

Fading Away – Douglas MacArthur and Our Crisis of Meaning

by [DL Adams](#) (May 2010)



Introduction – the Value of History

During times of national strife, upheaval, and war thoughtful people look in many directions for counsel and context. The essential resource for this research has always been history.

While we hold our past heroes and leaders in high esteem and speak of them with respect (or critically) in the halls of academia and occasionally elsewhere, we seem poorly equipped to learn the lessons they hold for us or to heed their often extraordinarily clear warnings for future generations, that is, for us.

To leave this great font of valuable knowledge untapped is to limit our ability to understand the world in which we live and to deny that there is continuity in national as well as human lives; events of

today have their origins in the past and nowhere else.

Failure to learn about the past can only result in a functional failure today in that the full picture of people, motives, and events can never be fully understood. The extraordinary conflict and its aftermath between President Harry S. Truman and General Douglas MacArthur that culminated in MacArthur's 1951 dismissal is a case in point.

A great orator and insightful observer of culture, politics, and history, MacArthur gave a series of speeches after his dismissal in 1951 and afterwards that warned of cultural decline, cynicism, and loss of faith. These orations ring loud and clear today.

It is the role of the historian to bring these lessons back to the consciousness of the people and to provide context and analysis. MacArthur's insight and wisdom driven by love of country and a desire to serve help to illuminate our current difficulties.

Re-reading MacArthur's brilliant speeches of warning and concern allow us to smash the vacuum of ignorance and confusion in which many toil today and return to a world of context, comprehensibility and understanding. Many of the issues that MacArthur publicly discussed from 1951 to his death in 1964 involve core societal and cultural concerns that still reverberate today though the specific issues of contention have faded into the past. The challenges of human development never disappear.

MacArthur Dismissed

One of the great challenges of Harry S. Truman's presidency was what to do with General Douglas MacArthur. Having clearly overstepped his authority in 1951 by disobedience to orders of the Commander in Chief, MacArthur had brought about a crisis in leadership that Truman and his staff could only consider a Constitutional crisis.

It did not matter that MacArthur was highly revered across the country, was the savior of the Philippines, the Supreme Allied Commander in the Pacific, hero of WW2, former Commandant of West Point

and recipient of the [Medal of Honor](#), the architect of post-war Japan's conversion to democracy, and in the early 50s commander of the United Nations forces in Korea and was in fact far more popular than Truman himself; what mattered to Truman was the American tradition of military subordination to political leadership.

This relationship is codified in the Constitution and other founding documents placed there by the founders most likely to avoid an overly strong military which could lead to overthrow of the political order of the Republic and military rule.^[i] If the Constitutional tradition of the United States was to continue, five-star General Douglas MacArthur's military career would have to end.

There is a clear demarcation between military and political leaders. They have different challenges, and different purposes that often come into conflict. This occurred during Vietnam and, most regrettably for MacArthur, during the Korean War.

After the Chinese military joined the conflict (supporting North Korea) against the United Nations (supporting South Korea) MacArthur, who believed that there was "no substitute for victory," developed a totally different perspective on how the war was to be won. Obsessed (as he should have been as Commander) with victory in the war MacArthur appeared to forget (or chose to ignore) the highly charged political repercussions of his public statements which often were in conflict with those of the White House.

Desiring to keep the conflict "limited," Truman had no interest in any direct conflict with China over Korea. Fearing another world war, Truman ordered MacArthur to limit his public statements to mirror those of the political leadership ("keep the war limited"); MacArthur was not to discuss or suggest any attack on Chinese forces or mainland Chinese targets ("widen the war").

While Truman and his political team worked to bring about cease-fire discussions early in 1951, MacArthur—in apparent response to the constraints placed upon him—complained publicly, thus demonstrating his opposition to the administration. The conflict between political control (Truman) and military subservience was growing.

In early March, 1951 Truman and his staff were preparing cease fire proposals to submit to the Chinese government. MacArthur, seeing these political moves as impediments to his military plans complained of the "military restrictions" placed upon him and his command.

Later that month MacArthur issued a public statement. This statement was completely opposite to the more conciliatory tone of the Truman White House and could well have been meant by MacArthur to "increase the heat" in the Korean theater of war.

MacArthur viewed Korea as an active front in the global fight against Communism and believed that, if Asia were to fall, Europe would eventually also fall. For MacArthur, defeat in Korea, or a peace in which Communism were allowed to flourish (that is, anything other than a total defeat of Communism) would result in threats to Europe and the United States in the future.

MacArthur's vision was long-term while his direct attentions were focused on victory in Korea so that the long-term threat would be minimized (or eliminated for the foreseeable future). MacArthur was prepared to do most anything (including stating that he would use [nuclear weapons](#) against the Chinese) to achieve victory in Korea.

