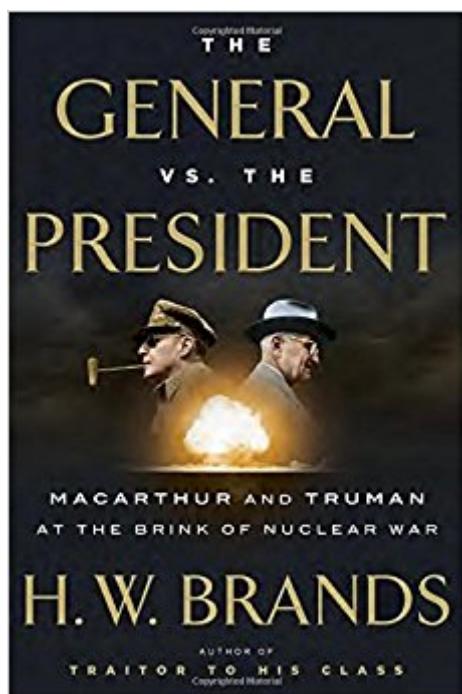


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# The General Vs. The President: MacArthur And Truman At The Brink Of Nuclear War



## Synopsis

From master storyteller and historian H. W. Brands comes the riveting story of how President Harry Truman and General Douglas MacArthur squared off to decide America's future in the aftermath of World War II. At the height of the Korean War, President Harry S. Truman committed a gaffe that sent shock waves around the world. When asked by a reporter about the possible use of atomic weapons in response to China's entry into the war, Truman replied testily, "The military commander in the field will have charge of the use of the weapons, as he always has." This suggested that General Douglas MacArthur, the willful, fearless, and highly decorated commander of the American and U.N. forces, had his finger on the nuclear trigger. A correction quickly followed, but the damage was done; two visions for America's path forward were clearly in opposition, and one man would have to make way.Â Â Â Â  Truman was one of the most unpopular presidents in American history. Heir to a struggling economy, a ruined Europe, and increasing tension with the Soviet Union, on no issue was the path ahead clear and easy. General MacArthur, by contrast, was incredibly popular, as untouchable as any officer has ever been in America. The lessons he drew from World War II were absolute: appeasement leads to disaster and a showdown with the communists was inevitable--the sooner the better. In the nuclear era, when the Soviets, too, had the bomb, the specter of a catastrophic third World War lurked menacingly close on the horizon.Â Â Â Â  The contest of wills between these two titanic characters unfolds against the turbulent backdrop of a faraway war and terrors conjured at home by Joseph McCarthy. From the drama of Stalin's blockade of West Berlin to the daring landing of MacArthur's forces at Inchon to the shocking entrance of China into the war, The General and the President vividly evokes the making of a new American era.

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## Customer Reviews

"The General vs. The President" is that rare military chronicle that becomes an instant page-turning classic." "San Antonio Express-News"Fast-paced, dramatic, and amply illustrates why Truman's stock has been on the rise in recent decades." "Boston Globe" A vivid accounting of an event that was, on the surface, a personality conflict between two strong-minded figures and, at the bottom, a courageous act that solidified civilian authority over the military in wartime." "Dallas Morning News"Brands spikes the shadowboxing between [Truman and MacArthur] with vivid dispatches from the battlefield that give his tale a get-along kick." "TIME" A highly readable take on the clash of two titanic figures in a period of hair-trigger nuclear tensions . . . History offers few antagonists with such dramatic contrasts, and Brands brings these two to life." "Los Angeles Times" "Two American heroes tested and tried at their most inspired hours . . . An exciting, well-written comparison study of two American leaders at loggerheads during the Korean War crisis." • "Kirkus Reviews, starred review

H. W. BRANDS holds the Jack S. Blanton Sr. Chair in History at the University of Texas at Austin. A New York Times bestselling author, he was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in biography for *The First American* and *Traitor to His Class*.

The death of Franklin Roosevelt as World War Two entered its final stages thrust a little known Vice-President onto the world stage. Coarse where Roosevelt was refined, usually described by a skeptical press as a "failed haberdasher" and known for building a political career with the help of the Kansas City Democratic machine led by corrupt party boss Tom Pendergast (and later sarcastically hailed as "the senator from Pendergast"), little was expected from a Truman presidency as he assumed office with the war still raging on two fronts. Some of the most momentous decisions of the twentieth century were forced upon this unprepossessing man with a reputation for plain speaking and salty language. But history has a habit of producing great leaders during difficult days (not much was expected from President Abraham Lincoln either during equally dangerous times a century earlier). General Douglas MacArthur (like Lincoln's general George B. McClellan) was glamorous, willful, egotistical, a darling of the press and feverishly ambitious with

