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A Timely Lesson from the Korean War

by Lee Lacy

*Mrs. Rierdon of Covington, Va. thinks the President is a traitor to his country because of the removal of MacArthur. Says "as of now I am a Republican."*¹

The time was April 1951 and the United States and its allies were in the midst of a police action on the Korean Peninsula. To a war weary American public, the police action felt more like a war. The conflict teetered back and forth since the June 1950 invasion by North Korea. Initially, the venerable soldier-statesman, General Douglas MacArthur, led the allied effort. Behind the scenes raged a political battle between the iconic General MacArthur and the plain-spoken President of the United States, Harry S. Truman. It was personal dispute of extraordinary proportions and at times, it seemed as though the Korean War was ancillary to their private conflict. It was this "clash of titans" that helped to shape the modern definition of the doctrine of civilian control of the military.

Fast forward 60 years. History repeated itself in June 2010, when a similar problem tested the presidency of Barack Obama. Much as events unfolded in 1951, President Obama relieved General Stanley McChrystal as Commander, International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan. Both events had little in common except to test the tradition of civilian control of the military. The few things it had in common had far-reaching implications for civilian authority and the role of the military. Nearly 60 years after the Korean War truce, the lessons learned from that conflict continue to shape public policy. It is worthwhile to examine these two events in the context of how and why democratically elected governments hold its civilian leaders as supreme over the military. What conclusions are drawn from these two historical events and how does it shape relations between the civilian government and the military? How do we improve how our civilian leaders govern and how the military executes policy?

The Roots of Conflict

The doctrine of civilian control of the military is deeply rooted in the democratic traditions of the U.S. and is a staple of liberal democratic thought. The idea our elected civilian leaders, some of whom never served in the military, sit above professional military officers in the chain of command is distinctly a U.S. tradition, anchored in the U.S. Constitution. Article II, Section 2 lists powers granted to the "executive power." The document further states, "The President shall be Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, and of the Militia of the several States, when called into the actual Service of the United States..."² Author Peter Feaver defines the civilian control as "the proper subordination of a competent,

¹ National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Harry S. Truman Library, White House Telephone Call Transcripts, Author Unknown, 1951, 4.

² U.S. Constitution, art. II, sec. 2.

professional military to the ends of policy as determined by civilian authority.”³ On its face, the doctrine seems straightforward and uncomplicated. This is not the case according political theorist Samuel P. Huntington, in his landmark work, *The Soldier and the State*. Huntington asserts both the President and Congress have different ideas on the doctrine and they compete for power. “The one prime essential for any system of civilian control is the minimizing of military power. Objective civilian control achieves this reduction by professionalizing the military, by rendering them politically sterile and neutral. This produces the lowest possible level of military political power...it preserves the essential element of power which is necessary for the existence of a military profession.”⁴ General MacArthur, in his 1964 autobiography, wrote, “The legal authority of a President to relieve a field commander, irrespective of the wisdom or stupidity of the action, has never been questioned by anyone. The supremacy of civil over the military is fundamental to the American system of government, and is wholeheartedly accepted by every officer and soldier in the military establishment...”⁵ It is one thing for leaders and scholars to theorize about doctrine and another thing to put it to the test.

There are two categories in which military officers challenge the President. The first category is anecdotal, off-the cuff remarks, made without first considering the consequences of one’s speech. Over the years military officers were disciplined for making inappropriate comments about the President. Broken military careers litter the trail of those who walk this dangerous path. For example, the incident of the U.S. Air Force general who made public derogatory comments about President Bill Clinton in 1993.⁶ The general who violated the Uniform Code of Military Justice was forced to resign. It is an infraction of the rules which govern the military to speak in contempt of the President. The second category of challenge is a more serious test—sometimes manifested in a contest of the political will between a general officer and the President. The first real and substantive test came during the U.S. Civil War, when President Abraham Lincoln relieved General George B. McClellan for—among other things—insubordination. Approximately 100 years later, a most infamous case was the feud between Truman and MacArthur in 1951. As a historical backdrop to the incident, there was a precedent in the MacArthur family. General Arthur MacArthur, Jr., father of Douglas, was relieved by President William McKinley because of a conflict with the civilian governor of the Philippines, Howard Taft. Taft later became president. Ironically, Taft’s son, U.S. Senator Robert A. Taft, became an ardent supporter of Douglas MacArthur in the aftermath of MacArthur’s 1951 relief. Both MacArthur’s were known as strong-willed individuals, which certainly compounded the problem. The next test took place when President Truman relieved General MacArthur on April 11, 1951. In later years, President Truman was quoted, “I fired him because he would not respect the authority of the President...”⁷

