

Background Essay on the Korean War



Truman Presidential
Museum & Library

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 38th 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.

Source 1

Truman Library, Box, (45) MacArthur Dismissal, Box 1 of 1, Orange. 1-10, pg 1: "Home by Christmas" by General Douglas MacArthur, November 28, 1950.

"Home by Christmas" by General Douglas MacArthur, November 28, 1950

"Home by Christmas" statement
by General MacArthur, November 28, 1950.

The Associated Press had reported last Friday that General MacArthur discussed the campaign with Major General John B. Coulter and remarked, with a smile:

"You tell the boys that when they get to the Yalu (River) they are going home. I want to make good on my statement that they are going to eat Christmas dinner at home."

- - Washington Evening Star,
November 29, 1950

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Using Source 1

Sourcing Questions 1. Who wrote this?	
Contextualization Questions 1. When was this document written? 2. What event was taking place when the document was created?	
Corroboration Tasks 1. Describe the author's tone in this document.	
Close Reading Questions 1. What claim does the author make?	

Source 2

Statement by the President on His Meeting with General MacArthur at Wake Island

October 15, 1950

Primarily we talked about the problems in Korea which are General MacArthur's most pressing responsibilities. I asked him for information on the military aspects. I got from him a clear picture of the heroism and high capacity of the United Nations forces under his command. We also discussed the steps necessary to bring peace and security to the area as rapidly as possible in accordance with the intent of the resolution of the United Nations General Assembly and in order to get our armed forces out of Korea as soon as their United Nations mission is completed.

Meanwhile, I can say I was greatly impressed with what General MacArthur and Ambassador Muccio told me about what has already been done and is now being done to bring order out of chaos and to restore to the Korean people the chance for a good life in peace. For example, the main rail line from Inchon to Suwon was open to rail traffic in less than 10 days after the Inchon landing. The rail line from Pusan to the west bank of the Han River opposite Seoul was open to one-way rail traffic about October 8th. Bridge and highway reconstruction is progressing rapidly. Power and the water supply in Seoul were reestablished within a week after the reentry into the capital. General MacArthur paid a particularly fine tribute to the service being rendered in Korea by Ambassador Muccio.

Using Source 2

Sourcing Questions 1. Who is the author?	
Contextualization Questions 1. When was this document written?	
Corroboration Tasks 1. What is the author's tone in this document?	
Close Reading Questions 1. What is Harry S. Truman's attitude toward Macarthur?	

Source 3

Praise to MacArthur from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, September 29, 1950.

DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
STAFF MESSAGE CENTER

OPERATIONAL OUTGOING CLEAR MESSAGE

JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF
M A STEPHENS CAPT USN
55234

TO: CINCPAC TOKYO JAPAN

NR: JCS 46085

29 Sep 50

From JCS for MacArthur.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff are proud of the great successes you have achieved. We realized that they would have been impossible without brilliant and audacious leadership and without the full coordination and the fighting spirit of all forces and all arms. From the sudden initiation of hostilities you have exploited to the utmost all capabilities and opportunities. Your transition from defensive to offensive operations was magnificently planned, timed and executed. You have given new inspiration to the freedom-loving peoples of the world. We remain completely confident that the great task entrusted to you by the United Nations will be carried to a successful conclusion.

ORIGIN: JCS

DISTR: CSAF, CSA, CNO

MC OUT 46085

(Sep 50) DTG: 291649Z rae

UNCLASSIFIED

Using Source 3

Sourcing Questions 1. Who wrote this document and why?	
Contextualization Questions 1. When was the document written? Where was the document written?	
Corroboration Tasks 1. What is the tone of this document?	
Close Reading Questions 1. What is the author's feelings toward Macarthur?	

Source 4

Excerpts - Record of Phone Calls Regarding the Dismissal of General Douglas MacArthur, ca. April 1951. Official File, Truman Papers.

Mrs. David Gottlieb called to congratulate President on action taken re MacArthur (81 Galveston St., S.W., Wash., D.C.)

Mrs. Rierdon of Covington, Va., thinks the President is a traitor to his country because of the removal of MacArthur. Says "as of now I am a Republican".

