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White House Publicity Operations During the Korean War, June 1950-June 1951¹

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Abstract:

Truman was the first modern president to face the challenge of selling a limited war. Based on a wide range of primary sources, this article explores the impact that the Korean War had on Truman's publicity operations. Whereas all wars place important new demands on presidents to speak out more frequently and forcefully, limited wars place significant constraints on what presidents can say and do. During the Korean War, Truman refused to go public at key moments, often employed rhetoric that was more restrained than at earlier moments of the Cold War, and shied away from creating new structures to coordinate the official message. Such actions also had important consequences. In 1950-51, they hampered the task of effective presidential communication, and contributed to the war's growing unpopularity. For the longer term, they demonstrated the difficulties of selling a limited war, and hence place into sharper context the problems that beset Truman's successors during the subsequent conflict in Vietnam.

The large literature on the growth of the public-relations presidency emphasizes a variety of causes, including the changing conception of the role of the presidency in the political structure, the increased opportunities for "going public" created by new technologies, the decline in the efficacy of private bargaining between the president and

Congress as power blocs inside Washington have atomized, and the increasing incidence of divided government which encourages presidents to go above the heads of an ever more obstructive Congress (Edwards, 1983; Tulis, 1987; Kernell, 1997). But war has also been an important catalyst for change. From William McKinley's efforts to formalize relations with the press during the 1898 conflict with Spain, to the establishment of propaganda agencies by Woodrow Wilson in 1917 and Franklin Roosevelt in 1942, the pressures of war have generally enhanced the president's ability to take his case to the public (Hildebrand, 1984; Winfield, 1994; Ponder, 1999).

This article explores the impact that the Korean War had on Harry S. Truman's publicity operations. Amongst both historians and political scientists, Truman has a decidedly mixed reputation as a public opinion leader. On the one hand, he often emerges as a figure of marginal importance. Truman was certainly never comfortable practicing the arts of the rhetorical presidency. Often ill at ease when reading a prepared set-piece address, he had an instinctive "distaste" for publicity stunts and generally shunned the polls, surveys, and focus groups that drive so much of the content of today's speeches. Truman also inhabited a political environment that seems very distant from the demands that operate on contemporary presidents, for television was in its infancy, air travel was not widely used, and the Washington world was more insular and predictable. Nor, it is often assumed, was Truman much of an innovator. Inheriting significant changes in the structure of press conferences from Franklin Roosevelt, he made only the smallest of alterations, moving his conferences out of the Oval Office and allowing some of them to be taped (Murphy, 1969; Edwards, 1983, 39-40; Hart, 1987, 21-23).

Yet, especially for revisionist historians and analysts of presidential rhetoric,

Truman clearly made a mark in the realm of foreign-policy leadership. His efforts to sell the Cold War by exaggerating the threat to U.S. security and globalizing U.S. interests set an obvious precedent, which thereafter “presidents repeatedly drew on ... to justify military initiatives against communism in every corner of the globe” (Ivie, 1999, 586; Theoharis, 1971; Leigh, 1976; Freeland, 1985). In the early period of the Cold War, the Truman administration also moved to mobilize “ostensibly independent citizens groups to conduct public-relations campaigns in support of specific policies or programs,” working with organizations like the Committee for the Marshall Plan, the Advertising Council, and the Committee on the Present Danger (Herring, 1994, 123-24; Griffith, 1983; Wells, 1979; Wala, 1986). In addition, especially for recent incumbents behind in the polls, Truman’s combative public attitude toward the “do-nothing” 80th Congress has proved an appealing legacy. “Trumanesque” has thus entered the political vocabulary to denote a style of presidential leadership that aggressively and publicly blames political opponents in Congress for everything that is wrong with government (Kernell, 1997).

Regardless of their general thrust, most analysts glide over the fact that Truman was a war president for the last thirty-one months of his tenure. True, Korea was different from the two world wars that the U.S. faced in the twentieth century: it was a limited “hot war that broke out in the midst of an ongoing cold war” (Medhurst, 2000, 465). But Korea was still a major conflict, which soon sucked in more than five U.S. divisions, resulted in more than 78,000 American casualties in the first twelve months (of whom 21,300 were killed), saw the U.S. fighting no less than four armies and three artillery divisions of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) after November 1950, and militarized the whole American Cold War effort (Schnabel, 1992, 405; Chen, 1994, 205-9; Jervis, 1980). Based

on an extensive use of archival sources, this article documents the publicity efforts made by the Truman White House during the war, the calculations behind them, and the legacy they left both in the short and longer terms.

The argument is fourfold. As the first part demonstrates, the publicity pressures operating on the White House during the Korean War were almost as great as those facing presidents in other major conflicts—a tremendous demand for the latest information from the press and public, the need to respond the ebbs and flows of popular morale, and the difficulty of coordinating the official line as the federal bureaucracy grew to meet the manifold problems of war. Second, the president and his staff responded with some minor innovations, particularly in the use of new communications. Yet, third and more importantly, the fact that Korea was a limited war also placed significant constraints on what the president could say and do in the public sphere. Indeed, fearful that a panicky or hysterical public might demand an escalation of the conflict, official rhetoric was often more restrained than it had been in the three years before Korea. Believing too that, whatever the outcome in Korea, a full-scale conflict with the Soviets was still a distinct possibility, the White House wanted to save important structural changes, such as the creation of a propaganda agency, for the onset of total war. Fighting a new type of limited war thus cast an important shadow over what the president said, how frequently he said it, and the types of methods he used to ensure that other officials all toed the same line. Fourth and finally, this tension between the pressures of war on the one hand and the constraints of selling a limited conflict on the other had important consequences. In 1950-51, it often hampered the task of effective presidential communication, and contributed to the war's growing unpopularity. For the longer term, it demonstrated the difficulties of

selling a limited war, and hence places into sharper context the problems that plagued Truman's successors as they dealt with the even more unpopular conflict in Vietnam during the 1960s and 1970s.

I. The Impact of War

In theory, wars create a number of opportunities for more effective presidential leadership. The mass public certainly becomes more attentive to foreign-policy questions and more likely to listen to presidential rhetoric; especially in periods of crisis, Americans also tend to rally-round the flag and support their leader in the White House. At the same time, the powerful mediating voices between president and public tend to cooperate rather than compete with the White House. Not only does the press become more deferential, largely because reporters deem it hazardous to second-guess officials who have access to privileged sources of information, but opposition parties are also often ready to initiate a truce for the duration of the conflict, lest they be accused of disloyalty and undermining the war effort (Mueller, 1973; Zaller, 1994; Edwards, 2003).

In Korea, moreover, the pretext for war seemed clear-cut, at least in the early stages, for the U.S. was responding to a brazen case of communist aggression and was fully supported by the United Nations. Korea also came at the cusp of important changes in communications that were to profoundly influence the nature of presidential leadership in the decades to come. Air travel was becoming more common, reducing the distance between the battlefield and the home front and permitting senior officials to engage in high-profile summitry. Television, although in its infancy, was also starting to boom,

allowing officials to speak directly to their public audience. As we shall see, the White House was ready to embrace some of these changes in an effort to “package” the president’s message more effectively. But in 1950-51, it was the problems created by war, rather than these opportunities, which dominated most of the thinking inside the White House, for these problems seemed to greatly complicate the context within which the president had to lead.

