

THE KOREAN WAR AND AMERICAN POLITICS

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“A limited war tends to be a political war...and it is a particularly frustrating war to wage. In a full-scale conflict one’s aims are relatively simple: to use maximum force to destroy the enemy. In a less extensive conflict, the military is restrained by the political demands of the home government – a fact of life that disturbed the Republican party.”

--Ronald J. Caridi, *The Korean War and American Politics*

The conflict in Korea between 1950 and 1953 is not remembered as a controversial or hotly contested conflict so much as a forgotten one. Caught in between the last “good war,” World War II, and the war that forever damaged the American psyche, the Vietnam War, this conflict is not especially noted for the political debate it encouraged. Yet, like the Vietnam War, the Korean conflict was an intensely divisive issue for American politicians between 1950 and 1953. Both the Democratic and Republican parties wanted to prove they were the proper crusaders of American democracy abroad; they sought to accomplish this feat by attacking each other.

This paper seeks to illuminate the extremely polarizing nature of U.S. politics between 1950 and 1953. The debate over Korea emphasized Democratic and Republican party lines so greatly that senators, members of Congress and even the president himself often resorted to unprofessional, almost personal accusations. The rhetoric changed as the conflict progressed, but, aside from the initial unity seen in the summer of 1950, the relentless partisan attacks never did.

In researching this topic, Truman’s autobiography—specifically volume two—is especially helpful. The former president shared his thoughts on and reactions to issues like General Douglas MacArthur’s dismissal, which are especially crucial to this discussion. Since most of the Republican rhetoric targeted Truman, it is important to have his perspective and rebuttal to the accusations leveled against him.

Newspaper clippings from the time are absolutely essential for this topic as well. Both national newspapers like *The New York Times* and local ones like *The Tuscaloosa News* contain a wealth of comments made by Republican politicians in Congress or to the press. Public opinion can also be derived from these sources, revealing which party position was popular at the time of the clipping’s publication. These newspapers are particularly helpful in discussing the 1952 election, during which the respective candidates—and Truman—held several press conferences and/or interviews. Some of the comments reported in the newspapers were fairly vicious, and thus support the main argument about divisive partisan politics.

Robert J. Caridi’s book, *The Korean War and American Politics*, is an extremely detailed secondary source that provides a clear narrative structure of Republican strategy, beginning in 1949 and continuing through the conflict in Korea. Like the newspaper clippings, it contains countless comments from Republican congressmen, which illuminate prevailing party attitudes quite well. The book is mainly useful for understanding the chronology of GOP criticism, and the shifts that occurred during the conflict in Korea.

Finally, *Truman in Caricature and Cartoon* features a compilation of political cartoons about Truman that were published during his presidency. Through the artists’ exaggerations, it becomes

apparent that Truman was often portrayed as a little, weak man incapable of handling the conflict, even though cartoons drawn shortly after June 25, 1950 portrayed him as a hero.

The Conflict in Korea (1950)

Truman's initial handling of the Korean conflict was met with a unity and camaraderie that is surprising, given how divisive the conflict would become. Andrew K. Frank and Kenneth Osgood make the point that, at the onset, this war fitted the World War II template. The response of the press was particularly rousing. Various newspapers across the nation painted an account of North Korean aggression "that melded Nazi Blitzkrieg with Japanese perfidy in Pearl Harbor" while almost fawningly praising Truman for his subsequent actions.¹ Indeed, *The Pittsburgh Press* said the North Korea forces "smashed into the suburbs of Seoul."² Cleveland's *Plain Dealer* ran a cartoon called "Decision," which depicted a stoic, heroic Truman signing a pledge of U.S. military aid to stop communist aggression in South Korea as American soldiers from all the nation's wars looked on, an American flag waving in the back.³ *The Tuscaloosa News* backed Truman unconditionally in a June 28, 1950 article titled "The Nation Applauds Truman's Action." The local paper insisted that "an affirmative, military fashion" was the only option, and that Truman's action must be accepted "regardless of what the consequences may prove to be later on."⁴ According to this article, there was no alternative to complete support: "All politics aside, the people of the United States will applaud the action of their chosen leader, President Harry S. Truman, in the Korean crisis."⁵ Truman was the man they *chose* to lead them through this crisis, and he absolutely had to be praised for his efforts.

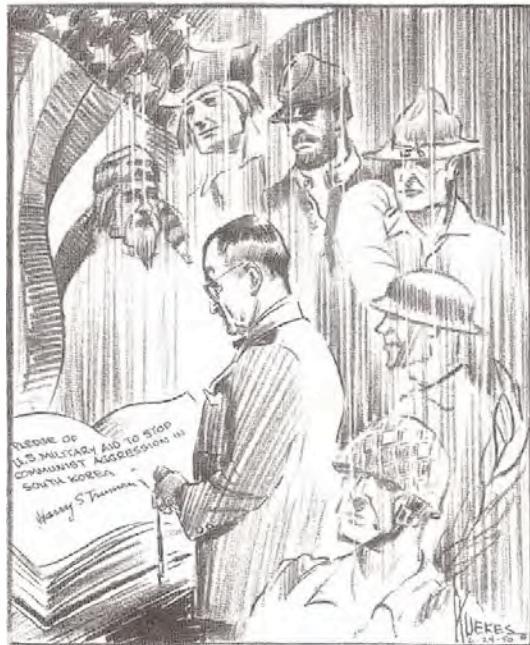


Figure 1: *Decision*. Edward Kuekes, 1950. *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland).

