

## Chapter 3

### The Korean War and General MacArthur

President Truman decided that the US could not afford to allow communist North Korea to overrun non-communist South Korea. His first action was to ask the Soviet Union to urge their client state to halt its attack and withdraw its forces. Truman's second step was to ask his ambassador to the UN to introduce a motion asking North Korea to desist its attack. When these measures failed the President ordered US forces to assist South Korean troops in stemming the tide of the invasion.

#### Rush to Combat

The US announced direct assistance to South Korea was announced on June 27, 1950, the same day the UN asked member countries to aid the Republic of [South] Korea (ROK). The next day US airplanes bombed North Korean troops. U.S. air support failed to stop the North Korean army which completed its capture of Seoul, the capitol of South Korea, on June 29. The next day Truman ordered U.S. ground forces into South Korea, and the first troops arrived on July 1st. Rushed into combat four days later, the troops were forced to retreat. On July 7th the UN created a united command, and Truman immediately appointed General Douglas MacArthur Commander of UN forces in Korea. Ultimately, sixteen countries, including the US and the ROK joined in the fighting, but the US supplied 2/3rds of the men, money and equipment. Along with South Korean troops, the US sustained the bulk of casualties. Altogether 33,629 US soldiers died in combat.

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are needed to see this picture.

**Major turning points of the Korean War before  
November, 1950**

## Pusan and Inchon

During the remainder of July, 1950, US troops were rushed into Korea in a desperate effort to halt the communist advance. Despite heroic and energetic resistance by the outnumbered US soldiers, the communist advance continued. Prodded by General Douglas MacArthur, General Walt H. Walker finally ordered his troops to stop retreating and hold their ground. Within a week, UN forces completed a long defense perimeter around Pusan in the southwest corner of Korea. A desperate struggle ensued as North Korean troops unsuccessfully hurled themselves against UN defenses. With reinforcements arriving daily, including troops from friendly countries, UN forces were able to mount a brief though unsuccessful counterattack.

Meanwhile General MacArthur was hatching a daring plan for a quick end to the war. Rather than rely on a breakout at Pusan leading to a prolonged drive to Seoul against a well-prepared adversary, MacArthur decided to land the bulk of his forces far behind enemy lines at Inchon, port city to Seoul, the South Korean capital. Since the ocean tide in this area reached a height of 31 feet, the invasion would involve a great risk, or in MacArthur's words, a 'desperate gamble.' The invaders would have to achieve complete surprise, and a sufficient force must be landed in a brief interval, and then wait 12 hours for the next high tide for reinforcements. Initially the US Joint Chief of Staff was totally opposed to the plan, but MacArthur persisted and at last won their grudging approval. The operation took place on September 15th. With a flotilla of 260 ships, MacArthur's invaders managed to avoid two typhoons, thread their way around a poorly arranged minefield and scale an unguarded seawall. Within three days the ill-prepared enemy was driven out of Inchon. Two weeks after the initial landing General MacArthur, accompanied by South Korean President Syngman Rhee, addressed the Korean parliament in Seoul. In the meantime, General Walker led US/UN forces in a breakout of the Pusan perimeter, and after some hard fighting began chasing the communists northward, and the 50,000 US/UN troops were preparing to cross the 38th parallel.



**Landing at Inchon**  
National Archives



**UN troops crossing the 38<sup>th</sup>**

At this point the Korean War might have been over. The main UN objective, freeing South Korea, had been achieved, the enemy was routed, and the South Korean government was re-established in its pre-war capital. But few decision makers in Washington, DC were ready to leave the table just as the food was being served. Truman, his advisors, MacArthur, and the victorious UN soldiers wanted to continue the war until all of North Korea was liberated. England and India were not so sure and wanted UN forces to stop their attack at the 38th parallel. But President Truman was able to push a resolution through the UN

which authorized an invasion of North Korea for the purpose of ensuring "conditions of stability throughout Korea." The Truman administration advised MacArthur to continue the attack unless there was a danger of China or the Soviet Union entering the war. General MacArthur assured Truman and the Joint Chiefs that intervention by China would result in a 'great slaughter' of Chinese troops.

