



Harry Truman, the Firing of Douglas MacArthur, and Integrity

Handout A: Narrative

BACKGROUND

On June 24, 1950, North Koreans, led by communist dictator Kim Il-sung, invaded South Korea. President Harry S. Truman was resolved to stop communism from spreading. With the support of the American people, he went before the United Nations to ask for support in defending the South Koreans. In all, 20 countries would join the United States in attempting to stop the North Korean attack.

Truman's commander in Korea was General Douglas MacArthur, who was once the Superintendent of the United States Military Academy at West Point, and, before World War II, was the Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army. MacArthur was well-loved as a hero of the Pacific Theater during World War II. He had won the Medal of Honor for his leadership there, and was responsible for rebuilding Japan after the war.

Just as the situation seemed most dire in the Korean War, MacArthur devised a daring sea landing at Inchon, Korea, which helped turn the tide for the United Nations forces. This surprise offensive pushed the North Koreans almost all the way back to the Chinese border. After many difficult battles, a ceasefire was declared almost three years later, but not before President Truman needed to make a difficult choice concerning MacArthur.

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Harry S. Truman was born on May 8, 1884, on a small farm in Lamar, Missouri. While growing up, he developed a passion for politics and eventually made connections with the Kansas City Democratic Machine run by "Boss" Thomas J. Pendergast. Truman wanted to go to West Point, but was rejected because of poor eyesight. He later joined the Missouri National Guard and when the U.S. entered World War I, he earned the rank of Captain of an artillery unit. While fighting in France, not a single man died under his command.

Harry Truman understood that integrity equaled strength. Despite a business failure after the war, Truman did not give up. He entered politics, working with the Pendergast Machine in Kansas City, and eventually became Chief Judge and County Administrator of Jackson County, Missouri. There, he earned a reputation for hard work and honesty by building new roads and public buildings without any corruption.

Truman's reputation for integrity ultimately opened the door for a chance to run for the U.S. Senate, and he was elected in 1934. He was well respected and liked by his fellow senators as he was a man of honor. In 1944, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt prepared to run for an

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unprecedented fourth term, choosing Truman to be his running mate. The duo easily defeated their Republican opponents, but Roosevelt died only 82 days into his term. Truman suddenly found himself thrust into leading the nation through World War II as the 33rd president of the United States.

Truman wanted to run his administration with integrity. “A person who is fundamentally honest,” he said, “doesn’t need a code of ethics.” In his day, there was a common saying: “pass the buck.” This would occur when things went wrong and the person responsible passed the blame onto someone else. Truman despised this, and he had a sign in the Oval Office that read “The Buck Stops Here.”

It wasn’t easy to step into the shoes of leadership and follow someone as popular as Franklin Roosevelt. Truman needed to be brought up to speed on every facet of World War II. After victory in Europe, he met with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin in Potsdam, Germany, where they discussed continuing the war against Japan. Ultimately, Truman decided to use the atomic bomb against Japan in order to end the war.

After World War II ended, Truman dedicated his administration to maintaining peace. His goal was to stop the spread of communism while keeping the Cold War from turning into a third world war. It was this strategy that led Truman to become involved in Korea.

Truman’s commander in Korea, General Douglas MacArthur, was a man of great intellect and outstanding courage, but he possessed some flaws. Unlike Truman, MacArthur never surrounded himself with anyone who might disagree with him. In the military, people of superior rank require those beneath them to follow their orders. On a battlefield, anyone who does not follow orders might cause others to die. MacArthur’s flaw was that he forgot how to take orders, especially when no one ever dared disagree with him. This inability to hear he was wrong and a strong sense of superiority ultimately led to tension between the president and his leading general.

The Constitution makes the president the commander-in-chief of all military forces of the United States. This means that a civilian leader who is elected by the American people controls the military, not professional generals. When President Truman met General MacArthur on Wake Island during the Korean War—the only time the two ever were face-to-face—the general did not salute the president. He did not see the commander-in-chief as his superior.

MacArthur later gave a speech in which he threatened to use Taiwanese forces to fight in Korea. Taiwan was once a part of China, but separated itself in order to avoid being under communist rule. Truman did not want Taiwan to get involved as it might provoke China. Hoping to avoid starting another world war, he ordered all military officers and diplomats not to make any statements to the press without first getting approval from the State Department.

In November 1950, China sent 280,000 troops into North Korea, shocking the U.S. and United Nations forces. MacArthur had earlier believed victory was imminent, and he split his forces into two groups. This weakened his defense and allowed Chinese forces to quickly advance and push U.S. and U.N. forces back. Politicians began to “pass the buck,” but Truman took responsibility as

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commander in chief. MacArthur, however, began to say that he wanted to attack China. Truman refused, believing this would lead widen the conflict and possibly start another world war.

Slowly, the situation on the Peninsula became more stable. As the Truman administration began to prepare to send a ceasefire offer to the Chinese, MacArthur issued a statement to the press in which he personally threatened to bomb and invade China. MacArthur did not receive permission to make this statement, and it directly violated Truman's orders.

Truman did not take this act of insubordination personally and he waited to hear the opinions of his military advisors. The Joint Chiefs decided unanimously to relieve Douglas MacArthur of his command. Truman knew that removing the popular General MacArthur from his position would anger many in the public, but he still fired the military officer. He understood that the Constitution established a system where the president, a civilian, served as commander-in-chief, not a military officer.

In April 1951, a poll revealed that 69 percent of Americans supported MacArthur. There were calls for Truman's impeachment in Congress, as well as in newspapers and television shows all over the nation. Despite the attacks, Truman remained nearly silent, having made his decision. He would not "pass the buck" and planned to accept whatever criticisms and insults came his way. "We do not want to widen the conflict," Truman said on the day he fired Douglas MacArthur.

Over time, the United States moved on, and even changed its mind on the firing of Douglas MacArthur. Truman decided to not run again as president, as he was looking forward to retirement as a private citizen. He died on December 5, 1972, at the ripe age of 88. Truman left behind a strong nation, made stronger by his integrity in the face of disobedience, insults, and criticisms.