proceed.

MacArthur’s challenges to Truman’s authority paid off at the Battle of Incheon; a decisive victory for the UN, it reversed roles with the North Koreans and providing MacArthur with a victory despite his differences with Truman’s administration. The victory at Inchon led to the recapture of Seoul, the capital of South Korea, and also a key symbol of democracy in the Koreas. The planned date to take Seoul was mid-October, but MacArthur made the executive decision to advance the date of the advance to September 15. MacArthur’s rationale for this change was unusual: “Late in Aug[ust], flying

over Korea, I looked out the window and saw what I believed was one of the best rice crops the country had ever had... I decided I wanted the South Koreans to harvest that rice” (211 Kenney). Based solely on his desire to have the rice harvest, the move of the date was strongly discouraged by the vast majority of staff and commanders. They were worried about what China would do under the circumstances of their early attack. The soldiers, however, praised MacArthur, saying that it was a “far-seeing decision of a statesman, a great humanitarian, and, above all, a man who realized what the real problem is in the Orient” (211 Kenney). Although praised by his soldiers as a humanitarian, his advisors sought more realistic and conservative measures. Still, MacArthur ignored the unanimous opinion of his advisors and went in early at Seoul.

By the end of the Battle of Incheon, UN forces had recaptured Seoul, a crucial victory in the war as it partially severed Communist supply lines running through the city (Pearlman 145). However, MacArthur’s decision to go in early even though the entirety of his staff disagreed with him exacerbated the strain between him and the Truman administration, weakening their trust in MacArthur’s abilities as General. The relations with China, Japan, and the Soviet Union were all delicate; any extreme movements from MacArthur could have been devastating. Washington understood the importance of these relationships, but did not trust MacArthur to handle the situation delicately because he had ignored their advice in the past (Pearlman 160). Tactically, MacArthur’s insubordination created problems for Truman; their disagreements would create confusion in future battles such as the “Big Bug-Out”.

The Battle of Incheon was not the first time MacArthur had gone against what was advised by the President’s inner circle; during World War II MacArthur made another decision that ignored the advice of his advisors. While working as a general, MacArthur again rejected the advice of colleagues to pursue his own agenda. MacArthur’s proposed “Steal” of Admiralties on Feb 29, 1944 was

unauthorized, but MacArthur ignored those who opposed him and “ruthlessly brushed aside arguments that [the US army] had already outrun capabilities of supply system” (Kenney 215) and decided to invade. MacArthur was victorious, and the Allied victory completed the isolation of the major Japanese base at Rabaul, which had been the objective of 1942 and 1943. Although MacArthur’s decision became a decisive victory for the Allies, it was an early sign of MacArthur’s effrontery when in charge.

MacArthur’s perceived success at Incheon gave him the confidence to proceed forward past the 38th parallel, creating the great failure of the “Big Bug-Out”, which heightened tensions between Truman and MacArthur, leading Truman to question MacArthur’s judgement throughout the rest of MacArthur’s leadership in the war. In November of 1950, the Chinese, threatened by MacArthur’s most recent offensive move that pushed UN forces to the Yalu river, attacked, and, “seemed to come out of nowhere” (Dvorchak 113); they swarmed around UN flanks and over the defensive positions of UN troops. The UN’s 8th army’s right flank collapsed, leading the UN army to complete disarray that created the “Big Bug-out”, the complete withdrawal of the UN army during extremely cold weather. The panicked UN forces fled south, employing the “scorched earth” strategy that denied the advancing of enemy food, clothing, shelter, and transport. Villages were burned, factories were demolished, and bridges were blown up. Pyongyang, the only communist capital ever to be captured by free world forces, was abandoned on December 5, 1950. Truman, however, stated that UN forces “had no intention of abandoning their mission in Korea” (Dvorchak 116), marking the beginning of peace talks between China and the US.

After the “Big Bug-Out,” Truman abandoned the goal of unifying Korea and expressed an eagerness to negotiate with North Korea and its Communist allies. MacArthur, however, continued to advocate for an escalation. He encouraged the blockade of China and for the bringing of Chinese

Nationalists from Taiwan into the war in addition with among other “all-out measures” (Dvorchak 117) such as continuing to press forward in Korea rather than staying on the defensive. The “Big Bug-out” enhanced tensions between Truman and MacArthur; the incredible loss under MacArthur exposed their differing approaches to resolving the war; while MacArthur wanted to continue moving troops forward, Truman believed that diplomacy was the best option. After MacArthur’s dismissal, Truman wrote:

“I should have relieved General MacArthur then and there [after Big Bug-Out]. The reason I did not is that I didn’t want to appear as if he were being relieved because the offensive failed. I have never believed in going back on people when luck is against them, and I did not intend to do it now... No one is blaming General MacArthur... for the failure of the November offensive... [but] I do blame General MacArthur for the manner in which he tried to excuse his failure” (Dvorchak 117).