The Republican Party had been critical of Truman prior to June 25, 1950. Many members firmly condemned his decision to withdraw troops from Korea in 1949; a House Minority Report issued during that July read, "our forces...have been withdrawn from South Korea at the very instant when logic and

¹ Osgood, Kenneth and Andrew K. Frank. *Selling War in a Media Age: The Presidency and Public Opinion in the American Century*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2010, p. 115

² "Truman Denounces Act of Aggression, Promises More Arms." *The Pittsburgh Press*, 26 June 1950. Print, p. 1

³ Giglio, James N. and Greg C. Thielen. *Truman in Cartoon and Caricature*. Des Moines: Iowa State University Press, 1984, p. 116

⁴ "The Nation Applauds Truman's Action." *The Tuscaloosa News*, 28 June 1950. Print, p. 1

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 1

common sense both demanded no retreat from the realities of the situation...Our position is untenable and indefensible.”⁶ Paradoxically, the GOP also struck down Truman’s proposed economic aid to Korea that year. After finally obtaining his request for \$150 million—which took four months to receive authorization—Truman was dismayed to discover that his additional request for \$60 million had been defeated in the House of Representatives. “Most of the negative votes,” Truman wrote, came “from the Republican members.”⁷ The president had thus received the impression that the Republicans were not behind him in his Korean policy, noting that the Congress was generally “in no hurry to provide aid which had been requested for Korea by the President.”⁸

Some of that Republican reluctance to support Truman lingered in the immediate wake of the North Koreans’ crossing of the 38th parallel. Republican Senators Styles Bridges and William F. Knowland took the floor on June 26 to criticize the lack of “firm policy” in the East, as did several more dissenters who emphasized President Truman’s apparent lack of information.⁹ A meeting of the Senate Republican Policy Committee that day produced similar sentiments. Senator Eugene D. Millikin, acting as spokesman for the committee, said that he and his colleagues were “unanimous that the incident should not be used as a provocation for war,” adding that there was no obligation for the United States to go to war. A conclusive party position was not reached, but the members of the committee concluded that, “we should use cool heads and not be provoked into war.”¹⁰ Democratic Senator Tom Connally did not greet these words with warmth. *The New York Times* describes Connally, in his address to the Senate floor that day, as “turning to face the Republican side of the Senate chamber” and “[shaking] an admonitory finger at critics of the Administration” before saying, “Why all this splendid attitude of doubt, suspicion, and that something is wrong and something is dark and behind cover? So far as I know, there is nothing.”¹¹

However, this partisan flare-up died down in a matter of days as the press support mounted and Truman continued to act swiftly and decisively. Assessing these developments, the GOP changed its tune. After all, the party was not about to go against the overwhelming public and press support. Between June 26 and July 10, twenty-two Republican senators spoke on Korea, all favoring the action Truman had taken.¹² Though their degree of friendliness towards Truman might have varied, “the Republicans were clearly pleased that the United States was determined to halt this latest evidence of aggression.”¹³ Truman noted with satisfaction in his memoirs the approval he obtained from Republican senators and congressmen as well as Democratic ones during a briefing of select congressional leaders on June 27. Though some questions and concerns were raised, Truman claims that he gained the approval of all the Republicans in the group—Representative Dewey Short, Representative Charles Eaton, Senator Howard Alexander Smith, Senator Alexander Wiley and even Senator Styles Bridges, the same Senator Bridges who had voiced his dissent just one day earlier.¹⁴

Howard Alexander Smith gave an especially warm commendation. On July 5, he requested one of his interviews be placed in *The Congressional Record*. In it, he responded to the question of whether the Republican Party planned to use its repeated call for stronger action in the Far East for political purposes

⁶ Caridi, Ronald J. *The Korean War and American Politics: The Republican Party as a Case Study*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968, p. 30

⁷ Truman, Harry S. *Memoirs, Volume Two: Years of Trial and Hope*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956, p. 329

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 329

⁹ Hinton, Harold B. “Connally Says U.S. Is Firm on Korea.” *The New York Times*, 26 June 1950. Print, p. 1

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 1

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 1

¹² Caridi, Ronald J. *The Korean War and American Politics: The Republican Party as a Case Study*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968, p. 33

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 33-34

¹⁴ Truman, Harry S. *Memoirs, Volume Two: Years of Trial and Hope*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956, p. 338

in the November elections. "Of course it will," Smith replied. "But I want to emphasize this point. We Republicans to a man—while we have been critical of the Far Eastern policy in the past—are united now with the administration. All of us as loyal Americans want to see the matter through to a successful conclusion."¹⁵

Truman was seen by the press and public as a leader standing up to communist aggression and refusing to wait until the USSR overtook nations or committed genocide to intervene. Though the GOP had previously taken a stand against him in the events leading up to war, they fell in the majority line of support. The motives behind this support are murky. One could interpret the response as simply keeping with the previous Republican stance on Korea – they had cried out when Truman took the troops out of the country, so putting them back satisfied their demands. Yet one could also see the Republican praise as a political strategy devoid of genuineness. They had used their weight in Congress to swiftly defeat major economic aid to Korea, so did they really care about its fate? With everyone else in the nation clamoring to endorse Truman's actions, this could be seen as the GOP saving its constituents and storing sharp critiques for a more opportune moment, when Truman was in a much weaker position.

The Republicans began looking for this moment fairly quickly. There had been some relatively isolated attempts at questioning the legality of the war – which had not begun with a declaration of war issued by Congress. Yet it took almost two months for the Republican goodwill to truly start to ebb. On August 14, 1950, Senator Wiley attempted to articulate these shifting GOP attitudes:

I speak now about the world situation as it confronts us today. The newspapers say there is a feeling of relief in Washington now that the bickering and indecision has disappeared and that we are rallying to the President's support. I am not so sure that that feeling now exists to the extent it did immediately after the President sent American forces to Korea.¹⁶

It was not yet clear what the Republicans were opposing, or what their plan of attack was. Feelings of dissent were beginning to resurface, though.