Problems of Coordination and Control

The North Korean attack on June 25, 1950 shocked Washington. On the first Sunday, as officials hurriedly returned to their desks, reporters bombarded the White House, State, and Defense Departments with numerous questions. That day the Pentagon alone received more than fifty requests for updates on Korea and interviews with the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Two days later, more than a hundred reporters packed into the White House lobby, as congressional leaders arrived for their first major briefing of the crisis (Activity Report, 1950a, 1950b). In the next weeks and months, as the fortunes of war fluctuated rapidly—from retreat and defeat during July and August, to counterattack and the prospects of victory during September and October, and then another demoralizing retreat during November, December, and January after the PRC intervened massively in the war—the demand for information remained intense.

It was a demand that the existing machinery of government was clearly unable to meet effectively. Part of the problem was a lack of personnel. Inside the White House, a staff of only 25 supported Truman, and not the hundreds that are currently employed in

the West Wing and Executive Office Building (Carlin 2003; Hess, 2002). Headed by Charlie G. Ross, the president's close confidant, the White House press office was particularly hard hit by the intense demand for information. Indeed, although it continued to perform routine tasks, such as providing background briefings or outlining the president's daily schedule, with a degree of efficiency, the strain on the press office swiftly mounted. Soon the area was morbidly dubbed the "homicidal center" because of the killer levels of stress suffered by incumbents, with Ross succumbing to a fatal heart attack in December 1950 and his successor, Joseph Short, "a taut, tense, 'ulcer-type,'" dying of a heart condition in September 1952 (Heller, 1980, 109, 145). Inside the Pentagon, the Office of Public Information (OPI) was similarly overworked. Here, officials quickly complained that they lacked the resources to field the roughly 60 visits and more than 500 telephone inquiries they were receiving each day. And the press itself was far from forgiving, with leading reporters soon condemning the OPI for being "clumsily ineffective in the face of crisis" (Activity Report, 1950c, 1950d; Condit, 1988, 26-27).

As well as placing enormous burdens on the White House and Pentagon, Korea also brought other bureaucratic players into the business of supplying news. In Washington, foreign policy was no longer the preserve of just the White House, State, and Defense Departments. Very quickly, officials at, say, the National Security Resources Board (NSRB), the Commerce Department, and the Labor Department were increasingly drawn into statements (sometimes controversial and contradictory) on America's productive capabilities, which now had a direct bearing on the war effort. In New York, the UN became a vitally important venue, too, for the administration worked hard to wrap

its Korean intervention in the cloak of legitimacy provided by UN endorsement. In the UN, Warren Austin, the U.S. ambassador, was thus often at the forefront of the administration's efforts to define objectives and counter Soviet propaganda efforts, a task that was given a greater profile by the wall-to-wall coverage that the fledgling medium of television gave to the UN, particularly in the early months of the war. Finally, in Korea itself more than 200 correspondents were accredited to General Douglas MacArthur's command by the end of July. They were thus in a position not only to cover the general's intermittently insubordinate statements but also to witness the war at first hand, to talk to battle-weary GIs, and to record the demands for unification issued by South Korean leaders, not to mention the human-rights abuses carried out by South Korean troops.

This proliferation of news sources, combined with the intense media demand for the latest information, also exposed a deeper set of problems: the underlying rivalries that had plagued the infant national-security state since the start of the Cold War. In this area, historians have focused most of their attention on the public disputes between Truman and MacArthur over the strategic importance of Taiwan or the wisdom of extending the Korean conflict into China, since these led to the biggest political crisis of the war: MacArthur's dismissal for insubordination in April 1951 (Spanier, 1959; Rovere and Schlesinger, 1965; Weintraub, 2000). But this was only the most overt manifestation of the deeper problem of trying to keep the sprawling bureaucracy in line. Even before Korea, the growing national-security state had proved difficult to control. The Army and Navy had already been engaged in something approaching open warfare for the past few years, as stringent budget cuts ate into their resources and the two services vied to make their case in public for a larger share of the dwindling resources. The partial mobilization

plan announced by Truman a month into the war, which increased the military budget by \$10 billion, eased some of this rivalry. But other problems persisted. In the field, the Marines continued to lobby tirelessly for their own cause—much to the annoyance of Truman, who angrily commented in September that the Marines Corps had “a propaganda machine that is almost equal to Stalin’s.” In Washington, Truman had also become increasingly exasperated by the antics of Louis Johnson, his secretary of defense, especially Johnson’s constant publicity seeking, his connections with leading Republicans, and his efforts to badmouth Dean Acheson and the State Department.

Despite a few vain efforts to improve relations between the State Department and Pentagon, Korea initially served only to exacerbate the tensions. After powerful sections of the press blamed America’s early reverses in Korea on Johnson’s economy drive, the secretary of defense was quick to lash out in a series of leaks to supporters, in which he sought both to shift the responsibility for the poor showing in Korea onto the State Department and to depict himself as the administration’s leading hawk. Everything finally came to a head on August 25. On the same day that MacArthur released his famous public letter to the Veterans of Foreign Wars extolling the strategic importance of Taiwan, Johnson’s sidekick, Navy Secretary Francis P. Mathews, declared before an audience of 100,000 Bostonians that the U.S. had to be ready to launch a preventive war. In the next few days, the White House feverishly tried to undo the damage, publicly reprimanding Mathews and prevailing on him and MacArthur to withdraw their statements. But both outbursts seemed to suggest that the administration was in some disarray. And with even mainstream media organs like the *New York Times* calling on Truman to take “more active charge of our foreign policy,” the president’s press secretary was somewhat desperately

forced to remind reporters that “in the field of foreign relations there can be but one voice. This is regarded as being of fundamental constitutional importance” (Ross, 1950)

The Political Environment

Such evidence of disarray seemed like a gift to Republicans, especially those on the nationalist wing of the Party who had become increasingly vocal in their opposition to Truman’s foreign policy. Of course, Republicans in the 81st Congress were hardly a cohesive group. On most of the important roll call votes of the past eighteen months, the administration had ultimately got its own way, often with the help of East Coast Republican internationalists. But even before Korea, bipartisan cooperation had clearly been on the wane, the victim of a complex mix of personality, politics, and ideology. Back in 1947 and 1948 the Truman administration had worked constructively with the Republican-controlled 80th Congress partly because of the strong relationship it had forged with Arthur Vandenberg, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, who had the clout to get many of his fellow Republicans to support government policy. By 1950, however, Vandenberg had been effectively removed from the scene, struck down with the cancer that would kill him within a year. From the president’s perspective, none of his prospective replacements were either influential or trustworthy enough to be a new partner. This was partly because a number of leading internationalists like William Knowland and Alexander Smith had become increasingly alienated by the administration’s hands-off policy toward China and its lack of support for the Nationalist regime on Taiwan. After the Democrats regained control of the Senate in the 1948

elections, Republicans were also miffed by the small proportion of seats they had been allocated on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. And, most visibly of all, nationalist Republicans were not only ideologically out of sympathy with the Truman administration's internationalist orientation in Europe and its apparent lack of concern with China; they were also firmly convinced that the "me-too" bipartisanship practiced by Vandenberg had only reaped electoral defeat in 1948 and that vigorous partisan assaults were the best way to win back the White House after five straight losses (Westerfield, 1955; Caridi, 1968; Kepley, 1988).