Nearly 60 years later, we revisited this matter, albeit in a different setting and with a new cast. The recent matter between President Obama and General McChrystal seems to fall somewhere in between. There is little evidence of critical remarks toward the President, directly attributed to General McChrystal; but it appears the remarks were sanctioned by him. The

³ Peter D. Feaver, *The Civil-Military Problematic: Huntington, Janowitz and the Question of Civilian Control*. (Armed Forces & Society, 1996), 149-178.

⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1957), 84.

⁵ Douglas MacArthur, *Reminiscences*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), 393.

⁶ John Lancaster, “General Who Mocked Clinton Set To Retire, Punishment Follows Remarks At Banquet,” *Washington Post*, June 19, 1993, sec. A1.

⁷ Merle Miller, *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Berkley Publishing, 1973), 287

incident went viral on the World Wide Web and the press wrote McChrystal's epitaph as he was summoned to the White House. The affair seemed heightened in an age of around the clock news coverage and instant communication. The issue between Obama and McChrystal never reached the seriousness of the Truman-MacArthur affair. It attracted worldwide attention in the summer of 2010 and caused many observers to re-examine events from 1950 and 1951. One thing is certain—the Monday morning quarterbacks of history will never run out of material as long as tension exists between civil authority and the military. This was clearly demonstrated in both the MacArthur and McChrystal affairs. It is important to note, since the creation of the Republic, no instance of contention between the President and his flag officers ever came close to creating a Constitutional crisis or put the nation in jeopardy. It is a testament to our form government and its traditions.

Truman-MacArthur

The relief of General MacArthur initially polarized the nation. Telephone calls, telegrams and letters poured into the White House. Many were against MacArthur's firing. One such telephone call taken by a White House operator, in which Mr. Charles Durran of Waterbury, Conn. said "Me and my five brothers can whip all the Koreans – and if my five brothers won't help me, I can whip them myself."⁸ Conversely, there were many instances of support for President Truman's decision, some of which came in the press and in Congress. The events of April 1951 began soon after the Korean War started. Historian Michael Pearlman chronicled the Truman-MacArthur situation as taking place in stages. Stage 1 was the onset of hostilities in June 1950 and lasted until September 1950. During this time there was much bargaining and compromising on the war between MacArthur, The Department of Defense (DOD) and the Truman Administration. This period was characterized by initial North Korean victories and the lack of preparedness of U.S. troops. Stage 2 began in September 1950 and ended in November 1950. The amphibious Battle of Inchon took place and was on overwhelming success. MacArthur's popularity grew. Additionally, the People's Republic of China (PRC) entered the war, surprising MacArthur who, only a few days earlier, met President Truman at Wake Island and predicted the Chinese would not invade. Pearlman wrote, "...Stage 2...was a de facto abdication by the president [to MacArthur]."⁹ Truman respected MacArthur's military mind and deferred to him on operational matters. Truman "passively await[ed] the outcome of MacArthur's plans for victory."¹⁰

This changed. In Stage 3, as tensions between the two men increased, Truman ignored MacArthur's policy criticism and shifted operational war decisions to the Commander, Eighth Army and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS).¹¹ A war of words ensued. Much of the conflict between Truman and MacArthur took place when MacArthur made public comments about the war. MacArthur spoke out on policy by issuing press releases. More often than not, these press releases were not given in advance to other interested parties, such as the DOD, Department of State (DOS) and the Truman Administration. On many occasions, President Truman learned about MacArthur's statements when he read it in the *Washington Post*. In a watershed moment, early in the dispute, General MacArthur spoke to the Associated Press on November 28, 1950.

⁸ NARA, p. 3.