General MacArthur's statement of March 24, 1951 set the stage for the final conflict with Truman.

"The enemy, therefore, must by now be painfully aware that a decision of the United States to depart from its tolerant effort to contain the war to the areas of Korea, through an expansion of our military operations to his coastal areas and interior bases, would doom Red China to the risk of imminent military collapse." [\[ii\]](#)

The high esteem in which MacArthur was held by the American people is now not seen for any leader in our society. For Truman, dismissing MacArthur would be the most dangerous political move of his presidency.

Truman wrote in his *Memoirs* that MacArthur "was in open defiance of my orders as President and as Commander in Chief. This was a challenge to

the President under the Constitution. It also flouted the policy of the United Nations... By this act MacArthur left me no choice—I could no longer tolerate his insubordination.”[\[iii\]](#)

Newspapers across the country had similar headlines on April 11, 1951: “Truman Fires MacArthur”. Truman trusted that the resulting political storm would blow over in several weeks and everyone would get past the dismissal of the highest ranking great General. Politically, Truman’s relief of MacArthur, while unavoidable (from the White House’s perspective), could have had grave consequences for the administration. Only a month before Truman’s approval rating (Gallup poll) was at 26%, an all-time low.

Calls for impeachment immediately arose across the country. During the first 48-hours after the announcement of MacArthur’s firing, over 44,000 telegrams were received at Congress.

The *Chicago Tribune* editorialized that Truman was “unfit, morally, and mentally, for his high office... The American nation has never been in a greater danger. It is led by a fool who is surrounded by knaves...”[\[iv\]](#)

Truman would escape all the demands for his resignation and impeachment as the furor over MacArthur receded. MacArthur, now a civilian, took a new path – using his immense oratorical, intellectual, and moral authority to ring the bell of warning in speeches across the country.

Not Fade Away – MacArthur Continues to Serve

On April 19, 1951 MacArthur delivered his [Farewell Address](#) to the combined Houses of Congress. Millions of Americans watched this speech on television or listened over radio. A master of oratory, MacArthur delivered a stunning address of patriotism and humility that brought cheers and applause again and again in the House Chamber. MacArthur explained himself, his actions and perspective and his desire for victory. He closed with this: “And like the old soldier of that ballad, I now close my military career and just fade away, an old soldier who tried to do his duty as God gave him the light to see that duty. Good Bye.”

Harry Truman did not listen to nor watch the speech. When he read the text of MacArthur's address to Congress Truman described it as "a bunch of damned bullsh*t."[\[v\]](#)

Truman's biographer, historian [David McCullough](#), not apparently a great fan of the General, described the speech as MacArthur's "finest hour."[\[vi\]](#) This was the beginning of the old soldier's fading into twilight – fading away as he said that he would but with a profound message of warning for the country and the future.

MacArthur embarked upon a series of speeches across the country in which he warned of rising threats to our culture, our country and our people. Foreshadowing President [Eisenhower's Farewell Address](#) of 1960 in which the former Supreme Allied Commander warned of the "military industrial complex" and its potential threat to democracy, and referencing his own remarks at the acceptance of the surrender of Japan in which human character was described as the only means by which a lasting peace could be attained MacArthur set out on a new path. Little is known of these speeches today; we all suffer for lack of knowledge of them.

On the *USS Missouri*, September 2, 1945 representing the Allied powers [MacArthur accepted the surrender of Japan](#). Under the gaze of defeated enemies, and joyous and relieved fellow American and Allied servicemen as well as the attention of the world MacArthur [spoke](#) of the failure of political structures to secure peace between nations. He said that "a new era" had begun and that the destructive forces of war could now end not only lives and nations, but civilization itself.

MacArthur, a great hero of the war concluded his remarks on the *Missouri* about character – the importance of the development of human character so that future devastating conflicts could be avoided.

"Men since the beginning of time have sought peace... Military alliances, balances of power, leagues of nations, all in turn failed, leaving the only path to be by way of the crucible of war. We have had our last chance. If we do not now devise some greater and more equitable system, Armageddon will be at our door. The problem basically is theological and involves a

spiritual recrudescence and improvement of human character that will synchronize with our almost matchless advances in science, art, literature and all material and cultural development of the past two thousand years. It must be of the spirit if we are to save the flesh."