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The march northward proceeded at breakneck pace. Convinced that a hasty attack would annihilate the remnants of the North Korean army, UN units competed with one another to see who could cover more territory and capture more enemy soldiers. In the process UN units were badly stretched out – far ahead of their supply lines, out of communication with one another, and often low on food, fuel, and ammunition. Repeated warnings by the Chinese that they would not tolerate UN forces approaching the Chinese border marked by the Yalu River were ignored.

Unbeknown to MacArthur, US intelligence, or UN forces, 3000,000 Chinese soldiers had slipped across the Yalu River and were preparing to attack UN forces. When the attack came on October 25th, UN troops were caught by surprised. But within 10 days, the Chinese were defeated and disappeared. MacArthur then planned an offensive that started on November 24th. A race to the Yalu River, which the

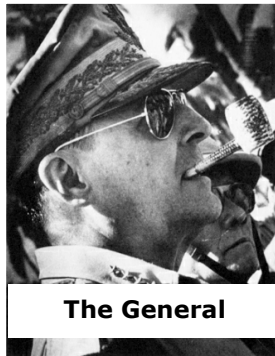


**US soldiers in combat in Korea**

general promised would end the war and bring UN troops home by Christmas, was initiated. But the Chinese counterattacked two days after Thanksgiving. Thousands of Chinese soldiers, who had remained undetected in North Korea, attacked the 250,000 man UN forces at night. "[S]warming over hills, blowing bugles and horns, shaking rattles...and shooting flares into the sky" the Chinese came on foot, totally surprising UN troops and forcing them to retreat hundreds of miles. Since the Chinese armies maneuvered and attacked after sunset, UN forces could not take advantage of their air superiority. Seoul fell for the second time on January 5th and yet the retreat continued for another 70 miles.

Finally, the death of 8th army commander Walt H. Walker and his replacement by Mathew Ridgeway helped to stem the retreat. By March, UN forces were in command once more, Seoul was liberated for the second time, and UN forces were once again approaching the 38th parallel.

## MacArthur Fired: the Issues and the Reaction



**The General**

From his command post in Japan General MacArthur blamed much of the defeat suffered by UN forces on the lack of support for his armies. MacArthur differed with the Truman administration on three major points:

1. MacArthur wanted to use nuclear weapons, which the US possessed in far larger numbers than the Soviets. However, Truman ruled this out because the US possessed too few nuclear bombs, the mountainous terrain would make them largely ineffective, and world opinion would not support such a move.
2. MacArthur wanted to bomb Chinese bases and factories in Manchuria, and destroy the bridges crossing the Yalu River from China to North Korea. He believed this would allow him to destroy enemy troop concentrations, prohibit enemy armies from entering Korea, and destroy the enemy's source of supplies. But Truman believed that the Chinese might bomb US airfields in Korea and aircraft carriers in Korean waters, and bombing China might increase Chinese hostilities and bring the Soviet Union into the war.
3. MacArthur wanted to allow Chiang Kai-shek's forces to invade mainland China which he hoped would trigger a revolution against the Communist government, or at least draw Chinese troops out of Korea. Truman opposed this plan for fear it would involve the US in a land war in Asia – the 'wrong war at the wrong time, the wrong place, and against the wrong enemy.'

4. In summation, MacArthur firmly believed that the main aim of any war was to win, and that victory meant the liberation of North Korea. Any half-hearted measure was no better than appeasement, and would allow the enemy to regroup and start another war as soon as US defenses were down. President Truman was determined to fight only a limited war in Asia for the purpose of containing aggression against South Korea, and did not want to risk WWII, or committing too many scarce resources in a strategically unimportant sector at the expense of opening Europe to Soviet attack.