Mr. Joseph Buegeleisen of Detroit telephoned and wanted the President to have the following message: "Your removal of General MacArthur was necessary if we are to maintain our form of Government. We applaud you. Sgd. Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Buegeleisen, 3308 Glendale, Detroit, Michigan." He said he wanted the President to know that they were behind him before he went on the air. ers

Charles Ginsberg, Denver, Colorado, telephoned and said he is a very close friend of Secretary Chapman's. He wanted to congratulate the President on his stand and tell him what a fine talk he had given. He said now the people had the real objectives in mind and after the initial protest would get behind him. He said he had not always agreed with the President but now was 100% for him. ers

William L. Bailey, (colored) 1829 Corcoran St., N. W., telephoned to say that the President is a great President, a great man and a man inspired by God. Says he is surprised at the reaction of well thinking people.

Mr. Edward D. Richards, 224 Jefferson St., N.W., Wash. a veteran of World War II called just after the MacArthur speech to Congress to say that in his opinion Mr. Truman and Mr. Acheson are the biggest menace to national security that the country has ever known. acm

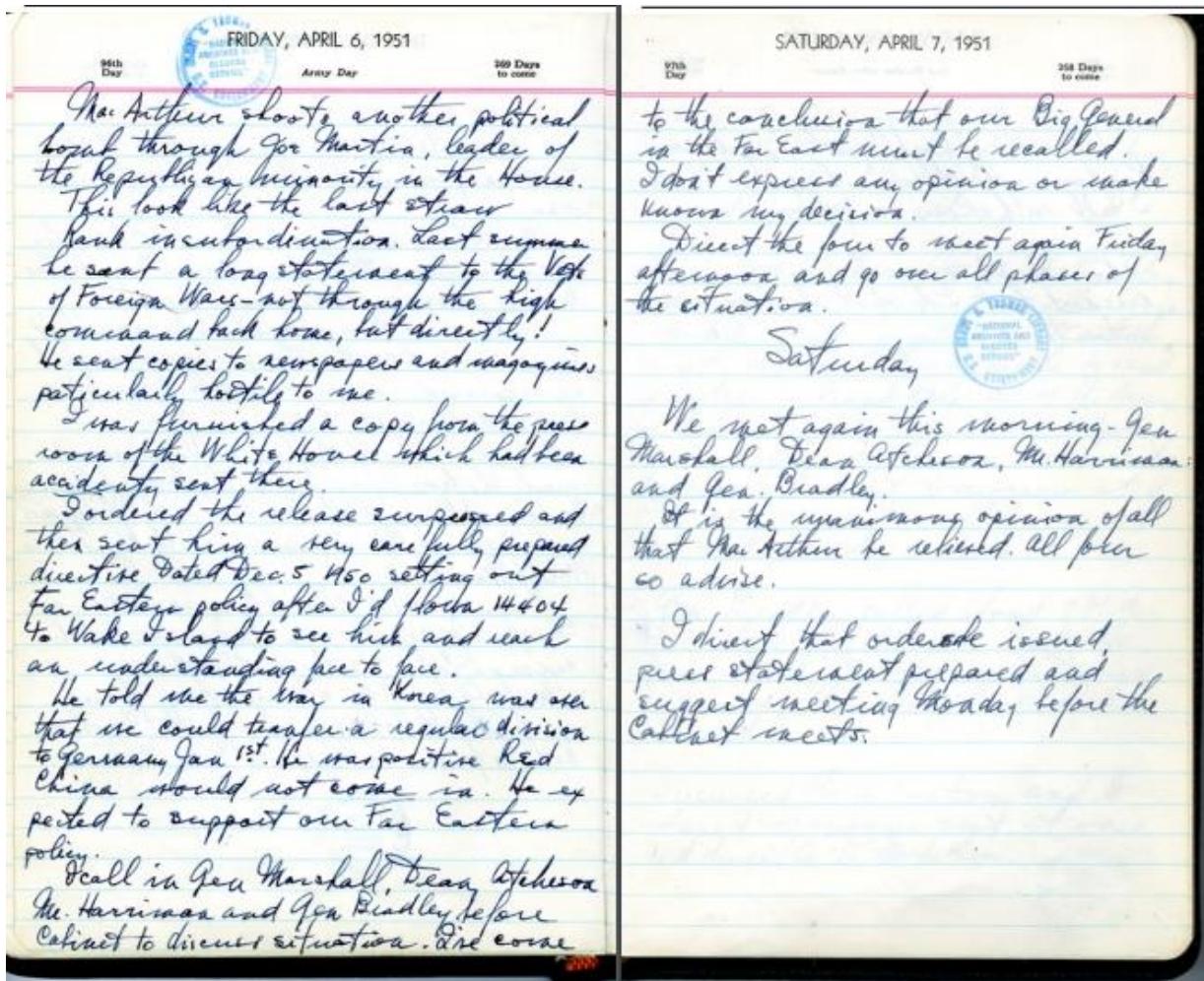
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Using Source 4

Sourcing Questions 1. When did these phone calls occur?	
Contextualization Questions 1. What influenced these people to call the president?	
Corroboration Tasks 1. What are some the differences in the messages?	
Close Reading Questions 1. How does the language used indicate which side the person is on?	