⁹ Michael Pearlman, "Truman and MacArthur: The Winding Road to Dismissal," Korean War Anthology, (Fort Leavenworth, CSI Press, undated), 2.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

“You can tell the boys that when they get to the Yalu [River] they are going home...”¹² This was known as the “Home by Christmas” statement which, later, MacArthur regretted. The next day, after an infuriated President Truman privately reacted to the statement, General MacArthur wrote a de facto retraction. This was precursor of things to come. It was the first shot across the bow in the private, but high profile personal war between Truman and MacArthur. On November 30, President Truman made a public statement about the “Home by Christmas” statement. President Truman responded in a press conference. A reporter asked the President if MacArthur exceeded his authority. President Truman responded that MacArthur did nothing of the kind. Inside, the President was seething. In public, President Truman showed support and respect for MacArthur, but historical records show the President was privately angry. To mitigate the situation, in December 1950, the JCS released new press guidelines for field commanders. The JCS dictated all press releases and public statements receive approval by the DOD, for military matters, and the DOS, for foreign policy statements. This directive was at the heart of the Truman-MacArthur controversy in months that followed. Despite the gag order MacArthur continued to violate it by issuing unilateral statements on Korea. Later, this subject boiled over when MacArthur spoke out on the question of Formosa (Taiwan) against the JCS directive. President Truman was suspicious of the Nationalist Chinese, who occupied Formosa, and did not want to widen the war with the PRC. In turn, Truman directed the JCS to enforce the gag order.¹³

On March 20, 1951 MacArthur wrote Congressman Joe Martin a letter critical of the Truman Administration. Martin was the Republican Minority Leader in the House of Representatives. The political climate was similar to today. Martin, later, read the letter on the floor of the House. It was a turning point in the test of political will between Truman and MacArthur. About the same time, on March 24, 1951 MacArthur, without White House authority, announced an ultimatum to the PRC in which it told the Communists to surrender or face the possibility of the expansion of the war. Truman was livid when he learned of the statement and branded MacArthur’s actions as sabotage against ongoing negotiations. Truman considered this act as overt insubordination. The President ordered the JCS to mildly reprimand and re-direct MacArthur to the JCS directive to clear all external communications through proper channels.¹⁴ It was a show of restraint and demonstrated Truman awareness of the possible political repercussions if MacArthur was fired. Finally, it was MacArthur’s letter to Rep. Martin that was the beginning of the end for the General. MacArthur critics took particular offense with the concluding statement in the letter, “There is no substitute for victory.” It was thought the statement meant—that MacArthur would abandon the current policy of limited war on the Korean Peninsula. MacArthur, in his autobiography, felt his letter was taken out of context. He felt the letter was a courtesy reply to a Congressional query.¹⁵ It was the final straw. According to White House documents, Secretary of State Dean Acheson, Secretary of Defense George Marshall, Joint Chiefs Chairman General Omar Bradley and presidential counselor Ambassador Averell Harriman met on April 6 to discuss what the President should do in light of this latest development. Secretary Marshall cautioned to weigh any decision carefully before taking action. Secretary Acheson also voiced caution. General Bradley and Ambassador Harriman wanted to fire MacArthur right away. President Truman expressed his concern about MacArthur violating

¹²NARA, Harry S. Truman Library, General File Papers of Harry S. Truman, Author Unknown, 1951.

¹³ Pearlman, 7.

¹⁴ *Documentary History of the Truman Presidency* (University Publications of America, 1996), Vol 20, xxxiii.

¹⁵ MacArthur, 386.

the JCS directive on making comments about foreign policy. No decision was made and the President directed everyone to reconvene the next day. They met again on April 7. Joining the group were Vice President Alvin Barkley, Supreme Court Chief Justice Fred Vinson and Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn. In the meeting Vinson advised caution because the authority of the President was at stake and there might be Constitutional questions. Barkley asserted MacArthur should be fired. Speaker Rayburn worried about the political repercussions, no doubt in deference to MacArthur's perceived popularity.