If the waning of bipartisanship therefore predated Korea, the war itself helped rip these partisan perforations further apart. Rather than rallying around the flag, nationalist Republicans clearly saw Korea as a chance to launch a political offensive. In the Senate, Robert Taft, Kenneth Wherry, and William Jenner even tried to hold Acheson responsible for the war. "The blood of our boys in Korea," Wherry shouted on one occasion, "is on his shoulders, and no one else" To make matters worse, in July even internationalist Republicans united in support of Joseph McCarthy, whose reckless charges that the State Department was infested with communists had greatly poisoned the political environment since February.² Equally troubling, in August internationalist Republicans like Alexander Smith and Henry Cabot Lodge joined with Truman's habitual critics to produce the Republican White Paper, which charged Truman and Acheson with being blind to the "true aims and methods of the rulers of Soviet Russia," constantly underestimating the dangers of Asian communism, and failing "vigorously to build strong American armed forces" (New York Times, 1950).

The outcome of the mid-term elections in November only intensified the partisan

divide. Although the Democrats retained a nominal hold over both Houses in the 82nd Congress, officials recognized that, in practical terms, they would now face a far more hostile audience on the Hill. According to one internal survey, only 24 senators and 80 congressmen could be counted on as outright supporters (Marshall, 1950). And even these raw numbers masked the important fact that leading administration supporters had gone down to defeat against nationalist Republicans, with Scott Lucas losing to Everett Dirksen in Illinois and Millard Tydings losing to McCarthy's candidate in Maryland. Although later scholarly analyses have suggested that these high-profile Democrat defeats were principally the product of local issues, at the time Republican leaders were convinced that the voters had embraced their hard-hitting attacks on Truman's policies (Griffith, 1987, 122-31). Thus emboldened, in December even moderate Republican legislators supported an almost unprecedented vote of no confidence in Dean Acheson. In the New Year, Taft and Wherry then initiated the "Great Debate" into the basic thrust of the government's Cold War strategy, and especially the wisdom and constitutionality of allowing the president to send more troops to Europe.

The Pressure to Go Public

The literature on presidential leadership posits a clear relationship between the political environment and the decision either to bargain privately with congressional leaders or to "go public" over their heads. Because Truman inhabited a Washington that had not yet atomized into an "individualized pluralistic" society, and because he faced a Congress controlled by his own party from 1949-53, he might have been expected to

bargain behind the scenes with powerful committee chairs rather than adopt a confrontational strategy of going public (Kernell, 1997). To some extent, this is what happened. Truman certainly continued to place great emphasis on his weekly meetings with the “Big Four” congressional leaders. In the summer he was reluctant to deliver too forceful a riposte to the Republican White Paper lest this do further injury to the fragile bipartisan principle. And after the November election the first instinct of White House aides was to invite rank-and-file congressmen to cocktail parties and luncheons to make the administration appear less “inaccessible” and “stilted” (Lanigan, 1950).

Yet at a time when McCarthy was charging that the State Department was infested with communists, when Taft was tacitly supporting this campaign, and when other leading Republicans were launching a major attack on the whole thrust of government foreign policy, the prospects for bargaining with the opposition were clearly greatly reduced. The president certainly saw little point in private haggling sessions with Taft, the central GOP figure in the Senate, and only invited him to the White House on one occasion during the war (Patterson, 1972, 370). Wherry, the Republican floor leader in the Senate, was a more frequent interlocutor. But senior officials hardly trusted this “super-salesman” with “a tireless and bellicose enthusiasm for his product,” as was demonstrated not only by White House complaints that in private Wherry often “addressed the president as though he were on the Senate floor,” but also by one notorious occasion in September when Acheson had to be physically restrained from hitting the Nebraska senator (Stromer, 1969; Acheson, 1969, 438-39). Moreover, with internationalist Republicans increasingly starting to gravitate toward Taft rather than Truman, it was hardly surprising that the president was under increasing pressure to go above the heads of these opponents by making frequent

and timely public appeals.

This pressure was naturally at its height during the heated midterm election campaign. Truman himself bristled at the GOP assaults, commenting privately in August that “the antics of McCarthy, Taft, and Wherry have had as much as any other one thing to do with bringing on the communist attack” (Hamby, 1995, 550). In an ideal world he would loved to have responded directly. Always at his best on the stump, where he could speak directly to his audience in an informal, off-the-cuff manner, the president was widely viewed as the Democrats’ chief election asset after his shock victory over Dewey in 1948. In May, the presidential party had even undertaken a successful swing around the country, which had clearly been a dress rehearsal for the main show in the fall. As the campaign got underway, Truman then came under considerable pressure from fellow Democrats to undertake an intensive speaking tour. The DNC certainly lobbied hard to get the president to take to the stump. So did “shaky Democrats” like Brien McMahon in Connecticut, Francis Myers in Pennsylvania, and Scott Lucas in Illinois, who all asked Truman to speak on their behalf (Berger, 1950).

But politics was not the only reason to go public. Wars also create numerous situations that demand high-profile presidential leadership. First, in the early days of a conflict presidents normally deliver a “war address,” which “are typically thoughtful rather than angry narratives that explain the origins of the immediate crisis and the necessity for war” (Campbell and Jamieson, 1990; Smith and Smith, 1994, 23). Second, whenever the military campaign bogs down in stalemate and defeat, presidents need to explain why U.S. troops are continuing to fight and die in faraway lands. In 1950-51, this was summed up by pithy phrase “Why Korea?”—a question that increasingly cast a

shadow over official deliberations, dominating cabinet meetings, sparking long private presidential ruminations, and even providing the title for an Oscar-winning documentary film. Third, presidents also need to explain and clarify American objectives. In Korea, this was far from a simple matter, particularly as U.S. objectives fluctuated between defending South Korea in June, liberating North Korea in October, and effectively accepting a division of the peninsula by the following March. Nor, in the fourth place, was it necessarily clear how Korea fit into the broader Cold War context—whether it meant that the final military showdown with the Soviets was impending, whether it meant a significant shift in the U.S. gaze from Europe to Asia, and whether it demonstrated the reliability of allies or their unwillingness to make sacrifices in the common cause.

In past wars, Truman's predecessors had responded to these pressures with intensive publicity campaigns. In World War I, Wilson had undertaken extensive speaking engagements to drum up support for preparedness and his liberal peace plan. In the space of just twenty months, Wilson had spoken before Congress on no less than seven occasions, as well as making numerous other appeals (Link, 1983-86, vols. 41-53; Kraig, 2004). In World War II, FDR had been more selective in his appearances, convinced that "the public psychology cannot, because of human weakness, be attuned for long periods of time to a constant repetition of the highest note in the scale." But Roosevelt had always been shrewd in the timing of his famous fireside chats, speaking promptly in periods of defeat and swiftly briefing the public after his major wartime summit meetings (Roosevelt, 1950, 466-67, 1298-1300; Casey, 2001)

Inside the Truman administration, officials studied these precedents with care (Hechler, 1950). They also put the president under intense pressure to make more timely

and frequent public statements on each of the questions thrown up by the war. Even in the very first days of the war, despite polls demonstrating that 81 percent of the public approved of the decision to intervene, the State Department repeatedly called on Truman to deliver a major public address setting out the precise reasons why the U.S. had intervened in Korea and bringing “the whole [Korean] story together in one official narrative.” Some State Department officials were certainly uneasy at the president’s reluctance to ask Congress for a formal declaration of war, and thus hoped that such a “narrative” might suffice to keep the bypassed legislature quiescent. According to one White House aide, senior State Department figures also “seemed panicked by the criticism of a few [press] writers and they thought it essential for the president to go on air almost at once.” They were especially concerned that, by not speaking out, Truman would effectively create an information vacuum that would dissipate the initial rally around the flag effect (Acheson, 1969, 414; Elsey, 1950)

