

"Old Soldiers Never Die" (Farewell Address to Congress)--General Douglas MacArthur (April 19, 1951)

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Essay by Christopher Sterling (guest post)*



General Douglas MacArthur

Much of the nation was listening on radio as General of the Army Douglas MacArthur began to address a joint session of Congress at midday on Thursday, April 19, 1951. The scene was unprecedented as the General had been relieved of his command in Korea just days before by President Harry Truman. As he finished speaking, there were tears in the eyes of many in the packed chamber, and he was given a long standing ovation. More than a few saw him as presidential timber in the approaching 1952 election.

A political crisis had been building for months as MacArthur sought greater freedom of action to fight the North Koreans and their Chinese allies in the 10 month-old frustrating war across Korea. The North Koreans had invaded the south on June 25, 1950, sweeping all before their forces. Urged by the United States, the United Nations Security Council had quickly authorized military action to resist the invasion. General MacArthur, the Supreme Allied Commander of the occupation forces in Tokyo, had taken charge. But Korean and American forces were pushed back and nearly out of Korea by August to a small perimeter around the southeast port of Pusan. The situation was grim.

On Wednesday, September 13, 1950, MacArthur turned the war around with a daring amphibious landing at the western port of Inchon, not far from Seoul. North Korean forces quickly folded up in the face of this threat to their supply lines north. Soon UN forces, spearheaded by the Americans, were driving toward the Yalu River and the Korean border with China. General MacArthur and President Truman both flew to the tiny Pacific island of Wake for meetings to plan future moves in the war.

In November, however, the war turned yet again as thousands of Chinese “volunteer” forces suddenly attacked the stretched UN troops as winter weather froze the landscape. The fighting pushed back south and communist forces again took Seoul. As 1951

opened, fighting seesawed on both sides of the 38th parallel, the political line dividing North and South Korea. A stalemate settled in as neither side had the force to eliminate the other.

MacArthur urged numerous aggressive alternatives to the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington to end the stalemate. These included letting the Kuomintang, the Chinese nationalists on the island of Formosa who'd been driven from mainland China by Chinese communists two years earlier enter the war with the Allies—and allowing bombing attacks on the Chinese side of the Yalu where communist Chinese forces had their bases. Under direction from President Truman, the Joint Chiefs turned down these and other ideas, seeking to “limit” this first fighting in the deepening Cold War. Frustrated, MacArthur turned to members of Congress—most of them Republicans who despised Truman and his Korean policies.

This step led directly to the famous appearance before Congress. For MacArthur was going around the civilian control of the military effort, seeking Republican pressure on Truman to widen allied fighting choices. As nearly always happens in Washington, of course, some of the letters the General exchanged with the Republican leadership were leaked to the press. Truman considered relieving the General for insubordination but bided his time and gathered political and military support. The Joint Chiefs finally voted unanimously that MacArthur should be relieved and replaced. Truman acted, and the general returned to the country he'd not seen in a decade and a half.

Truman acted cautiously as MacArthur was one of the most famous military heroes in the country. Son of a decorated Civil War general, MacArthur had become one of the youngest generals in his own right by the end of World War I. He'd been the superintendent at West Point and served as army chief of staff under presidents Hoover and Roosevelt. He had later commanded army forces in the Pacific, first in a hopeless defense of the Philippines in early 1942, and then in the slowly growing advance that, in conjunction with Navy and Marine island hopping campaigns and two atomic bombs, forced Japan to surrender in August 1945. By then he'd received the Medal of Honor, just as his father before him—the only father-son recipients of the nation's highest military award. And he was one of only a handful of five-star generals of the army.

In the fall of 1945, MacArthur began what many still consider his finest hour—as overlord of the Japanese occupation. In this non-military task, and working with a talented staff, for five years he rebuilt Japanese political and social systems from their wartime ruins. By the time the Korean War broke out, he was well appreciated—even revered--by the Japanese people.

But years of high positions and success fed MacArthur's ego as well. Surrounded in too many cases with “yes men,” he had come to believe his own press. He certainly considered himself an infallible authority on Asia, and vastly superior to his military and political superiors (he would have said “nominal” superiors). And that ego finally led to the confrontation with Truman and the Joint Chiefs—and his April 1951 relief. The speech before Congress wrapped up his long and often distinguished career.

This is surely one of the two most important speeches General MacArthur ever gave (the other was aboard the *U.S.S. Missouri* for the surrender ceremony with Japan in September 1945). In it he summed up both his own career (with the emotional twist of his final lines) and the gist of his argument with the Truman administration concerning the war in Korea. He spoke to a largely appreciative Congressional audience who treated him like the war hero many Americans believed he was. But seen in retrospect, his remarks sounded the end of his long career--there would be no further calls to duty.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.