*General MacArthur wanted a military victory – he did not believe in fighting with one hand tied behind his back. During the course of the war, MacArthur constantly pressured his government for more freedom to fight the war without restrictions, was constantly irritated by orders from Washington, and occasionally spoke out publicly against the government which limited his action. President Truman repeatedly told the General to obey orders and refrain from publicly criticizing his administration. Finally, on April 11, 1951, the President carried out a decision he had made several days earlier and relieved the General of his command.*

Truman's advisors had warned him that firing MacArthur would be a very unpopular decision. But they had no idea that Truman's action would unleash an overwhelming outpouring of support for MacArthur. Two-hundred and fifty thousand Japanese came out to wish the General well when he left Tokyo. One-hundred thousand gave him a hero's welcome when he arrived in Hawaii; crowds of 500,000 greeted the General in San Francisco, and the airport in Washington, D.C. was crowded at midnight when the General arrived at the Nation's capital.

Congress took the unprecedented step of inviting General MacArthur to address both Houses to give his side of the story. President Truman spoke directly to the nation to inform the American people why he fired the General. Read the following excerpts from both speeches and judge for yourself who was right – the General or the President.

### **General MacArthur: There is No Substitute for Victory**

*The Communist threat is a global one. Its successful advance in one sector threatens the destruction of every other sector. You can not appease or otherwise surrender to communism in Asia without simultaneously undermining our efforts to halt its advance in Europe.*

*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 our military strategy. Such decisions have not been forthcoming.*

*While no man in his right mind would advocate sending our ground forces into continental China, and such was never given a thought, the new situation did urgently demand a drastic revision of strategic planning if our political aim was to defeat this new enemy as we had defeated the old one. Apart from the military need, as I saw it, to neutralize sanctuary protection given the enemy north of the Yalu, I felt that a naval blockade against the China coast, removal of restrictions on air reconnaissance of China's coastal area and of Manchuria, removal of*

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*restrictions on the forces of the Republic of China on Formosa, with logistical support to contribution to-their effective operations against the Chinese mainland.*

*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 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 know war as few other men now living know it, and nothing to me is more revolting. I have long advocated its complete abolition, as its very destructiveness on both friend and foe has rendered it useless as a means of settling international disputes.*

*But once war is forced upon us, there is no other alternative than to apply every available means to bring it to a swift end. War's very object is victory, not prolonged indecision. 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 worldwide basis. The tragedy of Korea is further heightened by the fact that its military action was confined to its territorial limits. It condemns that nation, which it is our purpose to save, to suffer the devastating impact of full naval and air bombardment while the enemy's sanctuaries are fully protected from such attack and devastation.*

*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.*

## **President Truman: We Have Prevented World War III**

*Since the end of World War II – we have been working with other free nations to check the aggressive designs of the Soviet Union before they can result in a third world war. That is what we did in Greece when that nation was threatened by aggression of international communism. The attack against Greece could have led to general war. But this country came to the aid of Greece. The United Nations supported Greek resistance. With our help, the determination and efforts of the Greek people defeated the attack on the spot. Another big Communist threat to peace was the Berlin blockade. That too could have led to war. But again it was settled because free men would not back down in an emergency..*

*The question we have had to face is whether the Communist plan of conquest can be stopped without general war. Our Government and other countries associated with us in the United Nations believe that the best chance of stopping it without general war is to meet the attack in Korea and defeat it there. That is what we have been doing. It is a difficult and bitter task. But so far it has been successful. So far, we have prevented World War III. So far, by fighting a limited war in Korea, we have prevented aggression from succeeding and bringing on a general war. We do not want to see the conflict in Korea extended. We are trying to prevent a world war not to start one. The best way to do this is to make plain that we and the other free countries will continue to resist the attack. But you may ask: Why can't we take other steps to punish the aggressor? Why don't we bomb Manchuria and China itself? Why don't we assist Chinese Nationalist troops to land on the mainland of China?*

*If we were to do these things we would be running a very grave risk of starting a general war. If that were to happen, we would have brought about the exact situation we are trying to prevent. If we were to do these things, we would become entangled in a vast conflict on the continent of Asia and our task would become immeasurably more difficult all over the world. What would suit the ambitions of the Kremlin better than for military forces to be committed to a full-scale war with Red China?*