President Truman felt history was on his side. Truman noted that President James Polk disagreed with General Winfield Scott during the Mexican-American War and President Lincoln dismissed several generals in the U.S. Civil War. Truman agonized over what to do with MacArthur and was deliberate in coming to his decision. In Truman's mind, the time had passed for political consideration—this was a matter of the insubordination of a high ranking flag officer. Truman, a former National Guard officer with service in World War I, respected MacArthur and acknowledged his role in achieving victory in World War II. All of this was considered. On April 9 President Truman made up his mind. MacArthur had to go. A short cable was sent from the JCS to MacArthur's headquarters in Japan informing him of the action. The termination was immediate. MacArthur never questioned the authority of the President to relieve him of command, although he felt humiliated. A leak caused the information to become public before MacArthur could read the cable.¹⁶ MacArthur accepted his fate. The MacArthur's immediately returned to the U.S. to adoring crowds. In San Francisco five hundred thousand well-wishers greeted the MacArthur's return to the mainland. The day before MacArthur spoke to a joint session of Congress, an estimated crowd of seven million gave him the largest ticker tape parade ever given in New York City. The adoration was short-lived. Within a month the enthusiastic crowds that initially greeted MacArthur began to dwindle. An appearance at the Cotton Bowl in May drew an estimated twenty-seven thousand supporters.

From the time MacArthur arrived in the continental U.S. through the end of 1951, Truman supporters around the country reported directly to the President the size and enthusiasm of public support for MacArthur. Most of the letters and telegrams came from partisan supporters, some with unkind comments about MacArthur. It appears the President was concerned about the fallout from firing MacArthur. Truman often responded to the reports with a personal note.¹⁷ Eventually, the controversy quieted down in the U.S. and the Korean campaign continued under General Matthew Ridgeway. MacArthur slipped quietly into private life. 52 years of distinguished military service came to end for General Douglas MacArthur. The mood of the country shifted political power from the Democrats to the Republicans in November 1952. Following the inauguration of General Dwight D. Eisenhower on January 20, 1953, President Harry S. Truman, to some the "accidental President," quietly left office. Harry and Bess Truman, private citizens, boarded a Union Pacific train for Independence, Missouri. The greatest challenge to civilian control of the military became another chapter in history.

Obama – McChrystal

No one believes the events that caused General Stanley McChrystal to resign as the NATO Commander in Afghanistan was anywhere near the magnitude of the Truman-MacArthur

¹⁶ Geoffrey Perret, *Old Soldiers Never Die* (New York: Random House, 1996), 570.

¹⁷ NARA, Harry S. Truman Library, General File Papers of Harry S. Truman, Author Unknown, 1951.

controversy. The Truman – MacArthur affair barely rose above a simmering feud between two leaders of gigantic stature. MacArthur’s undoing was rank insubordination, demonstrated over a period of time. Similarly, the Obama – McChrystal dispute was, in itself, a serious event. It never rose to the level of the Truman – MacArthur feud. The Truman – MacArthur event had its roots in the post World War II occupation of Japan.¹⁸ Neither President Obama nor General McChrystal held superstar status and the conflict began and ended in a relatively short period of time. Certainly, neither event ever threatened the Constitution nor the firm control of civilian authorities over the military. There is an abundance of scholarship regarding Truman – MacArthur because nearly 60 years have passed since the incident. There is much analysis from the volumes of history regarding the legacies of President Truman and General MacArthur. Additionally, each man wrote an autobiography and provided their personal views.

History is still fresh regarding Obama – McChrystal. There is little to draw conclusions from except official statements, news accounts and opinion. The study of both incidents will likely produce lessons to benefit the study of civilian - military relations. It is an enduring topic. What can we learn about the role of the military and its place in influencing the policy decisions of the civilian government? Where is the line between the military’s criticism of public policy and insubordination? What can public policy makers learn about their relationship with the military? How do the two distinct cultures converge? What can be done to prevent future challenges to civil authority?

What Does it Mean?

It is important to compare the two incidents in order to develop an assessment. General MacArthur overtly criticized a sitting President and his public policy. MacArthur was clearly insubordinate. MacArthur’s weapon of choice was a series of statements to the press about the conduct of the Korean War. In December of 1950, when MacArthur was ordered by the JCS to stop issuing unilateral and uncleared statements, he started down the path of insubordination. MacArthur boldly challenged President Truman policy of limited war on several occasions. MacArthur came close to widening the war with the PRC. Finally, the letter to Rep. Martin was all President Truman could bear. Truman had his own “runaway general.” The President had to act. MacArthur was relieved of command.