(MacArthur, [remarks](#) closing the ceremonies of the surrender of Japan, September 2, 1945, aboard USS Missouri)

After his return from Korea, MacArthur delivered numerous speeches across the country on themes of character, patriotism, vigilance, and service in addition to criticizing the Truman administration's Korea strategy. ("In Korea, we are admittedly applying the doctrine of passive defense which in all history has never won a war."[\[vii\]](#)) In Dallas at the Cotton Bowl in June 1951, 27,000 people attended a MacArthur speech. Covering an appearance by MacArthur at the Texas Legislature in June, 1951 [Life Magazine](#) described the oratory style of MacArthur as "couched in rhetoric such as few Americans have heard in recent times and evocative of an earlier, heroic era."[\[viii\]](#)

"Our own people harbor a strong spiritual urge in their hearts, but many leaders have become absorbed in the demands of political expediency, are not unwilling to compromise moral principle and have lost the traditional American patriot's touch. Such a leadership offers no panacea for freedom's festering wounds."[\[ix\]](#)

In December, 1951, MacArthur was in New York. In accepting an award from the Salvation Army he delivered the following remarks at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel.

"We must refuse to indulge those who are so blind they will not see the moral dangers now threatening the engulfment of our people. We must regain our spiritual and intellectual balance that there may be restored a full faith in public integrity and a renewed devotion to private morality. We must face the gravity of the times honestly and fearlessly so that our beloved country may survive the man-made periods which now confront it."[\[x\]](#)

Every generation faces challenges— these challenges often have similar foundations. The challenges of today seem particularly grave with

nuclear proliferation, economic crisis, deeply divided domestic politics, two confused and costly ongoing [wars for Sharia law](#), ideological war and offensive jihad at home and in the cities and capitals of our allies and friends.

In addition to these external challenges domestically we suffer a crisis of meaning, values and faith; loss of faith in our institutions and leaders, loss of value in our country, and the loss of meaning as to what being an American means and the value that our country has and continues to bring to the world and its many nations suffering injustice and tyranny.

An Ongoing Crisis of Meaning

MacArthur's warnings of the 1950s are pertinent today because the crisis of meaning and value about which he cautioned are ongoing and increasing in intensity.

We are not adept yet at learning well the lessons of our history, or looking back to those great men and women who can help light our way today with their insights gained from the challenges of their eras.

It is said that history is cyclical, that it repeats itself. But more accurately history perhaps is an ever advancing wave with eddies and whirls and areas of calm within and without at times. The challenges we face today are related to a similar cultural decline that MacArthur spoke about again and again after his dismissal from the service. A culture that does not understand itself, that cannot analyze itself, that cannot see its own value is not a culture that can defend itself.

In 1962, MacArthur, the youngest Commandant of West Point, returned to the US Military Academy to deliver his [farewell address](#) to the Corps of Cadets. He would be dead within two years. MacArthur reiterated his essential points of duty, honor, country. He told the cadets that while civilians can argue points of political differences and other issues of division, the American soldier stands aloof in total service to the nation, the guardians of American democracy.

Let civilian voices argue the merits or demerits of our processes

of government. Whether our strength is being sapped by deficit financing indulged in too long, by federal paternalism grown too mighty, by power groups grown too arrogant, by politics grown too corrupt, by crime grown too rampant, by morals grown too low, by taxes grown too high, by extremists grown too violent; whether our personal liberties are as firm and complete as they should be. [\[xi\]](#)

MacArthur mentioned many of the same issues in 1962 that still vex us today. History is like a forward moving wave but the themes and consequences of the past are never fully left behind. Understanding MacArthur's character and motives (as well as those of Truman in relieving him) can illuminate the difficulties of today and through his vigorous analysis and profound turn of phrase, seldom seen today, gain insights into how we should respond to our present challenges.

It seems true, after these many years, that Truman had no choice but to relieve General MacArthur. The specific issues of that conflict remain with us because the war never really ended; it is paused with an [Armistice Agreement](#). Our American soldiers remain in Korea and North Korea continues to be an ongoing threat to regional stability and peace. We never quite leave our past behind – our ignorance of it and our inability to understand it is an indictment of our society and its intellectual development.

In our world of terror and war, in which we face determined absolutist enemies our domestic cultural crisis of meaning and value cannot help but undermine our ability to resist the onslaught from those who are more violent and less inclined to compassion and are utterly driven for our destruction.

The wave of history moves ever forward and if we are not to be drowned by it or our civilization subsumed, we ought to hear again the voices of our great men and women from our past.

MacArthur took his leave of the country he served with bravery and honor for over 50 years by saying that he would “fade away” as old soldiers do. He said that old soldiers never die. They do not die because their example of selflessness, courage, determination, love of

country, compassion, duty, honor, and bravery lives on. If we allow them to fade away and disappear the result can only be a great loss to us all.

[i] “At the same time, they (the Founders) realized that if military force was not adequately controlled, it could be used to seize control of the government and threaten democracy”; Michael F. Cairo, [Civilian Control of the Military](#)