



## The Korean War (1951)

Japan seized Korea in 1910 and continued to occupy it until near the end of World War II. Then the Soviet Army drove the Japanese out of northern Korea, while the U.S. Army liberated southern Korea. The two superpowers agreed to divide that country along the 38th parallel of latitude. A Soviet-backed government ruled North Korea, while a U.S.-supported government controlled South Korea. Matters became more complicated in 1949 when Communists in neighboring China won a long-fought civil war against Nationalist Chinese forces. The Nationalists retreated to the island of Taiwan and set up a rival government there.

In 1950, the North Korean Army invaded South Korea, thus putting to the test the U.S. resolve to contain communism. President Harry S. Truman responded by sending U.S. troops into South Korea and by calling upon the United Nations also to send forces there. Instead of asking Congress to declare war on North Korea, Truman used his powers as commander in chief to conduct a “police action” there.

After a period of setbacks, U.S.-led forces under General Douglas MacArthur in November 1950 pushed the North Korean troops north across the 38th parallel, back toward the Chinese border. Fearing that its own borders were in danger, Communist China joined the war. The thousands of soldiers sent by China drove the UN and South Korean forces south of the 38th parallel in January 1951.

MacArthur felt that military actions against China would halt the Chinese assault in Korea. President Truman and other members of his administration, however, feared that such actions would widen the war dangerously. After MacArthur tried to persuade members of Congress to back his plan to widen the war with China, Truman on April 11 removed him from his command of the UN forces. Excerpt **A** is from an address by the dismissed UN Commander to Congress on April 19, 1951. Excerpt **B** is a rebuttal by U.S. Secretary of

State Dean Acheson on June 1, 1951, given as testimony to the Senate Committee on the Armed Services.

The Korean War finally ended in 1953 in a stalemate with an armistice. Neither side really won. Some 34,000 Americans were killed in the war; 103,000, wounded. Thousands of U.S. troops are still stationed in South Korea because North Korea—still Communist—is considered a hostile country and a threat to South Korea and Japan.

### A. General Douglas MacArthur, Address to Congress, April 19, 1951

I felt that the military necessity in the conduct of the war made necessary—

- The intensification of our economic blockade against China.
- The imposition of a naval blockade against the China coast.
- Removal of restrictions on air reconnaissance [military survey] of China’s coastal areas and of Manchuria [northeast China facing Korea].
- Removal of restrictions on the forces of the Republic of China on Formosa [Nationalist forces on Taiwan], with logistical support to contribute to their effective operations against the Chinese mainland. . . .

[Once war] was 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. . . .

### B. Secretary of State Dean Acheson, Testimony to the U.S. Senate Committee on the Armed Services, June 1, 1951

I should like briefly to address myself to the alternative course which was placed before this committee. This course would seek to bring the conflict in Korea to an end by enlarging the sphere of hostilities. . . .

Against the dubious [questionable] advantages of spreading the war in an initially limited manner to the mainland of China, there must be measured the risk of a general war with China, the risk of Soviet intervention, and of world war III, as well as the probable effects upon the solidarity of the free world coalition. . . .

### Review Questions

1. What is an economic blockade? How might that differ from a naval blockade?
2. What did General Douglas MacArthur think should be done to win the Korean War in early 1951?
3. Why might the Nationalist Chinese forces on Taiwan have wanted to invade mainland China in 1951?
4. Why did Secretary of State Dean Acheson (and President Harry Truman) oppose MacArthur's war strategy?
5. *To what extent does the dismissal of Douglas MacArthur by President Truman illustrate why the U.S. Constitution provides for a civilian commander in chief? Explain your answer.*
6. *Do you think that MacArthur's war strategy was wise? Why or why not?*