

The President and the Emperor

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A little more than 50 years ago a confrontation took place between two men which had an enormous impact then, and continues to resonate throughout our governmental structure, and is most likely to continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

The two men were both of the 19th Century. One was four years older than the other and both were approaching the end of their active careers. Both were highly intelligent, personally courageous and superb leaders of men. But there the similarities ended. As one might expect of a president and an emperor, their backgrounds and career paths were very different.

The president was Harry S. Truman, the 33rd President of the United States. Born in 1884 in Missouri he grew up on a farm. While he completed his formal education with graduation from high school, his informal education continued all his life. He was an avid reader who particularly loved history. His career was singularly unremarkable until World War I which gave him an opportunity to shine. A member of the Missouri National Guard which was federalized in August 1917, elected a lieutenant by the men of the regiment, he ultimately became the commander of Battery D of the 129th Field Artillery. During the first combat mission his men "became panic-stricken and all except five or six scattered like partridges". He showed great personal courage during the engagement, reorganized the men and made Battery D a very effective combat unit. Discharged in 1919 he opened a haberdashery store with one of the men of Battery D which at first was very successful and then failed in 1921 in the post-war depression. He

entered local politics with the help of the Pendergast political machine which became his patron until his election as United States Senator in 1934. When he arrived in Washington he was known as "The Senator from Pendergast" and he once wrote to his cousin "FDR and nearly everybody else. . .[had thought of him]. . .the representative of the devil, in the person of Tom Pendergast." In the Senate he was generally well-liked, known as "go along, get along Harry", and had a thoroughly undistinguished record until he called for the formation of what became the Senate Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program and was appointed its head. This committee, which became commonly known as the Truman Committee, made a distinguished record and in the process "Truman burnished his reputation for honesty and square-dealing." Ultimately this led to his nomination as Vice President on the ticket with Roosevelt as FDR ran for his fourth term. Upon FDR's death on April 12, 1945, only 82 days into his term, Truman was sworn in as President totally unprepared, uninformed about any of FDR's "deals" with Stalin, Churchill or any other leader, and not aware of the Manhattan Project to build an atomic bomb. Thus thrust on the world stage he did everything he could to inform himself and come up to speed. He successfully played catch-up and ultimately became one of the truly great foreign policy Presidents. Reelected in 1948 he was less than 3 years from the end of his political life when the confrontation took place in 1951.

The emperor was Douglas MacArthur, defacto emperor of Japan. Born in 1880 to Arthur MacArthur, Jr., hero of the Civil War and holder of the Congressional Medal of Honor, he was from birth destined for a military career. He entered West Texas Military Academy in San Antonio at age 13, and graduating at the top of his class, his next goal was West Point; but there was a bump in that road because he could not meet its physical

requirements. He had a bad curvature of the spine and it took nearly two years to overcome this condition. Ultimately admitted to West Point as a member of the class of '03 and had such an outstanding record there, including graduation as First Captain and leading his class in each of the 4 years that in all history it has only been exceeded by two men, one of whom was Robert E. Lee.

Once commissioned, his military career became one of superlatives. Promotions came quickly and in 1918, at age thirty-eight, he became the youngest general officer in the U. S. Army. He was recommended for the Congressional Medal of Honor as early as 1914, and he received nine decorations for bravery while fighting in France in World War I. At the end of that war he became the superintendent of West Point, only sixteen years after graduation. And in 1930 just 50 years old, he was named Chief of Staff of the Army. Subsequent to his retirement from that position in 1935 he became Field Marshall of the Philippine Army, which was his title when he was recalled by Roosevelt in early 1941 and made U. S. Far East Commander. From that point forward his name was on everyone's lips as he brilliantly led the forces in the Pacific War to ultimate victory. Appointed Supreme Commander Allied Powers he presided over the rebuilding and rehabilitation of Japan and became its defacto Emperor.