MacArthur had tried to excuse his failure by suggesting an even more aggressive approach, rather than accepting his loss and looking for other means of peace as opposed to looking for redemption in more bloody battles. Furthermore, MacArthur’s strategy of pressing forward in Korea had failed; although his strike at Incheon was successful, MacArthur’s second attempt at an offensive did not yield the same results. Though MacArthur had clashed with Truman frequently, this time, significantly, it was a conflict of strategy, not of personality, that opened up a rift between the two. MacArthur’s failures coupled with his insubordination caused Truman to re-question his leadership ability.

Especially after the Big Bug-Out, Truman and MacArthur varied on their opinions about how to approach foreign policy. Late in 1950, MacArthur demanded more troops, insisting that the Chinese objective was the “complete destruction of UN forces and the securing of all of Korea” (Dvorchak 117). MacArthur renewed his previous suggestion of using three divisions of Chinese nationalists from Taiwan, hoping to spark a revolution against the Communist government. Truman, however, believed that the remnants of Chiang Kai-Shek’s army would be of dubious value and used “in the wrong war at the wrong time” (Pearlman 73), so Washington denied MacArthur’s request, fearing broadening the war

with China. Washington understood that relations with China were delicate, and wanted to be diplomatic as opposed to militaristic. Washington also denied MacArthur permission to bomb Chinese sanctuaries in Manchuria out of fear of expanding the strain on the US-Chinese relations. The Truman administration favored a more conservative military approach, focusing on diplomacy in the midst of MacArthur's aggressive and numerous plans for the UN forces. The Truman administration was also generally less extreme; they feared that a military approach that was too aggressive would have disastrous effects on foreign relations with China and the Soviet Union. MacArthur took the more radical stance; he insisted taking all means necessary to win (Dvorchak 115). Truman understood that at stake was the very narrow line between war and peace.

The rift in their war strategies, in addition to their personalities, became very apparent as the war continued. In December of 1950, MacArthur claimed he was, "[forced to fight with] an enormous handicap... without precedent in military history" (Dvorchak 117). Truman put many restrictions on MacArthur and disapproved his ideas, such as his attempt to use the remnants of Chiang Kai-Shek's army, forcing MacArthur into the more conservative route in his strategy in Korea. MacArthur also did not like Truman's personality, explaining how he had "violent temper and paroxysms of ungovernable rage" when discussing with others plans for Korea (MacArthur 393). Truman detested MacArthur as well, stating that he was confused as to how the US Army could "produce men such as Robert E. Lee, John J. Pershing, Eisenhower and Bradley and at the same time produce Custers, Pattons and MacArthur" (Pearlman 18). Truman compared him harshly to the generals known as failures; Custer and Patton were both notorious for their big egos yet little success. Truman believed that MacArthur had no potential to be a successful general and no success in the Korean War to back up his ego.

Nuclear weapons were a very controversial topic, as they had never been used in a war before,

and Truman saw this as an opportunity to blame MacArthur for any major decisions made regarding the settled his declining popularity temporarily. After he was asked whether the bomb would be used against military objectives or civilian, Truman responded, "It's a matter that the military people will have to decide. I'm not a military authority that passes on those things...The military commander in the field will have charge of the use of the weapons, as he always has", implying that MacArthur, the military commander in the field, was responsible for their use as opposed to Truman himself (Truman). However, Truman was forced to take back what he said in the news conference after his statement generated much controversy and "ignited a political and diplomatic crisis of the first order" (Dingman 66), furthering Truman and MacArthur's power struggle. The Joint Chiefs of Staff came out with a statement to clear the confusion, explaining that the only logical use of nuclear weapons for the US would be to protect the evacuation of UN troops, and other than that the US had no intention of using them (Dvorchak 143). Furthermore, the UN commander felt as though the ground situation in Korea was stabilizing, and advised postponing any nuclear decisions to make room for possible diplomatic talks. Because of Truman and MacArthur's conflict over the use of nuclear weapons, other leaders in the Korean war were forced to get involved, creating even more controversy in Washington and polarizing even further the two sides of the argument.

After the UN commander's statement, the restraint at the State Department against using nuclear material became more evident. Second-level officials became involved in the strife, coming out with statements that they, "considered but rejected using nuclear weapons in Korea" (Dingman 67) because they wanted to promote diplomatic discussions as opposed to destroy them. For many politicians in Washington, the UN commander's suggestion was appealing because it avoided war with China and the Soviet Union. As more politicians in Washington began to agree with Truman's ideas of

diplomacy over aggression, MacArthur became more isolated in his beliefs.

