The Korean War

The Truman Doctrine stated that the USA would help people to fight against communism. In 1950 the USA showed that this was more than words: US troops went to war to stop the spread of communism in Korea.

How successful was the USA in the Korean War?

A divided land

The Japanese controlled Korea between 1904 and 1945. At the end of the Second World War Korea was in a situation similar to Germany. Russian forces were in the north of Korea and American troops had landed in the south. Korea became divided in two at the 38th parallel. In 1948 separate Korean governments were set up in the north and south of the country.

A communist, Kim II Sung, took power in the North. From 1948 the President of South Korea was the anti-communist, Syngman Rhee. He was a corrupt leader and he soon became very unpopular. In April 1950 Rhee did badly in elections. Many of the people of the south voted in favour of unification with the communist state of the north.

Invasion

On 25 June 1950 North Korean troops invaded the South in a bid to re-unite Korea by force. Historians disagree about whether the North Koreans were told to invade by the Russians. Truman believed that the Russians were behind the attack and that it was a test of the US policy of containing communism. The invasion came at a time when many Americans were extremely worried about the challenge of communism. China had recently become a communist state. In September 1949 the Americans found out that the USSR had nuclear weapons. American politicians became convinced that communists wanted to take over the world. On hearing the news from Korea, Truman immediately ordered US forces in Japan, led by General MacArthur, to help South Korea.

The US counter-attack

At first the North Korean attack was very successful. Within four days the southern capital of Seoul had been captured. The North Koreans conquered all of the country except for a small area in the south around the town of Pusan. In July 1950 MacArthur sent American forces to Pusan and prepared for a counter-attack. The US fight-back began in September. MacArthur organised a successful amphibious attack on the town of Inchon. At the same time US forces broke out of the Pusan area. The counter-attack went extremely well and by October the US troops had reached the 38th parallel, the original border between North and South Korea.

General MacArthur, 1949. This US general played a key role in shaping American policy during the Korean War.

The risk of Chinese Intervention

Communist China was a new force in the world. Few people believed that they would risk war with the mighty USA.

In early October the Chinese issued a statement that said, 'China will not sit back with folded hands and let the Americans come to the border'. The Americans ignored this warning and continued to march north. On 10 October the Chinese government said that Chinese troops would attack the Americans if MacArthur continued. MacArthur ignored this threat.

SOURCE A

The American view of the dangers of outside help for North Korea was expressed in American magazines of the time.

The danger of Chinese or Soviet intervention if the North Korean Communists are pushed hard to the border is negligible.

Life Magazine, October 1950

If the Chinese should commit their own forces to the struggle in Korea they would do so knowing that they were inviting a general war. That is a price they are not prepared to pay.

The Nation, September 1950

SOURCE B

The communist view was expressed in a Chinese newspaper.

We cannot stand idly by when the American imperialists, a notorious enemy, is now expanding its war of aggression against our neighbour and is attempting to expand the aggressive flames to the borders of our country.

Kung Jen Jih Pao, 13 October 1950

SOURCE C
The Chinese intervene

At the end of October Chinese troops went into action and attacked South Korean and American troops. In November the South Koreans and Americans were forced to retreat. Truman and MacArthur were not put off by the Chinese intervention. Britain and France wanted Truman to talk to the Chinese. The advice from these allies was ignored. Instead, MacArthur planned a further push towards the Chinese border. This renewed attack began on 25 November. It went badly wrong. MacArthur made a big mistake: he divided his forces in two and marched north. The Chinese had little difficulty in attacking and destroying many of the US forces. MacArthur had to retreat and the Chinese soon took control of almost all North Korea. Once again it was the turn of the communist forces to push over the border into South Korea. The Chinese offensive continued into the New Year. On 1 January they crossed the 38th parallel and on 4 January they took the Southern capital, Seoul.

**MacArthur's advice: December 1950**

> The US should consider all methods to defeat the Chinese; this could include the use of atomic bombs against China.

> The war should be extended to the Chinese mainland in order to cut off supplies to the communist forces in Korea.

> The ultimate aim of the war should be not only the recapture of North Korea, but also the defeat of communism in China.

The British government was appalled by talk of using atom bombs and invading China. The British Prime Minister, Attlee, flew to Washington and urged Truman to negotiate with the Chinese. Attlee failed to get the Americans to talk to the Chinese but Truman did stop talking about dropping the atom bomb.

**Source D**

MacArthur's mistake and retreat was a great blow to the Americans.

There is no doubt that confidence in General MacArthur has been shaken badly as a result of the events of the last few days. Similarly, there is no doubt that the United States leadership in the Western world has been damaged by President Truman's acceptance of the bold MacArthur offensive.

The New York Times, 30 November 1950

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The fall of MacArthur

In February 1951 the Americans launched a further attack on the communist troops. By March the communist forces had been pushed back to the original border, the 38th parallel. At this point MacArthur disagreed with Truman. Truman now abandoned the idea of conquering all of Korea and was considering making peace with China. For a long time there had been tension between Truman and MacArthur. This now reached breaking point. On 24 March MacArthur made a public statement criticising the idea of a deal with the Chinese. Truman was annoyed when he heard this. MacArthur wanted to cross the border again in order to re-conquer North Korea. He sent a message to an American politician explaining his view that America should keep fighting until the Chinese were defeated. Truman was very angry that a general was trying to control the war, instead of obeying his orders. And in April MacArthur was dismissed. This caused a sensation in the United States.

**Source F**

Eisenhower. He came to power determined to end the Korean War.

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Activity

1. Explain what happened in each of the following phases of the Korean War. For every phase decide whether you think the communists or the anti-communists were more successful.
   - June 1950 – July 1950
   - September 1950 – October 1950
   - November 1950 – January 1951
   - February 1951 – March 1951
   - April 1951 – May 1951
   - July 1951 – July 1953

2. Using all the information in this unit decide whether you think American policy in Korea was successful. Give reasons for your decision.