In December, the massive Chinese intervention in the war created an even greater crisis. With U.S. forces in full retreat, polls found that growing numbers of Americans now considered the war a mistake, one Gallup survey recorded that 66 percent of the public wanted to withdraw from Korea altogether, and the president’s approval ratings slipped alarmingly, so that by March only 28 percent approved of his handling of the job—an all-time low. Acutely worried by such figures, White House speechwriters now pressed for a more intensive presidential effort to bolster domestic support for the war. “One or two statements or speeches will not be enough,” insisted one aide, George Elsey, on February 2; “what is needed is a hard-hitting, carefully-thought-out program whereby a number of speeches on the Hill are required in addition to more activity on the part of

State and Defense.” “A great many people are gravely troubled and worried at the present,” Elsey stressed again a week later, “and there seems to be almost widespread confusion and uncertainty. It will be comforting and encouraging to the public to find out the president identifying himself with the gravest problems that families face today” (Elsey, 1951a; 1951b)

At the same time, the Chinese intervention in Korea and the Republican gains in the midterm election also posed a threat to the administration’s overall Cold War strategy. Before Korea, the State Department had pushed the president to endorse NSC-68, the national security review that had been completed in April 1950 and that advocated a massive increase in America’s defense capabilities. Initially, however, Truman had been reluctant to abandon both his Fair Deal domestic reform package and his effort to balance the budget, and it had taken the Korean War to convince him of the need for military mobilization. After detailed estimates for implementing NSC-68 had then been completed in the fall, the White House, State Department, and Pentagon began to plan an intensive publicity campaign to sell mobilization, using Truman’s 1951 State of the Union address as a launch pad. After the Chinese intervention, the president was under even greater pressure from the State Department to undertake this publicity blitz, especially since Taft and Wherry were openly questioning the need to expand America’s defense commitments in Europe, while Herbert Hoover and Joseph Kennedy delivered high-profile speeches calling on the U.S. to withdraw behind its hemispheric defenses (*Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950*, 1:423).

One way the president could have responded to public unease, partisan assaults, and the need to maintain the current course both in Korea and the broader Cold War

struggle was by issuing a ringing visionary proclamation. Precedent suggested that this was the way presidents tended to proceed, for Wilson's Fourteen Points, Roosevelt's Four Freedoms, and even Truman's own Doctrine speech of 1947 had all used ideological language in order to rally domestic support for extensive overseas commitments. On a number of occasions, MacArthur now called on the president to extend the Truman Doctrine to the Far East, which would mean abandoning the administration's earlier efforts to differentiate between primary and secondary interests in Asia. When MacArthur was subsequently dismissed in April 1951 for publicly calling for more aggressive policies, some White House speechwriters thought the time was ripe to play the general at his own game. As one official reported in the spring of 1951,

They feel that our present foreign policy has not been effectively enough 'packaged,' and is therefore not well enough understood by our people, and cannot compete emotionally with such solutions as are offered by General MacArthur, and may be offered by others in the future. They feel that a more precise expression of our objectives in relation to the Soviet Union would give our policy more emotional appeal. In several recent speeches, they have sought to express our policy as being intended to achieve the overthrow of the Soviet regime, and the liberation of the satellite states.

Although strong protests from the State Department headed off any talk of rollback, White House speechwriters still wanted a presidential proclamation along the lines of the Atlantic Charter or Four Freedoms, which would declare America's ultimate goal in the

Cold War as “universal liberty.” “Their feeling,” a State Department speechwriter concluded, “is that ‘people need to see the light at the end of the tunnel,’ to be willing to go along with the sacrifices being asked of them” (Shulman, 1951).

II. TRUMAN’S RESPONSE

In responding to these pressures, the Truman White House was ready to innovate in certain areas. In August 1950, the president’s senior aides began working with NBC to produce a series of weekly television broadcasts entitled “Battle Report, Washington.” These used “the magic of television” to provide White House briefings on key aspects of the war, and early editions were used to downplay the extent of U.S. battlefield reverses, amplify the key themes of presidential speeches, and stress the sterling work that was being done by the Army medical teams in Korea (Battle Report Scripts, 1950; Bernhard, 1999). In October, as the midterm election campaign got underway, Truman then suddenly decided to fly 14,425 miles to Wake Island to meet with General Douglas MacArthur. Clearly an attempt to place himself in the public eye in an ostensibly non-partisan setting, the Wake conference was intended to symbolize Truman’s role as commander in chief at a time when victory appeared imminent (Wilz, 1978). Then in the winter of 1951, as the debate over Cold War mobilization intensified, so did the administration’s efforts to construct “state-private” networks, as officials worked closely with organizations and pressure groups like the Advertising Council and the Committee on the Present Danger to make the public case for key aspects of the government’s program (Griffith, 1983; Wells, 1979).

Yet for the most part, Truman failed to respond in a decisive manner to the pressures created by the Korean conflict. The reason for this was simple: if wars place significant publicity demands on the White House, then limited wars also place important constraints on what the president can say and do. During the Korean conflict, these constraints operated in three different ways.

Preventing an Escalation of the Current Conflict

In the first place, Truman was generally determined to say and do nothing that might turn the current conflict into a full-scale global conflagration. Not only was the country woefully unprepared to confront the Soviets directly, but, if a world war was to break out, Korea was about the last place that the Pentagon wanted to make a stand. It was all well and good, senior officials agreed, making a limited move to defend South Korea, since this would serve to protect Japan, demonstrate U.S. resolve to the communist world, and build up American prestige amongst its European allies. But if such a limited engagement flared into a world war, the Joint Chiefs of Staff believed that Korea held very little strategic significance, and they had long planned to abandon the peninsula to the enemy as part of an overall defensive posture in the Far East, while scarce American resources were concentrated in Europe (Gaddis, 1977; Foot, 1985). Given these calculations, the White House was keen during the early days of the crisis not to taunt Stalin and provoke him into another act of aggression. As one senior official explained,

Should the U.S. officially denounce the Soviet government as responsible for the

aggression, it would be very difficult to avoid the logical consequences of such a position, i.e., branding the Soviet Union as the aggressor through UN action. Other steps, such as breaking diplomatic relations, etc., would be almost inescapable once the direct accusation was made.... In short, we definitely do not wish to see Soviet forces involved in this as it would complicate our military tasks and it could lead to a general conflict which we have no desire to see and for which we are distinctly not militarily prepared (Nitze, 1950).

As well as being keenly determined to head off such calamitous international consequences, officials also had one eye firmly fixed on domestic public opinion. Although suspicious of polls, Truman the ex-senator was always well briefed on the prevailing opinion up on Capitol Hill (Donovan, 1982, 81). And here, the mood was particularly tense and uneasy. On numerous occasions during the summer of 1950, a variety of congressmen intimated to the administration that popular support was growing for some form of preventive strike against the Soviet Union. In December, after the Chinese intervention, rumors even flooded Washington that a new preventive-war pressure group was about to be formed, while a number of leading Democratic congressmen also calling for more vigorous action against the Soviets (Marshall, 1951). Keeping the home front cool was thus a dominant concern. As one official explained to a friendly congressman in July 1950, “we must exercise a high degree of self-discipline under the present situation and should carefully consider any measures likely to cause hysteria” (Johnson, 1950).