Formosa then became one of the earliest Republican outcries. On June 27, Truman had ordered the Seventh Fleet of the U.S. Navy into the Formosa Straits, calling upon Nationalist China to cease any conflict against the mainland. The executive order did not merit much attention, until it was announced that Chinese Communists had attacked the island of Quemoy (or Kinman Island) on July 24. This played perfectly into the suspicion that the Chinese Communist troops – with the new freedom Truman's order granted them – would leave China and join the North Koreans. Truman tried to calm his congressional critics at a press conference in late August. He insisted that the Seventh Fleet would be withdrawn from Formosa once the Korean conflict was settled, as it was a "flank protection" for the U.S. forces in Korea.¹⁷ He also, like Secretary of State Dean Acheson, expressed hope that "Communist China would keep her armies out of the Korean conflict."¹⁸

Republican floor leader Senator Kenneth S. Wherry dismissed Truman's words, saying he was "engaging in wishful thinking" if he thought Chinese Communists would not attack Formosa

¹⁵ Caridi, Ronald J. *The Korean War and American Politics: The Republican Party as a Case Study*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968, p. 36

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 53

¹⁷ Leviero, Anthony. "Fleet to Quit Formosa at End of Korea War, Says Truman." *The New York Times*, 1 Sept. 1950, p. 2

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 1

once the fleet left.¹⁹ He also questioned whether Truman's statements meant his administration had completely abandoned the Chinese Nationalist forces, leaving them prey to communism.

Wherry was not the only one arguing with Truman over Formosa. In a highly publicized incident, General MacArthur contradicted the president's position on Formosa. MacArthur, after making a visit to Formosa on July 31, made a statement in which he declared Formosa "vital to America's Far East defenses" and that it must remain in non-communist hands.²⁰ Truman already had misgivings about MacArthur's trip – he thought it implied that MacArthur was rejecting his policy of neutralizing Formosa and that MacArthur had a more aggressive agenda.²¹ "I assumed that this would be the last of it and that General MacArthur would accept the Formosa policy laid down by his Commander in Chief," Truman wrote. "But I was mistaken."²² Fearing a confused public, and presumably a perception of weakness, Truman ordered that MacArthur retract the statement, which he did.

However, as *The Syracuse Post-Standard* noted, in striving to maintain a singular voice which avoided any hint of imperialism that communist propaganda might seize upon, Truman was "buck[ing] a powerful segment of opinion in Congress that stronger measures should be taken in Formosa."²³ Even more interestingly, "MacArthur complied with the presidential order, but his views quickly were placed on public record in Congress by Republican members."²⁴

The Republicans had found an effective means to launch their anti-Democrat attacks in MacArthur. The man was regarded as a hero and patriot who guided the U.S. expertly through World War II, and now his opposition to Truman was public knowledge. The public would listen to him, so it was in the party's best interest to make a friend out of MacArthur.

MacArthur proved to be an excellent investment for the Republican Party almost immediately after his public spat with Truman in August 1950. This was due to the success of his daring amphibious landing at Inchon on September 15, 1950. The language of the press once again conveyed the general approval of his action – a move that marked a major turning point in the war. MacArthur "hurled thousands of crack U.S. marine troops" into the Seoul port, in a "history making" landing, according to the *Lowell Sun*.²⁵ The "hard-hitting marines" were "personally led" by MacArthur.²⁶ The *Toledo Blade* reported that the marines "slashed inland" to join the waiting GIs "under the watchful eye" of MacArthur. This was not just a military victory for the U.S., but a major personal victory for the general – as the newspaper claimed, "General MacArthur and his battered gold-braided campaign cap were back in their element."²⁷

As MacArthur was aligning himself as a powerful GOP ally, a more extremist rhetoric took hold among some other Republican politicians. This rhetoric relied on red scare paranoia and positioned the Democrats as conspirators in a wide-reaching plot to undermine the nation.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 2

²⁰ Green, Roger D. "Truman Block MacArthur on Formosa Issue." *The Post-Standard* [Syracuse], 29 Aug. 1950. Print, p. 1

²¹ Truman, Harry S. *Memoirs, Volume Two: Years of Trial and Hope*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956, p. 354

²² *Ibid*, p. 354

²³ Green, Roger D. "Truman Block MacArthur on Formosa Issue." *The Post-Standard* [Syracuse], 29 Aug. 1950. Print, p. 1

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 1

²⁵ Handleman, Howard. "U.S. Marine Assault Smashes Into Inchon." *The Lowell Sun*, 15 Sept. 1950. Print, p. 1

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 1

²⁷ "3-Point Invasion Opened By Allies." *The Toledo Blade*, 15 Sept. 1950. Print, p. 1

Though Senator George Malone and Senator William Jenner were perhaps the founders, it was most actively promoted by Senator Joseph McCarthy, a man who tried to accuse the Truman administration of a “conspiracy so immense and an infamy so black as to dwarf any previous such venture in the history of man.”²⁸

Joseph McCarthy: A Case Study in Extreme Republican Opposition

No Republican stirred as much political divide, tumult and anger between 1950 and 1953 as Senator Joseph McCarthy. McCarthy is a figure primarily remembered as the communist witch hunter who was so instrumental in the red scare that communist paranoia became labeled “McCarthyism.” However, he did not just go after suspected communists. On several occasions, he attacked President Truman and the Democrats specifically. He often argued that Truman had lost control of his party, which was harming the stability and strength of the nation with a dangerous thought process, he insinuated, not unlike that of the communists. In McCarthy’s first speech delivered in the Senate on communists in government – the infamous “Wheeling Speech” – the senator stated, “I think the Democratic Party has lost control of the executive branch. An unusual group of people – a group of twisted-thinking intellectuals has taken over in the State Department in recent years. They think they are right, that is what makes them dangerous.”²⁹ McCarthy was careful to make a distinction between the Democratic Party that had lost control and the “twisted-thinking intellectuals” undermining it, but the implications of his speech cast Truman and the Democrats in an extremely unflattering light. Truman was once again weak, an ineffectual president who could not control his own supporters. Yet a more troublesome McCarthy assumption was at play. If the Democrats had lost control of the State Department and it had become overtaken by these awful intellectuals, where did these intellectuals come from? Despite what conspiracy theorists might have argued, they could not simply push their way into the government or assume the identities of honest politicians. They had to be placed in the State Department to begin with. They could not be Republicans, for Truman ran a Democratic administration. Were they not, then, sick and mutated versions of the weak, ineffectual Democrats? McCarthy made this point explicit in a speech about Democrats. While acknowledging again the existence of loyal and patriotic Democrats, McCarthy noted those “who are now complete prisoners, under the complete domination of the bureaucratic, communistic Frankenstein which they themselves have created.”³⁰ McCarthy was thus supporting the notion that there were two kinds of Democrats: the “soft” Truman type and the “twisted-thinking” madmen. No matter the variety, Democrats were harmful to the United States.