The final time nuclear weapons were considered in the Korean War divided Washington and polarized Truman and MacArthur even further. In April of 1951, Truman “picked up his Nuclear Weapons for the final time” (Dingman 69). The fighting in Korea had taken a dangerous new turn, with the Chinese appearing to be preparing a massive attack on the UN forces. US intelligence also suggested that Moscow had also moved into fighting position. Washington was divided about the situation; some doubted that the enemy would negotiate. MacArthur was adamant about maintaining a strong position in Korea, using military and economic pressures to pressure them into negotiation (Alperovitz 244). Without consulting Truman, MacArthur warned China that the UN might attack, enraging the President as well as his senior civilian advisors (Dingman 70). Truman, as well as all of Washington, was very sensitive about handling foreign relations, whereas MacArthur focused less on the importance of diplomatic relations and rather being an intimidating force against the Chinese. Truman and MacArthur’s varying approaches to the delicate nuclear foreign relations enraged Truman, leading him to believe that MacArthur had no respect for him.

MacArthur’s statement made towards the Chinese made Truman appear weak and indecisive to the general public. His popularity dropped greatly, and his relationship with Congress became, “a danger to national security” —without the support of the legislature, decision making would be challenging and would take more time (Dingman 70). Consequently, the cabinet became more restrictive on MacArthur, believing that he was the source of Truman’s problems with Congress. The Chiefs of Staff had also opposed any major advance beyond the 38th parallel, making MacArthur one of very few that still supported an offensive attack into North Korea. MacArthur continued forward, however, leading UN troops across the 38th parallel on April 4th, 1951. Washington fell into further discord.

MacArthur pushed for the strategy of “talking tough” (Dingman 71) with Russia, but many feared losing valuable allies and ruining the chance of future peace talks. MacArthur let no one impede his push forward, telling the public that there is, “no substitute for victory” (Dingman 72) in Korea. Truman saw this as a challenge to his authority, which was already shaky in the midst of war strategy controversy in Congress. Truman took this challenge and used it to fuel his ever-growing hatred of MacArthur; MacArthur was a challenge to his political authority and thus must be dealt with.

The controversy over a settlement to end the war ultimately led to MacArthur’s downfall as General during the war. In March of 1951, the US began preparing to discuss conditions for a settlement in the UN. But prior to these discussions, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, valuing MacArthur’s opinion, sought out his thoughts on how to approach a peace settlement. In a letter to MacArthur, the Joint Chiefs of Staff wrote, “Strong UN feeling persists that further diplomatic efforts towards settlement should be made before any advance with forces North of 38th parallel. Time may be required to determine diplomatic reaction” (Dvorchak 197). However, rather than agreeing with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, MacArthur’s brazen response shocked the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who had once supported MacArthur. MacArthur responded that he, “recommend[s] no further military restrictions be imposed upon the UN command in Korea. The inhibitions which already exist should not be increased” (198 Dvorchak). MacArthur did not want to talk with North Korea and the UN diplomatically, but instead, he wanted to control the army with no restrictions whatsoever. Truman saw the response as a threat to his own authority, and believed that MacArthur had gone too far with his ideas. On April 5, 1951, the letter from MacArthur was read to the House of Representatives, in which he declared that he wanted no restrictions on his military control and that there was no substitute for complete victory. Truman, backed by most of Congress, relieved him of command a few days after. Truman later came out with a

statement saying, “We are trying to prevent a world war—not to start one” (Pearlman 77). Although MacArthur was still seen as a hero when he returned, his extremely aggressive strategy in Korea did not agree with Truman and the UN, leading him to his dismissal.

Truman and MacArthur’s negative views of each other fueled their feud; however, their varying tactical strategies on how to approach the Korean War, not their oppositional personalities, was the primary impetus leading to MacArthur’s dismissal. The inevitable firing of MacArthur came in a speech announced via radio to the American public. In a move surprising for someone who clashed with MacArthur for so long, Truman expressed contrition for the actions he felt obligated to take: “It was with the deepest personal regret that I found myself compelled to take this action. General MacArthur is one of our greatest military commanders. But the cause of world peace is more important than any individual” (Radio Speech). In spite of their personal animosity, Truman treated MacArthur with respect and esteem, even praising him as one of the greatest generals the US has ever had. But ultimately, it was the strategic disagreements that were the cause of MacArthur’s downfall; Truman could not put these differences aside out of respect for MacArthur. In his radio speech, Truman explained, “we are trying to prevent a third world war... the cause of world peace is more important than any individual” (Radio Speech). Despite his heated criticism at times, Truman still greatly respected MacArthur, Truman could not put MacArthur’s reputation before the interests of the people.

In the years following MacArthur’s dismissal, UN forces and Communist forces were held at a stalemate until finally an armistice was reached in 1953, when Dwight B. Eisenhower took the presidency. Calling for the return to the 38th parallel, the armistice also created a demilitarized zone between the two countries. Although many criticized Truman for not using nuclear weapons and not expanding the war into China, doing so could have easily precipitated World War III. Truman’s

decision to stay more conservative during the Korean War saved the United States from expanding the war on a worldly scale.

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