The President and the Emperor met only once, on October 15, 1950, at Wake Island. The context was the Korean War which had broken out on June 25, 1950, when North Korean forces invaded South Korea. South Korean forces were overwhelmed and American forces were barely able to establish a perimeter centered on Pusan at the southern tip of the Korean Peninsula. MacArthur brilliantly, and against opposition of the Chiefs of Staff, proposed the invasion at Inchon which would outflank the North

Korean troops. It was a brilliant, high risk proposal which MacArthur carried out to perfection. Soon the North Korean Army was overwhelmed and rapidly retreating across the 38th parallel and United Nations troops were heading north into Pyongyang.

MacArthur's star was at its zenith and many believe that the President flew two-thirds of the way around the world for a two-hour meeting solely for political purposes by reflecting in MacArthur's glory. The meeting engendered all sorts of stories about MacArthur keeping Truman waiting or trying to upstage him, but all the historians seem to agree that these stories are not true and that Truman and MacArthur had a cordial two-hour visit. On his way to the meeting Truman had written his cousin "Have to talk to God's right-hand man. . ." and he went bearing gifts including another Distinguished Service Medal, MacArthur's fifth. Each man took the measure of the other and each left the meeting deeming it successful and that they were in agreement with each other. There was great optimism about the outcome of the war and neither appeared aware of what was to come.

What came was the entry of the Chinese into the war. Starting at the end of October 1950 what were first denominated as volunteers, and then became clearly regular units of the Chinese Army, engaged South Korean and other U. N. units nearing the Yalu River. Soon the complexion of the war changed from euphoria to despair, and U. S. troops had to take heroic actions to save themselves from defeat. MacArthur the brilliant architect of Inchon, the infallible hero, lost some of his luster.

MacArthur was a man of strong opinions and he often did not hesitate to express them. He butted heads with his superiors in Washington about many issues of foreign

and defense policy which were outside his purview as a military commander, and he inserted himself into issues which a more reticent man would have avoided.

At the end of July 1950, MacArthur had personally visited Formosa to learn the situation there firsthand. He and Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek issued statements at the end of his visit which caused great concern in Washington. Truman sent his roving ambassador Averell Harriman to Tokyo ". . .so that the General might be given a firsthand account of the political planning in Washington." Harriman gave a positive report on his early August visit and it thus came as a double shock to the White House when it learned not long afterwards of MacArthur's letter to the Veterans of Foreign Wars just three days before it was to be read at their annual encampment. The letter set forth a policy on Formosa and China which was at odds with administration policy. Because the letter had already been released to Life magazine and others and was already on the presses when the White House learned of it, the only course was to direct MacArthur to withdraw the statement, which he did. Time magazine reported "Harry Truman did what not even Franklin Roosevelt had the temerity to do. He ordered Douglas MacArthur to shut up."

But he did not shut up and in March 1951 he spoke out again and again trying to provoke Washington to change its policies. Then, learning of a diplomatic cease fire initiative which had been launched through United Nations channels, he bombastically issued his own statement which he called a "military appraisal" but which was an insulting and demeaning ultimatum to the Chinese. General Matthew Ridgway said of MacArthur's action that he had ". . .cut the ground from under the President, enraged our Allies, and put the Chinese in the position of suffering a severe loss of face if they so

much as accepted a bid to negotiate." Truman wrote later "This was a most extraordinary statement for a military commander of the United Nations to issue on his own responsibility. It was an act totally disregarding all directives to abstain from any declarations on foreign policy. It was in open defiance of my orders as President and as Commander in Chief. This was a challenge to the authority of 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."

There were other bombshells but MacArthur sealed his fate by a letter dated March 20, 1951, to Joseph W. Martin, the Republican minority leader in the House of Representatives. This letter was read by Joe Martin on the floor of the House. In it MacArthur challenged national policy in many ways and it made headlines around the world. Truman wrote: "The time had come to draw the line."