McCarthy railed several times against the Democrats’ handling of Korea. One of his earliest speeches dealing with the subject came on December 6, 1950, when he addressed the topic of American foreign policy. His very first line illustrates his harsh critique of Truman and his administration: “Mr. President, it is unnecessary to tell the Senate, the country, or the world that America is facing the greatest military disaster in its entire history,” it reads. “Day by day and hour by hour the situation grows blacker, blacker for the world, blacker for the United States, and more particularly is it painfully blacker for over 100,000 American young men in Korea.”³¹ McCarthy then proceeded to advise his audience “it is not of national interest to unite in support of error, or of policies that have failed.”³² To support Truman’s failed – in this case, McCarthy wagered, the Acheson-Marshall plan and the even more ghastly Hiss-Acheson-Jessup-Latimore-Vincent plan – in favor of unity would be idiotic. “World history is littered with the

²⁸ Press Release, Joseph McCarthy to Congress, June 11, 1951. Official File, Truman Papers, p. 1

²⁹ McCarthy, Joseph. *Major Speeches and Debates of Senator Joe McCarthy Delivered in the United States Senate, 1950-1951*. Washington, D.C.: United States Printing Office, 1975, p. 36

³⁰ “Joseph McCarthy on Democrats.” Speech. 7 Aug. 2009. YouTube. 10 Oct. 2010, 00:37.

³¹ McCarthy, Joseph. *Major Speeches and Debates of Senator Joe McCarthy Delivered in the United States Senate, 1950-1951*. Washington, D.C.: United States Printing Office, 1975, p. 157

³² *Ibid*, p. 157

corpses of nations which were united behind bad leadership following the wrong course," he surmised.³³ McCarthy was not just critiquing Truman's policies here – though he did rather explicitly in his claims that the "Acheson-Marshall plan fitted perfectly with Communist Russia's desire for a power vacuum in all of western Europe." He was also openly telling his listeners that supporting Truman, a man following "the wrong course," would lead to the "corpse" of the nation.³⁴

Though McCarthy threw far more aggressive accusations than most GOP politicians, he was by no means preemptive in his attack of Truman's administration. His foreign policy speech came about one month after the Republicans had made significant gains in the 1950 mid-term elections. High off their victory, they were in a better position to critique the opposing party. According to Caridi, "the most vocal elements within the party interpreted their election gains as an indication of widespread distrust of Administration policy...with the intervention of Chinese troops, there was dramatic evidence that once again Democratic policy had led to disaster in the Far East."³⁵

McCarthy continued to publicly thrash Truman for his handling of Korea as the war progressed. He was one of the many Republicans who condemned Truman's dismissal of General MacArthur – a controversy that will be detailed in full later. McCarthy issued a memo to Congress about two months after MacArthur's dismissal.

It is impossible to develop the facts in the MacArthur inquiry without at the same time bringing to light some of the facts which bear on the question of why we fell from our position as the most powerful nation on earth at the end of World War II to a position of declared weakness by our 'leadership' – a leadership which whines, whimpers, cringes in fear, and urges that we dare not win a war which it started.³⁶

In a speech entitled "Blockade of Red China, 1952," McCarthy viciously attacked the president for the continued stationing of the Seventh Fleet of the U.S. Navy in the Formosa Straits. McCarthy suggested that a quarter of a million previously contained communist troops were now taking American lives, and painted a manipulative, hypothetical story of two American brothers – one in the 7th Fleet and the other in the ground forces in Korea – being pitted against each other. But the attack was very specifically aimed at Truman and the Democrats. McCarthy quoted Ambassador Bullett as supporting his argument, making a quick aside that he hoped Bullett (a "great American") was not a Democrat anymore. Yet even more audaciously, he concluded his speech with the following: "If that order isn't treason...then I ask you what in heaven's name is treason in this country?"³⁷

Calling a political opponent a liar or a fear monger is one thing, but leveling accusations of treason – especially during wartime – is something much graver. McCarthy, unlike the majority of his GOP brethren, was not content to simply say the Truman administration was handling Korea incorrectly, and that the Republicans had a better strategy. He tossed out serious allegations without much material to back them up, and worked tirelessly to draw the line between the level-headed GOP and the no longer just weak but dangerous Democrats. He may have been one of the most extreme examples, but the GOP

³³ *Ibid*, p. 157

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 157

³⁵ Caridi, Ronald J. *The Korean War and American Politics: The Republican Party as a Case Study*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968, p. 107

³⁶ Press Release, Joseph McCarthy to Congress, June 11, 1951. Official File, Truman Papers, p. 1

³⁷ McCarthy, Joseph. "Blockade of Red China." Speech. 29 June 1952. Raynor Memorial Libraries, Marquette University. 25 Sept. 2010, 4:55.

would attack Truman with a fervor rivaling his following the termination of its new hero and virtual mascot, General MacArthur.