The recent issue with General McChrystal is not as black and white as it was in 1951. This will likely create debate for years to come. General McChrystal criticized a sitting President, although in a more subtle manner than General MacArthur. One subtly was McChrystal’s decision to release his commands’ August 2009 assessment on Afghanistan to the public. Some critics saw this move as seeking to force President Obama’s hand in committing more forces to the region. Rep. Dennis Kucinich gave an opinion which reinforced his view of civil authority over the military, “...”You know, generals are subordinate to the president who is the commander-in-chief. He’s the boss. And when generals start trying to suggest publicly what the president should do, they shouldn’t be generals anymore.”¹⁹ Nevertheless, President Obama let McChrystal continue. Without the hindsight of publicly available documents, no one knows if McChrystal was told to stop actions that were interpreted as challenging the President. We have

¹⁸ D. Clayton James, *The Years of MacArthur Volume III 1945-1964* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin), 21 -22

¹⁹ The Hill, December 26, 2009, "Kucinich: Generals Who Spoke Publicly on Afghan Strategy Should Lose Jobs" <http://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/73623-kucinich-generals-who-spoke-publicly-on-afghan-strategy-should-lose-their-jobs?tmpl=component&print=1&page=>

to wait for history in this instance. Finally, the infamous June 15, 2010 *Rolling Stone* article revealed unflattering comments about President Obama, Vice President Joe Biden and other senior administration officials. None of the comments were directly attributed to McChrystal, but he did not refute their validity. This had the same effect as if McChrystal directly criticized the President. Clearly, McChrystal's actions were wrong. A firestorm of controversy erupted in the days before the article was published. McChrystal offered his resignation to President Obama, which was accepted.

The similarities between the MacArthur and McChrystal incidents end with the instances of their criticism of the President. It is clear, as far as how history portrays the matter, the conflict between President Truman and General MacArthur was, in part, personality driven. MacArthur irritated Truman in many areas. In their first ever meeting on Wake Island, MacArthur's dress and demeanor rankled the President. At the beginning of the meeting, President Truman reprimanded MacArthur for keeping him waiting.²⁰ President Truman's 1956 memoirs are reserved, but 1973's *Plain Speaking*²¹, published after Truman's death, reveal the deep-seated animosity Truman held for MacArthur. "I've given it a lot of thought, and I have finally concluded...decided there were times when he [MacArthur]...well, I'm afraid he wasn't right in the head."²² General MacArthur cultivated a reputation for pomposity and for surrounding himself with yes men. He was an icon. In contrast, President Truman was well aware of his own status as a Washington outsider. Truman, widely unpopular, was a common man who unexpectedly became President. They were from different worlds, different cultures and destined to collide.

On the other hand, the controversy between Obama and McChrystal was less a personality driven issue than it was an apparent mistake on the part of McChrystal. The heart of the conflict appeared to be McChrystal's frustration over the conduct of the war. That frustration manifested itself with inappropriate comments about the President and the current Administration. At first glance, it seems like both men have more in common with each other than did Truman and MacArthur. Both President Obama and General McChrystal graduated from establishment universities and have ties to Ivy League schools. Differences begin to emerge. Obama is a political newcomer and McChrystal was a tenured Army officer. Where President Obama is more cosmopolitan and aloof; McChrystal is more comfortable casually dressed and prefers NASCAR over basketball.²³ It is too early to know the role each man's personality played in the controversy. There is little available for analysis. It was reported McChrystal was disappointed in his meetings with the President. "...McChrystal and his new commander in chief failed from the outset to connect."²⁴ Additionally, "...According to sources familiar with the meeting, McChrystal thought Obama looked "uncomfortable and intimidated" by the roomful of military brass."²⁵ When the complete history is written we will likely have better insight on how the entire incident unfolded. Often lessons are learned even when history is incomplete or unwritten.

²⁰ Miller, 295.

²¹ In 1995, Historian Dr. Robert Ferrell challenged *Plain Speaking* as inaccurately quoting President Truman, but the issue was never resolved since author Merle Miller died in 1986.