This “self discipline” was evident in a number of spheres. For a start, it influenced

the frequency with which the president went public. Despite the intense pressure from advisers, in the first weeks of the crisis the president not only refused to go before Congress to deliver a major speech lest this “contribute to a war hysteria” but also expressly stopped other leading officials from talking to the press and public (Connelly, 1950; Public Papers, 1950d). In this vital period, all that emanated from the White House were three short press statements, a number of relatively uninformative press conferences, and a series of private meetings with congressional leaders (Public Papers, 1950a, 1950b, 1950c; Paige, 1968, 202, 212). During the mid-term election campaign, Truman then deliberately shied away from playing a major role, believing that it was unseemly for the head of state to be grubbing for votes while American boys were still fighting and dying in Korea. And after the Chinese massively intervened in the war in November, the president waited for a couple of weeks before making a set-piece speech and firmly rejected any notion of making a direct appearance before Congress. When he did deliver a major television and radio address on December 15, Truman was now ready to declare a state of national emergency to meet the new crisis. But in the New Year, the president then failed to follow this up with a sustained publicity campaign, delivering no major foreign-policy speech between the State of the Union message in January and General Douglas MacArthur’s firing in April, even though this was a period when opinion polls revealed that support for the war was increasingly fragile and there was at least one cabinet debate on how to provide a more plausible public answer to the question, “Why Korea?”

Moreover, on those occasions when Truman did go public, much of what he said was also restrained. To be sure, the president had no qualms about indicting both the North Koreans and the Chinese in the starkest of terms, depicting their acts as “raw” and

“blatant” aggression “without a shred of justification.” Truman also placed Korea squarely in the context of the global struggle against communism. The U.S. faced a “worldwide threat,” he declared in July, which necessitated “worldwide defenses.” At stake in Korea, he stressed on other occasions, was nothing less than the future of Western civilization. Korea was “the frontline in the struggle between freedom and tyranny”: if freedom was extinguished in Korea, it would be endangered everywhere (Public Papers, 1950e, 1950g). As the conflict dragged on, Truman was also increasingly inclined to emphasize the monolithic nature of the communist enemy, with the Kremlin clearly acting as the driving force behind North Korean and Chinese aggression. “Our homes, our nation, all the things we believe in, are in great danger,” he stressed on December 15. “This danger has been created by the rulers of the Soviet Union.” (Public Papers, 1950h; Ivie, 1994, 3-5).

Yet when viewed in the context of his prewar statements, not to mention many of the suggestions he privately received from key advisers, the president’s Korean War rhetoric was not nearly as inflammatory as it first appeared. This was evident in Truman’s initial characterization of the enemy, which carefully shied away from linking Moscow explicitly to the North Korean invasion, and later emphasized that an all-out conflict with the Soviets could easily be avoided. “There is no conflict between the legitimate interests of the free world and those of the Soviet Union that cannot be settled by peaceful means,” he declared in December. “We will continue to take every honorable step we can to avoid general war” (Public Papers, 1950h).

As this statement suggests, Truman was keen to counterbalance his use of crisis imagery with reassuring words and phrases. Whereas earlier in the Cold War his rhetoric had “made the nation feel insecure in the extreme (Ivie, 1999, 587), now the president

generally tried to stress that the current crisis could be kept within bounds. In a major foreign-policy speech in September, for instance, Truman first alluded to the possibility of another major war, pointing out that this would result in “ultimate chaos.” But he then littered his speech with references to peace and progress, the possibility that aggressors could be deterred through strength, the basic health and confidence of America, and the effective support it was receiving from allies. More tellingly, even in December when he declared a state of emergency, Truman was careful to instruct the public to “act calmly and wisely and resolutely.” “We are a tolerant and restrained people,” the president reminded his audience, “deeply aware of our moral responsibilities and deeply aware of the horrors of war” (Public Papers, 1950g, 1950h).

This effort to becalm the public even extended to the selling of mobilization. On this subject, numerous analysts have claimed that the Truman administration attempted to drum up support for NSC-68 by using overheated language, by launching a “psychological scare campaign” that sought to paint the Cold War “in dramatic, even exaggerated terms” (Acheson, 1969; Theoharis, 1971; Gaddis, 1982, 108; Christensen, 1996; Bernhard, 1997). Yet, on close inspection, it is clear that the White House was often keen to dampen the zeal of other officials. The president’s whole timetable, as one White House aide privately divulged to a reporter in September, revolved around “gradually rousing the people to the peril they face, rather than scaring the daylights out of them all at once, as some administration advisers have urged” (Booth, 1950) This was certainly true at the start of the war, when Truman was keen to strike exactly the right balance between calling for greater effort without sparking hysteria and panic. “The facts should warn us against easy indifference and sensational alarm,” Truman carefully announced. “This is not time for

business as usual. We are not now living under peaceful world conditions. But neither are we engaged in general or widespread war. We are in a position between these opposite extremes, and economic policy should be guided accordingly” (Public Papers, 1950e and 1950f). Again, it was a somewhat similar story after the Chinese intervention. Although the president now moved to ratchet up the rhetoric and directly indict the Soviets, this was still accompanied by calls for restraint. As one senior official declared, U.S. mobilization efforts had to proceed “with determination, but also with patience and calm deliberation” (Public Papers, 1950h).

The Complexity of a Limited War

A second element of this limited war that exerted an important influence over White House leadership was the complexity of the policy agenda. Unlike a total war, where all resources are immediately mobilized behind the war effort, the objective is unconditional surrender, and the postwar world will naturally be constructed without the enemy that is blamed for starting the conflict, in a limited war none of the major problems is susceptible to a clear-cut solution.

In Korea, this was most obviously the true with U.S. objectives. Both in the summer of 1950 and in the winter of 1950-51, the president and his advisers engaged in a series of protracted debates over whether or not U.S. forces should cross the 38th parallel, whether or not they should seek just to destroy the North Korean Army or liberate the whole peninsula by force, and whether or not the conflict should be extended into China. While these vexed questions remained under active consideration, Truman’s reluctance to

go public in a prompt fashion stemmed partly from the fact that the administration often lacked a clear-cut policy to sell.

Moreover, when the administration finally agreed on its position, the resulting speech tended to be of a detailed “policy-stand” variety, rather than the more ringing visionary declarations that some White House aides demanded. This was particularly true in the late summer of 1950, the only occasion when the president abandoned his general wartime reluctance to go public, delivering two fireside chats in the space of just nine days in an effort to dominate the public agenda in the aftermath of high-profile insubordinate comments by MacArthur and Matthews. Both these speeches were detailed statements of government policy—the first listed the government’s eight goals in the Far East, the second outlined the complex considerations of the administration’s domestic mobilization program. Because so many departments and agencies were determined to have say on such important policy statements, the final product was greatly toned down. As one senior White House aide explained at the time, Truman’s “policy pronouncements . . . have to be carefully checked and revised from many angles. . . . One difficulty that the president has in this regard is that he usually has more to say in his speeches than most people, and has to say it with considerable precision. A presidential speech is a different animal from a news broadcast. Its primary requirement is accuracy, not style” (Murphy, 1950; Heller, 1980, 151).