MacArthur the Martyr and Thwarted Peace Talks (1951-1952)

The Republicans had strengthened the validity of their attacks in 1950 through their alignment with General MacArthur. However, strangely, the GOP found him to be an even more valuable asset after his termination by Truman on April 11, 1951. Tension was obviously already apparent in the Truman-MacArthur relationship, but the general pushed the president to his limits when he issued a statement that ran completely counter to the administration's new push towards settlement talks. On March 24, MacArthur released the statement, which insisted that his troops were in a great tactical position and that the U.S. not abandon the Korean people.³⁸ Coupled with an earlier March 7 statement issued to the press in which MacArthur maintained anything but his policy would result in "savage slaughter," Truman was tired of the general's insubordination, which made him look ineffectual to his public and foreign powers, who were now much more skeptical about peace talks.³⁹ He resolved to take a firmer line:

This was a most extraordinary statement for a military commander of the United Nations to issue on his own responsibility. It was an act totally disregarding all directives to abstain from any declarations on foreign policy. It was in open defiance to my orders as President and as Commander in Chief. This was a challenge to the authority of the President under the Constitution. It also flouted the policy of the United Nations. By this act MacArthur left me no choice – I could no longer tolerate his insubordination.⁴⁰

A letter from MacArthur read by Minority Leader Joseph W. Martin on the Senate floor, in which the general supported Martin's proposal to use Chinese Nationalist forces in the war efforts, only confirmed Truman's decision.⁴¹ After rumors spread that the termination story had been leaked, Truman called a special press conference at 1:00 a.m. on April 11 to formally announce the news. Interestingly, Truman noted that, in his April 6 meeting with his "Big Four" advisers over what to do with MacArthur, Secretary of Defense Marshall advised caution, fearing that if MacArthur were relieved "it might be difficult to get the military appropriations in Washington."⁴² Given the gains the Republicans had made in the mid-term elections the year prior, it is easy to interpret Marshall's words as expressing a fear of *Republican*, not just congressional, outcry.

Marshall's fears were verified swiftly. A "gathering partisan storm" emerged, during which the Republicans not only denounced Truman for firing MacArthur, but even made some isolated demands for Truman's and Acheson's resignations.⁴³ In a radio address on April 12, Senator Wherry accused Truman of a "weak defense of his shabby treatment of this great General and statesman."⁴⁴ He further branded Korea as "Truman's war," pointing out that the president did not obtain a declaration of war from Congress. A statement unanimously approved by the House Republican Party Committee questioned whether Truman, Acheson and Marshall were laying the groundwork for a "super-Munich" and if Eisenhower and other military leaders were now also to be "throttled into silence" if they disagreed with

³⁸ Truman, Harry S. *Memoirs, Volume Two: Years of Trial and Hope*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956, p. 440-441

³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 442

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 441-442

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 445

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 447

⁴³ White, William S. "M' Arthur Due Back in U.S. Next Week; Rival Parties Trade Blows on Issue; Truman Confident He Will Be Upheld." *The New York Times*, 13 Apr. 1951. Print, p. 1

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 1

the administration.⁴⁵ “The determination of the Republicans to make the MacArthur incident a celebrated cause and the vehicle for a hostile Congressional examination of every phase of Mr. Truman’s foreign policy was demonstrated” in the subsequent congressional discussion, according to *The New York Times*.⁴⁶

The Republican position was echoed in the press. A cartoon, “Gulliver and the Lilliputians,” that ran in the *Houston Chronicle* depicted a massive, mighty General MacArthur gagged and being tied down by scheming dwarf versions of Acheson and Truman. A Soviet general guffaws in the background.⁴⁷ Another, in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, showed yet another diminutive Truman gaping in horror at a larger-than-life silhouette of MacArthur in the moon, labeled “The Old Soldier.”⁴⁸ According to these publications, a weak and petty Truman – signified by his ridiculously short stature – was picking on MacArthur, the true American hero. The first cartoon also suggested that by dismissing MacArthur, Truman was in fact pleasing communist enemies. Furthermore, the public seemed to share these views. A total of 125,000 telegrams – the overwhelming majority being critical of the decision – were delivered to the White House and Congress by this date concerning MacArthur; Western Union claimed that no issue in recent years had provoked such a volume of messages.⁴⁹ There was also an avalanche of phone calls. Mrs. Schcklefritz of Kansas City called to say, “I am certainly praying for the President to get a head



Figure 2: *Gulliver and the Lilliputians*. Ferman Martin, 1951. *Houston Chronicle*.

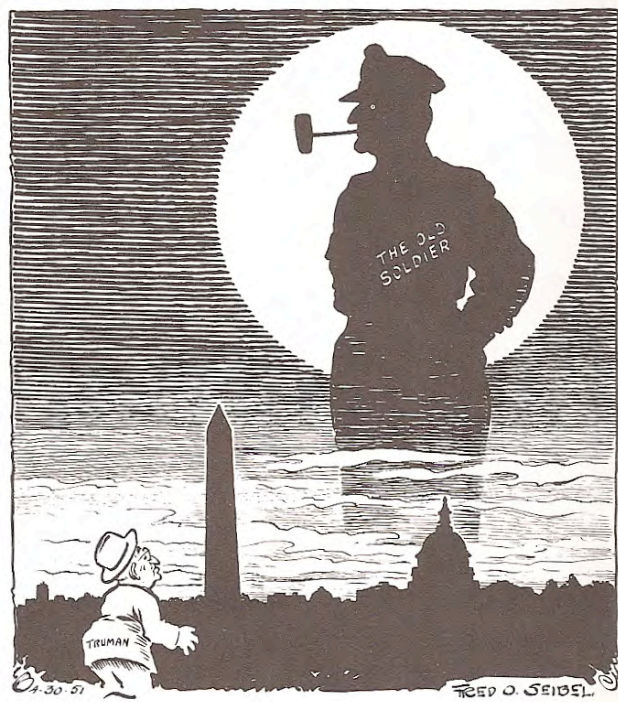


Figure 3: *When Is He Going to Fade Away?* Frederick O. Seibel, 1951. *Richmond Times Dispatch*

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 2

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 2

⁴⁷ Giglio, James N. and Greg C. Thielen. *Truman in Cartoon and Caricature*. Des Moines: Iowa State University Press, 1984, p. 124

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 124

⁴⁹ Lawrence, W.H. “President Says Republicans Will Rue Use of MacArthur.” *The New York Times*, 12 Apr. 1951. Print, p. 2

because he certainly needs a new one.”⁵⁰ Mrs. Rierdon of Covington, Virginia said she had switched parties in wake of the dismissal and called the president a traitor to his country.⁵¹ Mr. Edward D. Richards of Washington, D.C. called to say that Truman and Acheson were the biggest menaces to national security that the country has ever known.⁵² Clearly the backlash was taking a serious turn.