*Our experience in Greece and Berlin shows that it is the most effective course of action we can follow. If the Communist authorities realize that they cannot defeat us in Korea, if they realize it would be foolhardy to widen the hostilities beyond Korea, then they may recognize the folly of continuing their aggression. A peaceful settlement may then be possible. The door is always open. Then we may achieve a settlement in Korea which will not compromise the principles and purposes of the United Nation.*

*I have thought long and hard about this question of extending the war in Asia. I have discussed it many times with the ablest military advisers in the country. I believe with all my heart that the course we are following is the best course. I believe that we must try to limit war to Korea for these vital reasons: to make sure that the precious lives of our fighting men are not wasted; to see that the security of our country and the free world is not needlessly jeopardized; and to prevent a third world war.*

*A number of events have made it evident that General MacArthur did not agree with that policy. I have therefore considered it essential to relieve General MacArthur so that there would be no doubt or confusion as to the real purpose and aim of our policy. It was with the deepest personal regret that I found myself compelled to.*

## Suggested Student Exercises:

Based on the issues raised in this chapter and summarized in the following chart, did Truman make the right decision?

Issue	Truman's Position	MacArthur's Position
a. The goals of US policy :	Containment	Victory
b. The tactics that should be used:	Continued limited warfare	Bomb & blockade China, use nukes, & use Chiang to invade
c. who should make the final decision:	The President	The Generals

## Epilogue: After MacArthur

In his farewell speech to a joint session of Congress, General MacArthur said that, like the old soldier of the ballad he sung during his days as a cadet at West point, he would “never die, . . . just fade away.”

It took MacArthur quite a while to fade away. After being relieved of his command by Truman, he came back to a hero's welcome in the US, addressed a joint session of Congress, and was showered with more confetti in New York City than Charles Lindbergh had been for flying solo across the Atlantic Ocean. None of this proves whether the General was right or wrong in his dispute with the President. Let the following skeletal outline of events help you decide:

**April 11, 1951** MacArthur relieved of his command

**July 10, 1951** - Truce talks start between US, North and South Korean, and Chinese negotiators. Fighting tapers off. No more major offenses on either side. Battle lines conform closely to pre-war, 38th parallel.

**November, 1952** - Dwight Eisenhower swept to victory over Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson. With Korean War and peace negotiations still going on, Eisenhower promises to go to Korea if elected. It's expected that he will end the war.

**January, 1953** - John Foster Dulles becomes Secretary of State under Eisenhower. Dulles is a proponent of massive retaliation and liberation foreign policy.

**March 1953** - Joseph Stalin dies. Successors pledge to pursue a policy of peaceful co-existence with the West, and emphasize winning the “hearts and minds” of third-world countries through economic and political support.

**May, 1953** - Dulles asks India to relay message to China that the US is considering using nuclear weapons in Korea, bombing bases in China, and unleashing Chiang Kai-shek.

**June, 1953** - Revolt in East Germany put down by Soviet tanks. US, despite Dulles's belief in ‘liberation’ of countries behind Iron Curtain, does nothing but send food packages to East Germany and denounces Soviet Union.

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**July, 1953** - Armistice signed with North Korea ends 2 years of negotiations and 3 years of fighting. One of the last issues to be resolved was the return of Chinese and North Korean prisoners who claimed they did not want to go back to their native land (they weren't forced to go back). Final armistice line parallels final battle lines of the war with an equal amount of territory above and below the 38th parallel going to each side.

**1953-95** - Korea still divided between North and South. Despite periodic incidents, the peace has held. South Korea is considerably more democratic in 1995 than it was in 1945; North Korea is now under the rule of Kim Il Sung's son, and is a one party dictatorship with a dysfunctional economic system, clearly behind the robust South Korean capitalist economic miracle. The US still has troops stationed in South Korea. And though the North is unable to feed itself, it still spends a good deal of its National income making weapons of mass destruction and intercontinental missiles needed to deliver them.

**2000-01** – Gradual thaw in North/South Korean relations, including some visits allowed across the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel by families separated for fifty years, and more serious formal talks on issues that have long divided the two Koreas. U.S. so worried that North Korea might develop the ability to launch a nuclear missile that President Bush has proposed building a anti-missile defense system to protect the United States.