

## Harry Truman, the Firing of Douglas MacArthur, and Integrity

- **Compelling Question**
  - How can maintain your integrity help to advance freedom for yourself and others and help you achieve your purpose?
- **Virtue:** Integrity
- **Definition** – Integrity is personal consistency in moral goodness.
- **Lesson Overview**
  - In this lesson, students will learn about the life of Harry S. Truman and how it was shaped by integrity. They will explore actions throughout his life and how they impacted his identity and purpose. Through his example, they will learn how they can maintain the principle of integrity in their own lives.
- **Objectives**
  - Students will analyze Harry S. Truman’s life and actions.
  - Students will understand how acting with integrity can help them achieve their identity and purpose
  - Students will apply this knowledge to the pursuit of integrity in their own lives.
- **Background**
  - On June 24, 1950, the North Koreans, led by communist dictator Kim Il-sung, crossed the 38th parallel, invading South Korea. President Harry S. Truman’s resolve was to stop communism from expanding. The American people initially supported Truman’s decision to send U.S. troops to fight in Korea because they trusted their president. Truman gathered worldwide support for the defense of South Korea by going to the United Nations for support for the fight against the spread of communism in Korea. Countries from around the globe joined the U.S. military in South Korea.

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 on 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 in the Pacific, and was responsible for rebuilding Japan after the war. Just as the situation seemed most dire for the Americans in Korea, MacArthur devised a daring sea landing at Inchon, Korea, which helped turn the tide for the U.S. and United Nations forces fighting the North Koreans. They pushed the North Koreans almost all the way back to their border with China. Despite many difficult battles, a ceasefire was declared almost three years later, but not before President Truman needed to make a difficult choice concerning MacArthur that helped set the stage for that ceasefire.
- **Vocabulary**
  - Resolve
  - Chief of Staff of the United States Army
  - Political Machine
  - Facet
  - Flaw
  - Taiwan
  - Joint Chiefs of Staff
- **Introduce Text**
  - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.
- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
  - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
    - What challenges are you facing?
    - What fears or concerns might you have?
    - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?

- **Observation Questions**
  - Who was Harry Truman? Who was Douglas MacArthur? What were their roles in the Korean War?
  - What was the big decision Harry Truman had to make in April of 1951?
  - What do Harry Truman's actions throughout his life say about his personal integrity?
- **Discussion Questions**
  - Discuss the following questions with your students.
    - What is the historical context of the narrative?
    - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
    - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
    - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
    - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
    - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
    - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
    - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?
- **Additional Resources**
  - McCullough, David; *Truman*; Simon and Schuster; 1992
  - "Harry S. Truman Library and Museum." Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.  
<http://www.trumanlibrary.org/>

## Handout A: Harry Truman, the Firing of Douglas MacArthur, and Integrity

### Background

On June 24, 1950, the North Koreans, led by communist dictator Kim Il-sung, crossed the 38th parallel, invading South Korea. President Harry S. Truman's resolve was to stop communism from expanding. The American people initially supported Truman's decision to send U.S. troops to fight in Korea because they trusted their president. Truman gathered worldwide support for the defense of South Korea by going to the United Nations for support for the fight against the spread of communism in Korea. Countries from around the globe joined the U.S. military in South Korea.

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 on 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 in the Pacific, and was responsible for rebuilding Japan after the war. Just as the situation seemed most dire for the Americans in Korea, MacArthur devised a daring sea landing at Inchon, Korea, which helped turn the tide for the U.S. and United Nations forces fighting the North Koreans. They pushed the North Koreans almost all the way back to their border with China. Despite many difficult battles, a ceasefire was declared almost three years later, but not before President Truman needed to make a difficult choice concerning MacArthur that helped set the stage for that ceasefire.

### Narrative:

Harry S Truman was born on May 8, 1884, on a small farm in Lamar, Missouri. The family moved to Independence, Missouri, a suburb of Kansas City. While growing up, he developed a passion for politics. He eventually made connections within 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. 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 knew that when you have integrity, you have strength. He picked himself up after the war, and after a business failure, he never gave up and always moved forward with his life. He entered politics, working with the Pendergast Machine in Kansas City. He eventually became Chief Judge and County Administrator of Jackson County, Missouri. There he earned a reputation for hard work and honesty, 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. He won easily. While in the Senate he was well-liked, but more importantly he was well-respected, because he was a man of honor. In 1944, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt prepared to run for an unprecedented fourth term. There was little doubt that he would win, but the main question was who would be his running mate? Many fought for the position, but Truman was chosen because he was a man with great integrity. The Roosevelt/Truman ticket won. Truman had only been vice president for 82 days when Roosevelt died. Harry Truman suddenly found himself thrust into leading the nation through World War II as the 33rd president of the United States.

Integrity was always important to Truman. "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 meant that when things went wrong, people often try to pass the blame ("the buck") to someone else, without taking any responsibility themselves. Truman never liked "passing the buck." In fact, his desk in the Oval Office had a sign that read "The Buck Stops Here." It wasn't easy to step into the shoes of leadership, following 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. It was Truman who decided to use the atomic bomb against Japan in order to end the war.

When Truman said “The Buck Stops Here,” he knew that he had responsibility for every decision anybody made in his administration. In other words, every decision was ultimately *his* decision. He understood and accepted that his decision to use atomic bombs was horrible, but it was necessary 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 heating-up 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 had some flaws, too. 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 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 the control of the military is in the hands of a civilian leader democratically elected by the American people, not professional military leaders. When President Truman met General MacArthur on Wake Island during the Korean War—the only time the two ever met—MacArthur did not salute Truman. 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 themselves when they decided not turn communist. Truman did not want to use Taiwanese forces, as it might encourage the Chinese to directly enter the war. Truman wanted to avoid starting another world war, so 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. Once again, in the press, politicians began to “pass the buck,” but Truman took responsibility as commander in chief. MacArthur, however began to say that he wanted to attack China. Truman refused, on the grounds that he believed this would lead to a widening of the conflict, possibly to 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 expand the military to bomb and invade China. MacArthur decided to say this on his own, without clearing his statement, knowing that it went against President Truman’s orders. The decision to expand the war into China was not MacArthur’s decision to make. The president had made his policy clear. The decision was Truman’s and no one else’s.

Truman did not take this act of insubordination personally, he waited for the opinions of his military leaders. The Joint Chiefs decided unanimously to relieve Douglas MacArthur of his command. Truman agreed. He knew that the firing of General MacArthur would kick up a storm of anger against him, but he made the decision to relieve MacArthur as a matter of principle. The president is the commander in chief and no military leader, no matter how well loved, could disobey his superior. On this the Constitution is clear.

In April 1951, 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. Yet Harry Truman remained nearly silent, having made his decision, he would not “pass the buck,” he would 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. Truman knew he was right, and he knew he had the support of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It was stated about Truman that, “the fidelity of the military high command to the principle of civilian control of the military was total and unequivocal.”

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