Truman himself alleged that the Republicans were the ones playing into communist wishes. He accused the Republicans of generally using the incident to lay out every strategy and detail of U.S. policy in Korea, adding that the Soviet leaders must have “gotten a great deal of satisfaction out of the hearings.”⁵³ He further maintained that, while he expected some resistance to his decision, the Republicans would regret pinning their party to MacArthur.⁵⁴ The Democrats in Congress backed him up, saying the Republicans were being needlessly vicious and labeling them the “war party.”⁵⁵

The GOP used MacArthur’s dismissal to promote their more aggressive policy in Korea. MacArthur had always favored a harder line than Truman, so, with the public largely behind him, the Republicans attacked the administration’s supposedly weak tactics with a greater fervor. They increasingly pushed MacArthur’s stance that the U.S. accept nothing but victory over Red China, and balk at any type of appeasement.⁵⁶ The increased zeal was also due no doubt to planning for the 1952 election; several politicians and citizens were already calling for MacArthur’s bid for the presidency.

China was for both MacArthur and the Republicans a major sticking point. Senator Bridges said on April 27, “I think General MacArthur’s views are definitely the answer in order to bring [the war] to a successful conclusion. He has presented the only positive program for China.”⁵⁷ The flare-up over Formosa – which continued into 1952, with McCarthy’s speech – introduced this issue; there were allegations that Truman’s executive order concerning the Seventh Fleet would allow too great an access between Chinese communists and North Korea. Truman had attempted to deny these worries, but the entry of China into the war confirmed those fears. Many in the party found it impossible to support Truman in the wake of Chinese participation in the war.⁵⁸ Some even seemed to think that the U.S. should be at war with Communist China. Republican Senator Cain attempted to introduce a resolution formally declaring war on Communist China on April 17, though his proposal was, as Democratic Senator MacFarland predicted, “quietly tucked away in a committee pigeon hole” and never seriously considered even among Republicans.⁵⁹

Due to hostilities towards China and a reluctance to “appease” the enemy, Republicans made many attempts to hinder or derail peace talks. MacArthur’s career-ending statements had done enough damage – foreign reaction to his dismissal had ranged from subdued enthusiasm to jubilation – but the GOP continued to chip away at Truman’s peace talks.⁶⁰ After Truman had indicated his desire for peace

⁵⁰ Record of Phone Calls Regarding the Dismissal of General Douglas MacArthur, ca. April 1951. Official File, Truman Papers, p. 7

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 4

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 7

⁵³ Truman, Harry S. *Memoirs, Volume Two: Years of Trial and Hope*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956, p. 450

⁵⁴ Lawrence, W.H. “President Says Republicans Will Rue Use of MacArthur.” *The New York Times*, 12 Apr. 1951. Print, p. 2

⁵⁵ White, William S. “M’Arthur Due Back in U.S. Next Week; Rival Parties Trade Blows on Issue; Truman Confident He Will Be Upheld.” *The New York Times*, 13 Apr. 1951. Print, p. 1

⁵⁶ Lawrence, W.H. “President Says Republicans Will Rue Use of MacArthur.” *The New York Times*, 12 Apr. 1951. Print, p. 2

⁵⁷ Caridi, Ronald J. *The Korean War and American Politics: The Republican Party as a Case Study*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968, p. 154

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 155

⁵⁹ “Senate Leader Promises Wide Probe of Policy.” *The Albuquerque Tribune*, 18 Apr. 1951. Print, p. 1

⁶⁰ “Relief Felt in U.N. on the Dismissal.” *The New York Times*, 11 Apr. 1951. Print, p. 1

negotiations on multiple occasions, Soviet representative to the U.N. Security Council Jacob Malik announced on June 23 over the U.N. radio that Russia believed peace talks should begin in Korea; Truman jumped on this speech, eventually organizing communications between the belligerents in Korea.⁶¹ Efforts at peace talks proceeded but, as *The New York Times* noted, the anti-administration Republicans were “troubled by the possibility that so splendid and desirable a thing as peace, for which they yearn as much as any, may damage their prospects of taking over the Government.”⁶² It was simply in their best interest to interfere in the peace talks.

Senator Robert Taft had already attempted to spark a great debate in Congress at the beginning of the year. He hoped to exploit confusing nature of the political mood in 1951 in order to place legislative constraints on Truman and reshape the public debate to suit Republican interests in a more aggressive policy.⁶³ Truman responded angrily to the challenge, insisting he would take the matter to the public if Republicans interfered with his fulfillment of U.S. treaty obligations; the State Department also thought “the time had come to take off the gloves.”⁶⁴ Yet the administration won out by March. Thus, when the truce talks began, the Republicans in Congress – still stinging from their defeated debate – “deemed it vital to launch a vigorous and innovative program to prevent any possible reversion to complacency, apathy and withdrawal.”⁶⁵ No longer facing the enormous public pressure they had the year before, the anti-Truman Republicans in Congress threatened to defeat the Defense Production Act, which needed to be renewed by the end of June, claiming typical conservative opposition to state interference in the economy. The administration viewed defeat on this bill as “unthinkable.”⁶⁶ The DNC called on party members to bombard Congress with letters and telegrams, as did labor bosses. Charles E. Wilson, head of the Office of Defense Mobilization (ODM) said on July 9, “I am shocked to learn that, even before a truce has been arranged, there is a movement in some quarter to wreck this country’s defense program.”⁶⁷ Indeed, organized labor, undoubtedly recognizing the link between the truce talks and Republican debate, adopted the slogan “No cease-fire on the Anti-Inflation Front.”⁶⁸ Armed with Dixiecrat allies, however, the Republicans had a majority vote. They ultimately did not defeat the bill, but when it finally reached Truman’s desk on July 31st, the president complained of “gravely deficient” controls and inflation as a likely consequence. Bested by the Republicans, he grudgingly signed it into law.⁶⁹