The Prospect of a Future World War

As well as dampening down popular hysteria and clarifying detailed policy

initiatives, Truman also believed that certain courses of action were more suitable to a total war, and wanted to save them in case the worst was to happen and Korea, or another Cold War crisis, were to escalate out of control. This explains how he characterized the Korean conflict in the popular discourse. To be sure, his most famous soundbite of the period was inadvertent. In his first press conference of the crisis, the president lapsed into an error that periodically afflicted his unscripted appearances: he let journalists put words into his mouths. Would it be correct “to call this a police action under the UN,” one reporter inquired? “Yes,” the president replied, “that is exactly what it amounts to.” Although this phrase would come back to haunt him, as Republicans latched onto it time and again to attack the administration’s way of waging the war, it was actually perfectly in tune with Truman’s overall desire to place Korea in proper perspective. As the White House press office explained more than six months later, the president constantly refused to use the term “war” when referring to the fighting in Korea, reserving this term for “the possibility of a conflict on a much greater scale” (Short, 1951).

Truman’s reluctance to create a propaganda agency derived from similar calculations. In previous wars, presidents had met the challenge of coordination and control with important structural changes. Even in the war of 1898, McKinley had moved to centralize the dissemination of information to the press in the White House. In both world wars, the White House had then established a propaganda agency to try to control the flow of war-related news—although, sensitive to the backlash against Wilson’s centralized and coercive regime, Roosevelt’s World War II system had been looser and more informal (Vaughn, 1980; Winkler, 1978).

At various stages of the Korean War, the Truman White House considered

reviving the OWI, acutely aware that the demands of this conflict had “led to considerable public uncertainty, doubt, and confusion” (Ross, undated). Elmer Davis, who had headed the OWI, was even consulted and his long and detailed history of the bureau was circulated inside the White House. But on two separate occasions, the president and his advisers ultimately shied away from establishing a propaganda bureau. Their decision stemmed from a number of factors. Congress’ traditional distrust of anything that smacked of propaganda was all too familiar, and naturally overshadowed discussions. Truman also favored neat and tidy chains of bureaucratic command, and often shied away from creating new agencies to meet new problems. But there was one calculation that clearly clinched the argument. The OWI (like the Committee for Public Information in World War I) had been a creature of total war. A new OWI would have to await a new global conflagration (Else, undated).

Without a formal propaganda agency, the White House had to resort to tightening up existing procedures. An informal interagency committee, which had once operated under the auspices of the State Department, was reactivated. Meeting twice a month, it distributed background materials, instructions, and guidance to other departments, informing them of the official line. If anyone was still in doubt as to what to say, they were instructed to approach the White House press office for clearance (Barrett, 1950).

Yet, as well as placing even more pressure on the overburdened, undermanned White House press office, this minor tinkering proved far too flimsy to prevent certain senior figures from issuing deeply discordant statements. In September, Truman responded to Johnson’s leaking and the MacArthur-Matthews outbursts by sacking the former and disciplining the latter. In December, after the Chinese intervention, the

problem of coordination became even more acute. Truman responded by issuing two decrees, one reiterating that all government statements must be cleared by senior officials in Washington, the other ordering all officials abroad “to exercise extreme caution in public statements, to clear all but the most routine statements with their departments, and to refrain from direct communication on military or foreign policy with newspapers, magazines, or other publicity material in the U.S.” (James, 1985, 540-41).

This “gagging order” silenced MacArthur—for a time. But it also operated in a blunt manner. Unlike a propaganda agency, which could both act as a clearinghouse for official statements and undertake its own efforts to amplify the agreed line, the very existence of a gagging order tended to deter most officials from speaking out on Korea at a time when battlefield fortunes were taking a disastrous turn and opinion polls revealed mounting levels of public confusion about America’s whole involvement in Korea.

III. CONSEQUENCES

As Edwards (2003, 241) points out, presidential leadership of public opinion is rarely as effective as conventional wisdom maintains. Indeed, the evidence suggests that the bully pulpit has often “proved ineffective not only for achieving majority support [for a president’s program] but also for increasing support from a smaller base,” basically because presidents have to compete with the Congress and the media in order to get their message to a mass public that, in any case, is often apathetic and inattentive. The major exception to this tends to be during periods of national emergency. At such moments it is easier for the White House to set the agenda because “citizen attentiveness to politics

peaks.” It is also easier for presidents to frame the crisis because “elites are more likely to forge a united position,” with both Congress and the media falling in line behind the administration’s diagnosis of events (Zaller, 1994, 187-88). During the Korean War, moreover, Truman began with some clear advantages. Not only did the mid-1950s mark the high-point of the Cold War consensus, when most Americans fully supported the policy of containment but it was also the apogee of so-called “objective journalism,” when the mainstream press engaged in very little editorializing in its news pages and tended to rely instead on “official facts” when developing a story (Kern, Levering, and Levering, 1983, 7-9; Hallin, 1986, 25, 83, 169).

Yet, on close inspection, the nature of Truman’s publicity efforts during the Korean War greatly hampered effective communication. This is not to say, of course, that every public opinion problem stemmed from what the president did or failed to do. It is rather to argue that certain discernible trends can be traced directly from the way in which Truman chose to sell the Korean War. These trends were most noticeable at the level of elite discourse. “Most observers agree that to be effective, the president must focus the public’s attention on his policies for a sustained period of time” (Edwards, 2000, 56). But by refusing to speak out more frequently and more forcefully, Truman provided Republicans with an opening to re-frame the whole debate. And because presidential leadership tends to be most effective when there is a “consensual elite discourse,” with the administration, Congress, and media all disseminating roughly the same message, this very real clash between the Truman White House and its opponents also left a distinct mark on mass opinion.

Framing the Crisis

The first consequence of Truman's low-key response, particularly his reluctance to speak out promptly and repeatedly during periods of crisis, was that it effectively created an information vacuum. Indeed, with few "official facts" at their disposal, reporters naturally looked elsewhere for their stories. Many resorted to pure speculation. As the *New York Times*' White House correspondent revealingly noted two weeks into the crisis, because the administration was "making a studied effort to avoid sensationalism as part of a policy to avoid further complications in Korea and elsewhere," he and his colleagues were relying "mainly on their [own] observations of comings and goings of national leaders to uncover some idea of what was going on" (Leveiro, 1950). Often, this resulted in a welter of conjecture about developments that the White House hoped to play down, such as the state of the H-bomb program or the extent to which reservists would be obliged to fight in Korea. It also led to numerous stories claiming that Truman's subdued public posture, symbolized by his inadvertent characterization of the war as a "police action," was evidence of excessive complacency at the very top. "There is a total war in Korea," Drew Pearson told his ABC listeners in a typical comment, "but there is only 50 percent war in Tokyo and about 10 percent war in Washington" (Ayers, 1950; Daily Opinion Summary, 1950b, 1950c, 1950d).

The absence of sustained cues from the White House also provided leading Republicans with an obvious opportunity to frame the crisis in their own terms. Of course, intense partisan sniping was clearly evident before Korea, and for months Republicans had been looking for any stick with which to beat the administration. But at first, the new

crisis created something of a dilemma for nationalist Republicans, and even the administration's staunchest opponents believed that the party "should give every possible support to the conduct of the war" (Taft, 1950). In this context, Truman's early actions were highly significant. For in the absence of serious consultation, a formal declaration of war, and timely and forceful presidential speeches, Republicans were soon emboldened to speak out. Taft typically led the way, charging that the government's decision to place Korea outside America's "defensive perimeter" back in January 1950 had effectively "invited" the attack. Soon other leading Republicans like Styles Bridges, William Knowland, and Alexander Smith were repeating this charge and placing the whole crisis squarely in the context of the Democrats' past neglect of Asia (Smith, 1950; *Congressional Record*, 1950, 9994, 10560, 10558-59).