Source 5

Diary entry of Truman on April 6, 1951.



Friday, April 6, 1951

MacArthur shoots another political bomb through Joe Martin, leader of the Republican minority in the House.

This looks like the last straw. Rank insubordination. Last summer he sent a long statement to the Vets of Foreign Wars - not through the high command back home, but directly! He sent copies to newspapers and magazines particularly hostile to me. I was furnished a copy from the press room of the White House which had been accidentally [sic] sent there.

I ordered the release suppressed and then sent him a very carefully prepared directive dated Dec 5 1950 setting out Far Eastern policy after I'd flown 14404 to Wake Island to see him and reach an understanding face to face. He told me the war in Korea was over that we could transfer a regular division to Germany Jan 1st. He was positive Red China would not come in. He expected to support our Far Eastern

policy.

I call in Gen. Marshall, Dean Acheson [sic] Mr. Harriman and Gen Bradley before Cabinet to discuss situation. I've come to the conclusion that our Big General in the Far East must be recalled. I don't express any opinion or make known my decision. Direct the four to meet again Friday afternoon and go over all phases of the situation.

Saturday, April 7, 1951

We met again this morning - Gen Marshall, Dean Acheson [sic], Mr. Harriman and Gen. Bradley. It is the unanimous opinion of all that MacArthur be relieved. All four so advise. I direct that order be issued, press statement prepared and suggest meeting Monday before the Cabinet meets.

Using Source 5

Sourcing Questions 1. Who is the author?	
Contextualization Questions 1. Who was the audience this was intended?	
Corroboration Tasks 1. How is this different from the other documents?	
Close Reading Questions 1. What words or phrases gives you the opinion of the author?	

Source 6

Truman Library, Box, (45) MacArthur Dismissal, Box 1 of 1, Orange. Folder 2-10, pg 7:
Excerpt - Transcript of General MacArthur's address to congress, April 19, 1951.

AP STENOGRAPHIC TRANSCRIPT OF GENERAL MacARTHUR'S ADDRESS
TO CONGRESS, APRIL 19, 1951, AS CHECKED AGAINST OFFICIAL
RECORD.



Mr. President, Mr. Speaker and Distinguished Members of the
Congress:

In war there can be no substitute for victory.

There are some who for varying reasons would appease Red China. They are blind to history's clear lesson, for history teaches with unmistakable emphasis that appeasement but begets new and bloodier wars. It points to no single instance where this end has justified that means, where appeasement has led to more than a sham peace. Like blackmail, it lays the basis for new and successively greater demands until, as in blackmail, violence becomes the only other alternative. Why, my soldiers asked me, surrender military advantages to an enemy in the field? I could not answer.

Some may say to avoid spread of the conflict into an all-out war with China. Others, to avoid Soviet intervention. Neither explanation seems valid, for China is already engaging with the maximum power it can commit, and the Soviet will not necessarily mesh its actions with our moves. Like a cobra, any new enemy, will more likely strike whenever it feels that the relativity of military and other potentialities is in its favor on a world-wide basis.

I have just left your fighting sons in Korea. They have done their best there, and I can report to you without reservation that they are splendid in every way.

Using Source 6

Sourcing Questions 1. Who is the author?	
Contextualization Questions 1. When was this written and for what audience?	
Corroboration Tasks 1. How is this document different and similar to the others?	
Close Reading Questions 1. What words or phrases give you a clue as to the attitude of the author?	