Truman claimed later that even before April 5, 1951, he had made up his mind that MacArthur had to be discharged. But he was careful and sought advice. He asked for the views of his military chiefs who at first wanted to stay out of the controversy but when pushed to state their views, unanimously stated that MacArthur had to go. Orders were drawn for personal delivery to MacArthur in Tokyo; but when it appeared that the news might have leaked, a press conference was called for 1 a.m. on April 11, 1951, and his discharge was announced because ". . .General of the Army Douglas MacArthur is unable to give his whole-hearted support to the policies of the United States Government and of the United Nations. . ." One author has written "With that announcement President Truman precipitated perhaps the most convulsive popular outburst in American history and the severest test which civilian control of the military has ever had to face in

this republic. On April 11 there was little reason to believe that the faltering President would triumph over his daunting General in the clash that must ensue." Time magazine, picturing Truman on its cover, headlined the story "The Little Man Who Dared". Congress was inundated with an unprecedented flood of telegrams, many calling for the President's impeachment. Impeachment was also on the lips of many prominent Republican Senators and Representatives.

The General's departure from Japan was emotional. Emperor Hirohito took the unprecedented step of calling on MacArthur, the first time that the emperor had called on a foreigner who had no official standing. Hundreds of thousands of ordinary Japanese had gotten up before dawn to line the route to the airport. The newspapers throughout Japan lauded MacArthur and expressed their great regret at his dismissal. It is in this atmosphere that MacArthur returned home. He had been absent from the United States for 14 years. His reception when he arrived in San Francisco on April 17th was overwhelming. Greeted at the airport by Governor Warren, the Mayor and many other dignitaries, it took more than 2 hours to drive from the airport to downtown because everywhere the crowds were so great. The next day there was a tickertape parade down Montgomery Street attended by hundreds of thousands of people. When MacArthur then flew to Washington a crowd of more than 12,000 waited well past midnight to greet him at National Airport.

The next day the entire country tuned in by radio or television as MacArthur addressed a joint meeting of the House and the Senate. In a dramatic and unforgettable speech he stated his case and he closed with the forever remembered "Old soldiers never die; they just fade away. 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."

The power of the speech "visibly and profoundly shook" the President's supporters in Congress according to the N.Y. Times. There was fear in the administration that the general, in a single blow, had mortally damaged the Truman administration. And the events of the next day did not lighten the gloom at the White House. Having flown to New York after his speech he received a welcome that even outshone Eisenhower's and Lindbergh's. An estimated seven and a half million people lined the parade route, coming from throughout the region. While this was happening in New York, Harry Truman had gone to Griffith Stadium to throw out the traditional first ball of the year. As he and his party were about to leave later in the game he was roundly booed.

Two weeks later on May 3, 1951, a joint inquiry of the Senate's Foreign Relations and Armed Services committees opened under the chairmanship of Senator Richard Russell of Georgia. MacArthur was the leadoff witness and testified for three full days. He was then followed by the Administration's witnesses, Secretary of Defense George Marshall, Secretary of State Dean Acheson, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Omar Bradley and the three service chiefs. Slowly, steadily, the witnesses took apart MacArthur's position. In nineteen days of testimony, the five military officers made it clear to the joint committee that MacArthur's proposed policies regarding the conduct of the war in Korea and against China were wrong and in the words of Omar Bradley would involve the United States in "the wrong war at the wrong time with the wrong enemy". They answered the question of whether MacArthur's dismissal was warranted by stating

that it was more than warranted; it was absolutely necessary. "General MacArthur's actions were continuing to jeopardize civilian control over military affairs." It was the fact that the military chiefs so strongly testified in support of civilian authority over the military that assured that the principle would remain inviolate.

The public began to listen to the testimony and its hysteria over the dismissal died down. They began to think for themselves and listen to both sides without the emotionalism of the previous weeks, and slowly MacArthur's influence over the country began to fade away even if the General did not quite fade away. MacArthur gave his own valediction on civilian control of the military when at age 82 on May 1962, in his final address to the corps of cadets at West Point, he said: "These great national problems are not for your professional participation or military solution. Your guidepost stands out like a tenfold beacon in the night: Duty, Honor, Country."

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