political aspirations that were vast. Once described by an angry Roosevelt as "the most dangerous man in America", there was little that MacArthur needed to do in order to find and monopolize the spotlight. During their tense personal meetings, MacArthur's disrespect for Truman was galling. Yet somehow the notoriously feisty president managed to hold his temper when dealing with the general. With the new war in Korea becoming more dangerous by the hour and his leadership questioned from all corners, President Truman committed a serious slip-of-the-tongue when asked by a reporter about the possible use of atomic weapons in response to China's shocking entry into the war, Truman replied somewhat angrily that "the military commander in the field will have charge of the use of the weapons, as he always has." This suggested that General MacArthur, commander of the American and U.N. forces in the Korean theater, had his finger on the nuclear button and the will and temperament to push it. This was certainly NOT what the president wished to convey. Truman's quick correction did little to minimize the damage and the political fall-out was fierce. It created the illusion of two distinct and mutually exclusive paths to "victory" in this war, with the vision of an unpopular president pitted against that of the man who had single-handedly (or so he seemed to claim) won the war against Japan in the Pacific theater of operations. Truman appeared clueless to a war-weary public while General MacArthur appeared fearless and bold, unafraid of unleashing the nuclear genie despite Russia's recent entry into the "nuclear club." The two men soon clashed, spurred on by an American news media whose political agendas were as entrenched as today and just as noxious. The rise of Senator Joe McCarthy and his relentless anti-communist crusade, the ubiquitous House Un-American Activities Committee, staffed by a rising star in the Republican firmament Richard Nixon, who had recently broken the Alger Hiss spy case and relished the increasing acclaim, Soviet actions in blockading Berlin and threatening the freedom and safety of a nervous Europe, the testing of increasingly powerful and horrifying nuclear weapons and the heavy losses in Korea, all of these events served as a poisonous backdrop to the clash of wills between an obstinate and feisty President Truman and a supremely self-confident and narcissistic General MacArthur. The General vs. The President is exhaustive in detailing these events with a clear but unavoidable bias towards the president. History has been much kinder to Truman, who is generally considered to have been a great president (as discussed in David McCullough's masterful biography of Truman). The flaws in General MacArthur's personality have been revealed and magnified over time but author H. W. Brands maintains as much fairness as is possible under the circumstances. The story of the struggle between these two men is riveting and fascinating with its obvious ramifications for today. The modern political world was born during this era and The General vs. The President does an exemplary job in telling the story. It often reads

more like a political thriller as it delves into what can only be described as "high stakes poker" with its frequent raising of the stakes, bluffing and savage endgame with its winners and losers. The General vs. The President is compelling history that I often found difficult to put down. If you're interested in the Cold War era, the Korean War and the various political forces and actors engaged in a life-and-death-struggle for military and political supremacy, this is an indispensable book. An excellent history book and strongly recommended.

I asked a few of my friends what they knew about Truman and MacArthur in the Korean War. All are well read in history; they all had an answer. And for most it was "MacArthur wanted to use nuclear weapons against China," (or North Korea, or Russia), "and Truman wasn't willing to use the bomb, so he had to fire MacArthur." And while there's a bit of truth to each part of their answers, that's not really how it all played out. And I think all of them would love to read "The General vs. the President". This is a wonderful work of history. I've read biographies of both MacArthur and Truman, but this book brought both of them to life in a fresh way, especially with respect to their relationships with others. The complex narrative is laid out with great clarity, including both military and political maneuvers. I particularly appreciated the account of MacArthur's Congressional hearings, and the striking contrast between the public posturing and the devastating closed sessions. In a way, both men are diminished by this history. Truman's reputation has been on the rise in recent years, because of his no-nonsense pragmatism, but as Brands shows clearly, Truman was in over his head, and he made careless mistakes. MacArthur did wonders in Japan, particularly in the way he transformed its politics, but his naivety about global geopolitics seems breathtaking from our perspective. Highly recommended.

I was born at the end of World War II and somewhere in my childhood I became aware of the controversy between President Truman and General MacArthur, however, I never studied the facts behind the firing of General MacArthur. This book is an excellent guide which lays out the conflict in an easy to read format. It also attempts to keep to the facts and not take sides in the debate. However, it becomes clear who was right and who was not. It also demonstrates the correctness of the founding fathers in having a civilian government conduct the management and control of the military. As a side issue, I fought in Vietnam and felt the frustration of many in the military for the manner by which we conducted that war. Seeing the history of the end of World War III and the ensuing Korean War (which it was) I can better understand why we were reluctant to be more aggressive in taking the Vietnam War to the north. Excellent book. I highly recommend it.

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