With few countervailing statements from the White House, especially in the first weeks of the crisis, the mainstream press implicitly accepted this GOP charge. Although applauding Truman's prompt and vigorous action in Korea, a number of newspapers and magazines—including the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *New York Times*, *New York Herald Tribune*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and the *Wall Street Journal*—all claimed that Truman's stand in Korea "marks an almost complete reversal" in government policy. "It almost amounts to 'vindication' of the attitude taken" by senior Republicans, the *New York Herald Tribune* editorialized. By overturning our old do-nothing Asian policy, agreed the *New York Times*, we have finally regained "our national self-respect.... Our good conscience has been restored" (Daily Opinion Summary, 1950a)

Polls on this subject were scanty and somewhat mixed. On the one hand, when in August the Schenley organization conducted an intensive survey of popular attitudes in

thirteen leading metropolitan areas, it found little support for the Republican attempt to re-frame the crisis. In the opinion of 41.9 percent of respondents, the U.S. had intervened in Korea to “stop communism from spreading, halting reds,” while only 1.1 percent thought it was because “we were unprepared” and 1 percent because of the government’s soft attitude toward the communists in Asia. On the basis of such evidence, the State Department’s Office of Public Affairs was quick to conclude that “the general public has been little affected by charges in Congress and the press that administration ‘mistakes’ in foreign policy invited the attack” (Schenley, 1950; State Department, 1950a). But more conventional surveys were not so clear-cut. According to one NORC poll conducted in mid-September, for instance, 34 percent of Americans thought that the government could have done more to prevent the communists from invading Korea in the first place. After the Chinese intervention dramatically changed the context of the war, Republicans found an even more receptive audience. In December, one poll revealed that 50 percent believed the administration had done “a poor job of handling our foreign policy in Asia,” while only 17 percent believed it had done a good job. Of those who were critical, “poor preparation” and being “too lenient with Reds; too soft” were their central reasons. Moreover, this growing sense that government failings were in some way responsible for the war also had a knock-on effect on other key findings—not just Truman’s own approval ratings, which fell below 30 percent for most of 1951, but also those who thought that the U.S. had a “made a mistake going into Korea in the first place,” which shot up from 20 percent to 50 percent between the summer of 1950 and the spring of 1951 (Strunk, 1951, 171, 387; Towle, 2004, 58-59)

The Cold War Context

While the war itself became steadily more unpopular, Korea gave an undoubted boost to plans to mobilize American resources for the broader Cold War struggle. In June 1951, an opinion survey of popular attitudes toward NSC-68 found that the public “appears by all reliable objective criteria to be favorably disposed.” Indeed, 83 percent wanted to continue the current levels of high spending on rearmament, 52 percent supported economic assistance to allies, and 57 percent favored sending U.S. troops to Europe (Schwinn, 1951).

By 1951, such results had created a permissive environment that facilitated the implementation of NSC-68, which ultimately resulted in a staggering 262 percent increase in defense appropriations over the next few years. Significantly, however, the administration was unable to make much political capital out of its massive mobilization drive. Indeed, with the president adopting a restrained public posture on the whole subject, internationalist Republicans were quick to charge that the government was actually moving too slowly in this sphere. In the summer of 1950, for instance, fifteen House Republicans (including Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford) issued a statement declaring that Korea “has exposed the fact that a tragic diplomatic and military inadequacy exists.” Stressing that a “lack of leadership at this time will breed hysteria or complacency,” they called for a “vigorous program of positive action of which the American public is aware.” Henry Cabot Lodge shrewdly summed up their basic stance when he stressed that the administration would be far better placed to foster unity if officials launched a more vigorous campaign to awaken the people to the danger. Calling for “an all-out

preparedness effort that would know no party line,” Lodge urged “that the president declare the present struggle [in Korea] to be one for our existence, that it is not just a police action; that it is a struggle not only for the survival of the U.S., but a struggle for the whole free world” (Washington Post, 1950a and 1950b)

Significantly, a string of surveys found that Americans were prone to agree with Republicans that the president was too slow in recognizing the danger, too complacent in proposing an effective response, and too lackluster in providing vigorous leadership. In New York City on July 19, the Schwerin Research Corporation assembled one of the very first focus groups to watch Truman’s first major speech on the Korean War on “a large-screen, instantaneous-projection television.” It then asked this group to react to each individual passage, marking whether or not they were interested in or supported what Truman had to say. “Clearly,” the pollsters concluded, “the president was not in advance of the national mood.... If anything, the public would evidently have gone along with somewhat stronger language regarding communism” (Schwerin, 1950)

More conventional data supported this finding. “The main criticism of the administration’s actions since June 25,” one survey noted in August, “is that the actions are inadequate and that mobilization should be faster and greater in magnitude.” According to Gallup, 53 percent of respondents believed that plans should be worked out “NOW for the total mobilization of all U.S. citizens—that is, in case of another war, every able-bodied person would be told what war work he would have to do, where he would work, and what wages he would get.” If support for such regimentation was surprising in itself, Gallup also found that 70 percent would endorse higher taxes to fund a larger military. “Rarely has the Institute in its fifteen years of measuring public opinion,” Gallup

concluded, “found such heavy majorities expressing a willingness to pay more taxes for any public purpose” (Gallup, 1950; Patterson, 1950).

Bickering, Dissension, and Confusion

Nationalist Republicans were not particularly comfortable in exploiting such sentiments, for they were ideologically opposed to massive government spending and economic controls that might end in a “garrison state” (Patterson, 1972; Hogan, 1998). Instead, they focused one dimension of their assault on the administration’s bungling and incompetence—charges that had been a staple of GOP attacks since 1945, but which were now given greater force by the president’s inability to stop subordinates from issuing discordant statements. Recalling the 1946 election, when a very public dispute over foreign policy between two leading officials, Henry A. Wallace and James F. Byrnes, had foreshadowed a disastrous defeat for the Democrats, in August Taft was quick to seize upon the Matthews and MacArthur outbursts. The administration, he charged, “has so many conflicts within itself, it’s like a man with no brains who is unable to develop a consistent course of action.” The next month, the RNC then sought to follow this up, by making government “blundering” in Korea the focus of its whole midterm election campaign strategy.

Another aspect of the nationalist critique was the unconstitutional manner in which this bungling administration was bypassing Congress. This was at the heart of Taft’s campaign in the June crisis, when he called on the president to submit a formal declaration of war. It also formed the centerpiece of the nationalist position during the “Great

Debate,” when Taft and Wherry called for proper congressional participation in decisions to send additional U.S. troops to Europe. It was even an integral part of the GOP’s public support for MacArthur, which seemed to offer yet more evidence of blundering officials in Washington refusing to listen to other constituted authorities.