The Republican efforts to delay or harm truce talks soon took a backseat to the numerous deadlocks and tensions in the discussion between the nations involved in the conflict. Issues of POWs and buffer zones flooded the newspapers, all but burying Republican voices of dissent. Yet the Republicans had gotten exactly what they wanted: another bungled mess to blame on Truman, so that when their 1952 presidential candidate took to the campaign trail, he could promise a swift, easy end to “Truman’s war.”

Eisenhower Steps In (1952)

Many interpret Truman’s decision not to run for reelection in 1952 as a response to his many trials and tribulations with the Republicans and public – during his entire last year in term, Truman’s

⁶¹ Truman, Harry S. *Memoirs, Volume Two: Years of Trial and Hope*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956, p. 456

⁶² Krock, Arthur. “Korea’s Consequences Weighed in Washington.” *The New York Times*, 8 Jul. 1951. Print, p. 2

⁶³ Casey, Steven. *Selling the Korea War: Propaganda, Politics and Public Opinion in the United States, 1950-1953*. Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 183

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 186

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 316

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 316

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 317

⁶⁸ Stark, Louis. “Labor Chiefs Meet on Controls Policy.” *The New York Times*, 9 Jul. 1951. Print, p. 1

⁶⁹ Casey, Steven. *Selling the Korea War: Propaganda, Politics and Public Opinion in the United States, 1950-1953*. Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 318

popularity hardly reached 30%.⁷⁰ However, the president claimed he made the decision much earlier, and for ideological purposes. He wrote in a personal memorandum on April 16, 1950:

In my opinion eight years as President is enough and sometimes too much for any man to serve in that capacity. There is a lure in power. It can get into a man's blood just as gambling and lust for money have been known to do...Therefore...although by a quibble I could say I've only had one term, I am not a candidate and will not accept the nomination for another term.⁷¹

He read the statement to his staff in March 1951, but this did not become public until March 29, 1952, when Truman announced the news at the annual Jefferson-Jackson Day Dinner.⁷²

In Truman's place rose Adlai Stevenson, at the time the governor of Illinois. The president invited Stevenson to the White House first in January to discuss his potential candidacy. Stevenson was reluctant to commit, going back and forth with the president until July 24, 1952, when he called Truman to confirm he wanted to run.⁷³

The Republicans chose Dwight D. Eisenhower, a military man, like MacArthur, for their ticket. He had bested Taft and even MacArthur for the nomination. Korea became one of his biggest issues. "It was never inevitable, it was never inescapable...the Truman administration failed to read and outwit the totalitarian mind," he told the press on October 25, 1952. "The old administration cannot be expected to repair what it could not prevent."⁷⁴ He pledged to make a review and reexamination of Korea his very first task as president, with the ultimate goal of bringing about an "early and honorable end," that his administration would "always reject appeasement," and that he would confer with the free nations of Asia and cooperative UN members.⁷⁵ To prove the Republican strategy for Korea was the correct one, Eisenhower vowed to go to Korea himself, something Truman had never done.⁷⁶

Truman and Eisenhower had already attacked one another earlier in the presidential campaign. On October 6, Eisenhower branded Truman as the leading person "firing blanks" in the campaign as a response to Truman's denouncement of the "sheer poppycock and politics" of the Republican charges against him.⁷⁷ Furthermore, Truman called Eisenhower out on trying to disavow foreign policies that he himself had a hand in creating; any denial was in Truman's mind a "damned lie."⁷⁸ Truman's had a point: Eisenhower had seemed to accept the administration's policies prior to the campaign, removing himself so greatly from the political debate while serving as supreme commander of the NATO forces that many did not know if he was a Republican or Democrat.⁷⁹ The aggressiveness of Eisenhower's attack on Truman is also surprising, given the fact that Stevenson – not Truman – was the one running against him. But bland Stevenson was largely forgotten, and Eisenhower instead focused campaign attention on the president.⁸⁰

⁷⁰ "Presidential Approval Ratings History." Chart. *The Wall Street Journal*. Online. Accessed 7 Nov. 2010.

⁷¹ Truman, Harry S. *Memoirs, Volume Two: Years of Trial and Hope*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956, p. 488

⁷² *Ibid*, p. 492

⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 496

⁷⁴ "Eisenhower Rules Out Appeasement." *The Day* [New London], 25 Oct. 1951. Print, p. 1

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p. 1

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p. 1

⁷⁷ "Truman, Ike in Bitter Attack on Each Other." *Kentucky New Era*, 6 Oct. 1952. Print, p. 1

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p. 1

⁷⁹ Truman, Harry S. *Memoirs, Volume Two: Years of Trial and Hope*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956, p. 500

⁸⁰ "Truman, Ike in Bitter Attack on Each Other." *Kentucky New Era*, 6 Oct. 1952. Print, p. 1

That is not to say Eisenhower backed off Stevenson entirely. In response to Stevenson's questioning over vice presidential candidate Richard Nixon, Eisenhower fired back, "we are tired of aristocratic explanations in Harvard accents."⁸¹ He further accused Stevenson of "smugness" and "smug evasions."⁸² Comments like these led members of the press to comment on the "increasing intensity" and "deepening bitterness" of the campaign.⁸³