Source 7

BUHITE, Russell. The dynamics of world power, A documentary of United States foreign policy (1945-1973). SCHLESINGER, Arthur M. Jr. (sous la dir.). Volume IV: The Far East. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1973. 859 p. ISBN 0-07-079729-3. p. 401.

http://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/1999/1/1/2dee57c6-52f6-4ef7-87dc-489085a99b78/publishable_en.pdf

Excerpt - On March 20, 1951, General MacArthur explains in a letter to Joseph W. Martin, Member of the US Congress, that peace in Europe depends on the outcome of the Korean War

While I was not consulted prior to the President's decision to intervene in support of the Republic of Korea, that decision from a military standpoint, proved a sound one. As I said, it proved to be a sound one, as we hurled back the invader and decimated his forces. Our victory was complete, and our objectives within reach, when Red China intervened with numerically superior ground forces.

This created a new war and an entirely new situation, a situation not contemplated when our forces were committed against the North Korean invaders; a situation which called for new decisions in the diplomatic sphere to permit the realistic adjustment of military strategy. Such decisions have not been forthcoming.

I called for reinforcements, but was informed that reinforcements were not available. I made clear that if not permitted to destroy the enemy built-up bases north of the Yalu, if not permitted to utilize the friendly Chinese Force of some 600,000 men on Formosa, if not permitted to blockade the China coast to prevent the Chinese Reds from getting succor from without, and if there was to be no hope of major reinforcements, the position of the command from the military standpoint forbade victory.

We could hold in Korea by constant maneuver and in an approximate area where our supply line advantages were in balance with the supply line disadvantages of the enemy, but we could hope at best for only an indecisive campaign with its terrible and constant attrition upon our forces if the enemy utilized its full military potential.

I have constantly called for the new political decisions essential to a solution.

Efforts have been made to distort my position. It has been said in effect that I was a warmonger. Nothing could be further from the truth.

I am closing my 52 years of military service. When I joined the Army, even before the turn of the century, it was the fulfillment of all of my boyish hopes and dreams. The world has turned over many times since I took the oath at West Point, and the hopes and dreams have all since vanished, but I still remember the refrain of one of the most popular barracks ballads of that day which proclaimed most proudly that old soldiers never die; they just fade away. And like the old soldier of that ballad, I now close my military career and just fade away, an old soldier who tried to do his duty as God gave him the light to see that duty. Good Bye.

Using Source 7

Sourcing Questions 1. Who is the author of this document?	
Contextualization Questions 1. Who was the audience it was written for?	
Corroboration Tasks 1. What is the difference in this document to the others?	
Close Reading Questions 1. What claim is the author making? What is the author's purpose for writing this?	

Source 8

Truman Library, Box (45) MacArthur Dismissal, Box 1 of 1, Orange. Folder 3-9, pg 1: letter from Harry Vaughn to Bruce, May 15, 1951.

Filed by
GEN. VAUGHN
JUN 26 1951

584

15 May 1951

Dear Mr. Bruce:

I have delayed answering your note of April 20th as I thought the action and testimony of General Marshall, General Bradley, and Secretary Pace would take care of the situation. General Marshall, as you know, was on the stand for seven days which was considerably longer than anyone had anticipated. General Bradley goes on this morning and I am sure he will make a fair and impartial statement of the facts. x/285 x/285-7 x/285-73

In your profession I am sure you are well acquainted with the emotional tendencies of the American people. They have to go on an emotional binge every now and then, and who can say it is not beneficial in the end.

x/386

Literally, billions of words have been spoken on both sides in the present controversy, much of it incorrect. The whole thing, when stripped down to basic facts, is that the Constitution makes the President responsible for the foreign policy of the United States; as he has the responsibility, he must make the decisions and give the orders and any subordinate who does not play on the team must sit on the bench. I know General MacArthur well and have a high regard for him as one of our greatest military figures. He has done a great job and deserves all the credit and plaudits that he is receiving.

I feel sure the country will get back to normal eventually and the truth will prevail.

I showed your letter to the President and he has asked me to thank you for taking the trouble to write.

Sincerely,

HARRY H. VAUGHAN
Major General, USAR
Military Aide to the President

x
Mr. Nigel Bruce
1030 North Analfi Drive
Pacific Palisades, California

Using Source 8

Sourcing Questions 1. Who wrote this letter?	
Contextualization Questions 1. When was the letter written?	
Corroboration Tasks 1. What sets this document apart from the others?	
Close Reading Questions 1. What is the author saying? What words or phrases gives you the attitude of the author?	

NAME: _____ DATE: _____

HOUR: _____



Directions: Place the documents in chronological order within the boxes. Include the name of the author and describe the general attitude or tone of the document.