These twin charges of bickering and confusion on the one hand, and arrogant unilateralism on the other, clearly left a mark on mass opinion. According to one survey conducted in August 1950, although “the stand taken in Korea has received a stronger national support than almost any other foreign policy development since World War II, there is a substantial confusion about U.S. policy objectives... Many voices have demanded that the government make clear to the people its world position.” In other surveys, hard data backed these somewhat impressionistic conclusions. True, a range of polls demonstrated greater public confidence in the way “our relations with other countries are being handled,” up from a low of 33 percent just before the war to 48 percent a few weeks later. But throughout the fall and winter of 1950, as confidence again started to wane, a large plurality of those expressing disapproval consistently did so because they thought there was “too much bickering, dissension, confusion” in government circles (State Department, 1950b).

Unfortunately, no polls were conducted on the subject of Truman’s failure to ask Congress for a declaration of war. But as the “Great Debate” got underway, a clear majority of 64 percent agreed with the “Congress position” that “the president should not be allowed to send U.S. troops overseas unless the Congress first approves it.” When MacArthur’s dismissal the next month then placed the matter of dissension and bickering at the top of the political agenda, there was little doubt that most Americans had lost

confidence in the administration and were ready to listen to Truman's critics. In May, 58 percent disapproved of his sacking of MacArthur and only 28 percent were in favor. When it came to MacArthur's specific proposals for seeking victory in Korea, 56 percent supported the general's suggestion for bombing supply bases in China and 58 percent wanted to give aid to the Chinese Nationalists on Taiwan so that they could attack the mainland communists (State Department, 1951).

Such results have often been interpreted as evidence that the government's aggressive Cold War rhetoric had now come back to haunt it. By exaggerating the danger, the argument goes, officials now found it difficult to control public demands for more offensive action in Korea. Yet, on close inspection, there was actually a very different dynamic at work. Indeed, Truman was not being trapped by his earlier forceful rhetoric. Quite the contrary, it was his highly restrained utterances at the start of the war that had first fueled suspicions that he was too soft and too complacent. The fact that leading officials had publicly voiced similar doubts, together with the emphasis that Republicans gave to such dissension, only gave further credence to the general sense that America was losing the Cold War and that something radical was required to regain the initiative.³ It was this that MacArthur and the Republicans successfully tapped into in the spring of 1951.

IV. LEGACY

Analysts have employed a variety of variables to explain what, when, and how presidents speak out, from the personal and philosophical to the institutional and cultural

(Hart, 2002). By looking in detail at Truman's publicity operations during 1950-51, this article has attempted to establish that limited wars can have a significant impact, too. During the Korean conflict, Truman's actions were markedly different from other periods of his tenure. Despite his distaste for publicity stunts and general reluctance to innovate, he was willing to embrace changes in communications to get his message out more effectively, flying to Wake Island to meet MacArthur in the midst of the 1950 campaign and working with NBC to provide a factual weekly television show on the war. For the most part, however, Truman's dominant posture was one of restraint. In contrast to the earlier period of the Cold War, his Korean War rhetoric was, in key respects, more subdued. Unlike 1947, when he had gone before Congress to deliver his ringing Truman Doctrine speech, or even in 1948 when he had issued strong and direct condemnations of the Soviet Union, for most of the first year of the Korean War Truman was often keen not to be too provocative, lest this prod the communist superpowers into another act of aggression or worry the public at home. Nor was Truman's restraint confined to his rhetoric. Perhaps the most telling moment came in the 1950 campaign, when the president even adopted a decidedly "un-Trumanesque" posture by refusing to campaign directly and aggressively against his congressional opponents.

That Truman was a war president for the last thirty-one months of his tenure is thus important to understand what he said and did in public. But Truman was not the only president to be affected by such problems. That limited wars place their own particular pressures on what presidents say and do in public was further demonstrated by America's next experience of conflict on the Asian mainland. During the Vietnam War, the demands on the White House were, in some crucial respects, even greater. For one thing, presidents

of the 1960s were acutely aware of Truman's earlier political failures, and they might thus have been expected to learn some lessons from his earlier travails. Truman's successors were also in a position to benefit from the intellectual discourse on limited war that followed the Korean experience. This suggested that limited conflicts were likely to be unpopular with a public that hates war, blames its outbreak on evil regimes, and prefers only to use force when this promises to end in the total destruction of the leaders and polities who started the conflict in the first place (Osgood, 1957; Spanier, 1959; Rees, 1964). During the 1960s, moreover, the Johnson administration was faced with an even less propitious domestic environment than Truman had dealt with fifteen years before. Vietnam, after all, was a war covered by reporters who were more prone to question than accept the veracity of official statements. It was also covered far more extensively by television, which relayed images of death and destruction straight into American living rooms. And it came at a time of greater social upheaval and unrest, which was in turn greatly exacerbated by the stalemate in Vietnam. As Hamby (1977) points out, "Korean War protesters waved the American flag; Vietnam protesters frequently burnt it. Disapproval of Korea was encased in a lifestyle characterized by patriotism and conventional moral behavior; disapproval of Vietnam was inextricably tied to a counter-cultural revolution that defiantly challenged traditional morality."

Yet in Vietnam, too, the constraints associated with fighting a limited war greatly tempered presidential actions. Like Truman, Johnson was reluctant to speak out forcefully and frequently at key moments. When escalating America's involvement in the summer of 1965, he was determined to do so in "cold blood," fearing that a sustained publicity campaign might excessively arouse the public and greatly complicate the task of keeping

the conflict within bounds. Thereafter, Johnson was anxious reassure the Chinese in public, lest an untoward statement provoked the PRC to intervene in this war too. Throughout the conflict, he also refused to establish a propaganda agency, often attempting instead to use quiet behind-the-scenes initiatives to rally support and dampen discord (Herring, 1994). And, perhaps most damagingly of all, during the Tet Offensive in 1968, he made no major effort to go public between the start of February and the end of March, even though this allowed his opponents to re-frame the whole crisis at a time when popular support for the war was clearly starting to wane (Turner, 1985; Hallin, 1989, 197; Seib, 1998, 17-18).

Of course, like Korea, there were numerous reasons why the Vietnam War became increasingly unpopular, from the strategic stalemate to the mounting casualties. But the constraints associated with fighting a limited war were also important because they served to dissipate the advantages that presidents ought to enjoy during periods of crisis and war, from dominating the agenda to forging a cooperative relationship with the other mediating voices in the polity.

Put another way, the impact of a limited war on presidential leadership is essentially negative, for this type of conflict precludes certain types of action. The legacy of Truman's experience was thus subtle. During world wars, presidents had left behind distinctive changes that their successors could build upon. Indeed, even though the propaganda agencies were swiftly abolished, the intensification of the relationship between the executive and the media left an obvious mark. As Ponder (1999) concludes of Wilson's World War I publicity efforts, they "had given new institutional impetus to governmental adoption of techniques of publicity to shape opinion ... [and] their legacy

encouraged the expansion of press bureaus and publicity practices throughout the government in the 1920s.” Truman bequeathed no such changes. But as the first president to face the task of publicizing a limited war, he did pioneer methods of trying to keep the home front cool in the midst of crisis—methods that may have stopped the domestic environment from overheating but that nevertheless greatly hampered the task of effective communication.

Biographical Information

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² Although internationalists only stood up for McCarthy on the procedural grounds that the Democrats had sought to bring the politically explosive investigation into McCarthy's charges to a precipitous close.

³ In February 1951, a plurality of 30 percent believed that the Soviets were winning the Cold War, up from 15 percent in December 1948 and 23 percent in March 1950. Only 9 percent thought that the U.S. was winning. Strunk (1951), 399.