²² Ibid.

²³ Michael Hasting, "The Runaway General," *Rolling Stone*, June 22, 2010, <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/173901/19236> (accessed September 26, 2010).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

For the sake of improving our government, its traditions, norms and institutions, we study history. We seek to apply the lessons learned from history. We are a self-correcting military. We value the analysis of important events after they occur. Some of the best practices in government are the self-criticism practiced by the military. We study the doctrine of civilian control of the military in the hopes of educating the current class of military professionals and influencing the civilian leaders of our nation. The unique nature of our open society permits us to apply the concepts of critical thinking to this problem. How do we understand these historical events with reason rather than emotion? How do we assess these problems in light of our personal bias, assumptions and points of view? Do we understand these events with honesty and open-mindedness, without a hint of selfish motivation? How do we judge the events and weigh the evidence?²⁶

The lessons we learn will fill volumes, merely based on what happened between President Truman and General MacArthur. It is a timeless piece of history and it complements our study of the Constitution and the shaping of public policy. Later, when more is revealed about the trouble between President Obama and General McChrystal, we should re-examine the matter and validate any conclusions based on any new or revealed evidence. The lesson that stands out most is the enduring doctrine of civilian control of the military. It was never in danger in 1951, nor was it in 2010. It is unique to our nation, our humble beginnings and is a witness to the humility of our leaders. President Truman proved correct in his actions. General MacArthur made grave errors. 60 years later President Obama proved justified in his actions to remove General McChrystal. The President of the United States, in his role as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, sets policy for our military. President Truman asserted in his memoirs that civilian control of the military is basic element of the Constitution. "Policies are made by elected political officials, not by generals or admirals..."²⁷ Furthermore, Truman wrote, "I have always believed that civilian control of the military is one of the strongest foundations of our system of free government...we have always jealously guarded the constitutional provision that prevents the military from taking over the government..."²⁸ In the present day, this is a seminal question in the development of our future leaders. Professional military officers are encouraged to make their viewpoints known, but ultimately they are obligated to carry out lawful orders from the President. This separates the U.S. from despotism and reinforces our nation's role as the leader of the free world. Military officers perform their duties by carrying out the full intent of our civilian leaders. Privately held opinions of the military are to remain private while in positions of responsibility. The diverse nature of U.S. society holds dear our right to dissent. While in uniform members of our military must suppress the desire to challenge civil authority and it must uphold the policies set forth by the civilian government. It is reasonable to conclude General McChrystal knew this. It will be interesting to find out his motivations for his actions. Professional military officers are not ignorant of these concepts. It is fitting the best educated and trained military in the world should adhere to policies in support of its elected leaders. President Truman wrote about the humility military officers must have for public service. He wrote, "...these things [humility] are not taught to military officers. Military officers are accustomed to words like "command" and "obedience" Truman felt the military definitions of the words were not compatible for use in our form of government. We must ask ourselves if President Truman's

²⁶ Daniel J. Kurland, "What is Critical Thinking?," Daniel J. Kurland, http://www.criticalreading.com/critical_thinking.htm (accessed September 27, 2010)

²⁷ Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs* (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 444.

²⁸ Ibid.

words stand the test of time. Lastly, President Truman asserted that General MacArthur threatened and endangered the principle of civilian control of the military.

Does History Repeat Itself?

President Truman in his historical perspective warned us about the precarious relationship between civilian authority and the military. In 1956, Truman asserted the military lacked the proper training and understanding of the doctrine of civilian control of the military. Is this true in the present time? How do we engage in this conversation in 2010 in regard to the education of our military professionals? Is this limited to the military? Is this an appropriate topic for civilians studying or engaged public policy? The dialogue that takes place in our educational institutions can determine if there will be another “MacArthur moment.” An editorial on the *Milwaukee Journal* the day after MacArthur’s dismissal aptly summed up the subject, “...the dismissal of MacArthur has shaken the entire globe, and precipitated one the major controversies of modern times. We are a long way from hearing the last of it.” So, is it cliché to say “history repeats itself?” Whether it is or not, the dilemma is just as timely, now, as it was in 1951. How we apply the lessons of history is another matter.

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