

# MILITARY HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MASSACHUSETTS

September 7, 2007

## MHSM ROTC ESSAY COMPETITION TOPIC

### Background

The Constitution of the United States provides that “The President shall be Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy...”. It follows that during a time of war a president would see it as his duty and responsibility to exert control over the general direction of the war. In so doing, however, presidents have sometimes found themselves at odds with their military leaders.

In 1951 President Harry Truman, embroiled in controversy with General Douglas MacArthur over the course of the Korean War, and contemplating the extreme action of relieving the general of his command, searched for guidance in the past. He looked back over eighty-five years into the circumstances surrounding the dismissal of General George McClellan by President Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War.

### Purpose and Content of the Essay

Your essay should examine these two historical events, explaining how dissensions arose between the presidents and the generals, and how these dissensions influenced the course of each war. You are asked to make comparisons, and to point out any similarities and differences you may perceive between the Lincoln/McClellan and Truman/MacArthur situations. In so doing, you may want to consider such factors as the contrast in background and personalities between the parties, the influence of politics and public opinion in each era, and the lack of military experience on the part of the presidents. And your essay should contain answers to the following questions:

If the positions taken by Generals McClellan and MacArthur with respect to the conduct of the Civil War and the Korean War had prevailed, how might the outcomes have differed from what really happened?

Mid-nineteenth century America was a major force in the Western Hemisphere, but was not one of the world’s great powers. By the mid-twentieth century, on the other hand, following victory in world War II, the U.S. had emerged as one of two superpowers, with a global perspective and global commitments as the leader of the free world. How did this change affect the roles of President Truman and General MacArthur in contrast to the roles of President Lincoln and General McClellan?

In the final part of your essay, as you reflect on these confrontations of civilian and military leaders in a time of war, what conclusions would you draw about where to set the limits when it comes to the public criticism of a president’s war policies by his generals?