After Eisenhower won the election in November, some members of Congress suggested a White House conference with Eisenhower, Truman and MacArthur. Perhaps with only a month left in office, Truman finally let his critics have a true tongue-lashing, for his response in the press was atypically vicious. He first called Eisenhower's pledge to go to Korea "a piece of demagoguery."⁸⁴ He then criticized MacArthur. The general should have reported to Truman after his return from Japan following his dismissal, the president insisted, saying it was what any "decent man" would have done. He pointed out that he had traveled over 14,000 miles to Wake Island to see MacArthur on October 14, 1950, just to receive a bunch of misinformation.⁸⁵ He dared the general to share his ideas for ending the war. Truman was described as "ready to do battle with the two generals" and speaking "with a touch of acid in his voice" at this press conference.⁸⁶ Republican Senator Welker later called Truman's response the words of "a pretty sick, frustrated man" and that Truman's own record "will live forever as a record of demagoguery of the highest rank."⁸⁷

Truman came away from the election – which went decisively to Eisenhower – feeling personally stung. "Those of us who knew Eisenhower through his long service in uniform under two Democratic Presidents had reason to hope that he would campaign on a high level...We were shocked and disappointed to find that he would lend himself to the type of campaign that followed," Truman wrote.⁸⁸ Truman did not see how Eisenhower could have possibly believed in the lies and exaggerations he articulated. He was especially offended by the GOP use of the Korean War in the campaign, saying he would "never understand how a responsible military man, fully familiar with the extreme delicacy of our negotiations to end hostilities, could use this tragedy for political advantage."⁸⁹ In this reflection and his incensed response to a conference with Eisenhower and MacArthur, we see that the partisan politics of the Korean War truly struck a nerve with Truman. He was personally hurt by the attacks on his leadership and administration, refusing to write them off as the usual criticism a president endures in his term(s). Out of the highly divisive Korean conflict had strung something unprofessional and outrageous, a type of partisan politics that the president could no longer stomach. "[It] has hurt," he told the press during the campaign. "I can tell you it has hurt me personally."⁹⁰

Conclusion

Given the vicious nature of the insults thrown between parties during the 1952 campaign – and throughout Truman's handling of the Korean War – one would think the conflict would linger in American memories. Yet the political divisiveness of this conflict, like every aspect to the Korean War, was trumped by a later conflict. This conflict was regarded as the first real loss the U.S. experienced, even

⁸¹ Marlow, James. "Presidential Campaign Is Paralleling Play." *Sarasota Journal*, 23 Sept. 1952. Print, p. 1

⁸² *Ibid*, p. 1

⁸³ *Ibid*, p. 1

⁸⁴ "Truman Tongue-Lashes." *Tri-City Herald* [Kennewick], 9 Dec. 1952. Print, p. 1

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p. 1

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 1

⁸⁷ "Ike Branded with Election Demagoguery." *Prescott Evening Courier*, 11 Dec. 1952. Print, p. 2

⁸⁸ Truman, Harry S. *Memoirs, Volume Two: Years of Trial and Hope*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956, p. 501

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p. 501

⁹⁰ "Truman, Ike in Bitter Attack on Each Other." *Kentucky New Era*, 6 Oct. 1952. Print, p. 1

though the unresolved conflict in Korea could hardly be deemed a victory. This conflict was, of course, the Vietnam War.

Popular culture shows very clearly how Vietnam eclipsed Korea in the American conscious. Kris Kristofferson's rewriting of one of the most popular Korean War songs "Itazuke Tower" into "Phan Rang Tower" for the Vietnam War troops signals one of the more tangible ways Vietnam overrode Korean War memories.⁹¹ A similar revision occurred with one of the few well-known pieces of popular culture set in the Korean War, the TV series *M*A*S*H*. Running from 1972 to 1983, it remains one of the most popular and beloved shows of all-time. Yet it is widely acknowledged that any accurate or specific references to Korea were cut "so that it could be seen as a statement against the Vietnam War."⁹² No definitive Korean War movie has endured in American memory, either – films about the conflict made between 1950 and 1953 never even performed well at the box office on their initial releases.⁹³ Meanwhile, Vietnam movies are their own subgenre. Films like *Apocalypse Now*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket* are not merely remembered, but grace lists of the best American movies of all time. Considering the enormous impact popular culture has on American attitudes – and the way it is said to reflect those attitudes – the way Vietnam is emphasized over Korea is extremely telling.

The haunting, now iconic photos and newsreels captured in Vietnam – the brutal execution of a Vietnamese soldier, the Vietnamese children screaming as napalm dripped over their bodies – also erased and replaced any reported atrocities in Korea. It only makes sense, then, that the bitter political and public debates waged during the Vietnam War took precedence over the extremely divisive nature of the conflict in Korea. Aside from the Korean War, Americans remember the 1950s as a time largely devoid of conflict and strife. It was the era of Dr. Spock, suburbia and *I Love Lucy*, as opposed to the turbulent 1960s and 1970s. During this era, the nation's counterculture movement was instigating massive upheaval and new ways of thinking, and the assassinations of JFK, Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. caused a deep public trauma. All this came on top of Vietnam, making it impossible to write the war off as a mere blimp of turmoil in an era of overwhelming stability and serenity. Such amnesia was much easier to carry out with Korea, and that is precisely what Americans did. President Truman likely never forgot the personal hurt he suffered, and General MacArthur could not possibly push his termination to the back of his mind, but the overwhelming majority of U.S. citizens have downplayed and erased from their collective memories an extremely divisive, bitterly debated international conflict.

⁹¹ Young, Ron. "Vietnam Vets Reflect on War Through Music." *San Antonio Express-News*, 19 Jul. 1992. Print, p. 1

⁹² McMurtrie, John. "Frontal Attack on War in Hollywood Comedies." *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 9 Feb. 2003. Print, p. 1

⁹³ Osgood, Kenneth and Andrew K. Frank. *Selling War in a Media Age: The Presidency and Public Opinion in the American Century*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2010, p. 122

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