

Vietnam War

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Military Greatness Betrayed

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Liberal historians praise President Harry S. Truman for courage and honesty, but he did not exhibit these traits of character when he sacked General of the Army Douglas MacArthur as Supreme Commander in the Far East.

President Truman ordered General MacArthur's removal 35 years ago this month, on April 11, 1951. The General, then in Tokyo, first learned that he had been fired when told by a military aide who had heard it on a news broadcast.

Even William Manchester, in his less than flattering book *American Caesar: Douglas MacArthur*, recorded that Truman was not content with cashiering a legendary military commander; he wanted to make certain MacArthur did not have a chance to resign. "Because he insisted that MacArthur be fired," wrote Manchester, "instead of permitting him to retire gracefully, millions questioned the President's motives. The deed seemed punitive, even indecent, and it violated all the traditions which the General cherished. The unceremonious, peremptory dismissal denied him the right to deliver a farewell address to his troops, to counsel [his successor General], to speak to the Japanese people, or to discuss the forthcoming peace treaty with any Nipponese officials."

Douglas MacArthur became the first general officer in American history to be relieved of his command on the charge of insubordination *without* a hearing or formal charges. To have followed established precedent would have given the General a public forum in which to express his criticism of the Truman Administration's foreign policy in Asia.

Behind the cowardly political conduct of the President was the influence of his advisors: Defense Secretary George C. Marshall, Secretary of State Dean Acheson, Assistant Secretary of State W. Averell Harriman, and Undersecretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs Dean Rusk. Marshall, Acheson and Rusk had played a pivotal role in the surrender of mainland China to the Communists prior to 1950. And Harriman had been a key advisor to President Franklin Roosevelt at the February 1945 Yalta Conference that surrendered Eastern Europe to Soviet dictator Josef Stalin.

All four men pressured Truman to fire MacArthur on the pretext that he was insubordinate. In reality, at the time of his firing, MacArthur was close to demonstrating that the Red Chinese army could be beaten on the battlefield.

T.R. Fehrenbach, in his 1963 book *This Kind of War*, pointed out that six weeks after MacArthur was fired, U.S. and allied forces killed 65,000 Red Chinese and North Korean troops in the so-called May Massacre at No Name Line, in eastern Korea. According to Fehrenbach, the battle changed the course of the war overnight in favor of the U.S. and its allies.

"The Chinese had now completely lost the initiative; worse, they had been hurt almost beyond recovery," he added. A month later the Communists agreed to truce talks that would drag on for two years, the period when the bulk of U.S. and allied casualties were experienced.

Prior to his firing, General MacArthur had argued that Red Chinese intervention in the Korean War in late 1950 represented an opportunity to reverse Communist gains in Asia. After the General's death, Howard Handleman of *U.S. News & World Report* revealed in April 1964 the substance of first-person interviews he had had prior to MacArthur's being fired. Handleman reported that, unlike the leaders of the Truman Administration, the General saw an opportunity to defeat the Red Chinese military power in Korea by destroying its primitive industrial and military bases from the air. His brilliant and swift destruction of the North Korean army was, according to

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Handleman, the first step in a wide-ranging strategy intended to undo the U.S. sellout of China to the Communists.

Handleman wrote:

MacArthur felt, after the Chinese entered the war, that Korea was the right place and that moment was the right time to strike at China — a major source of Communist power in the world. Washington ... did not agree.

So strongly did the General feel that his strategy was right, Washington's dangerously wrong, that he put his career on the block. His closest aides insist that General MacArthur knew the risk he was running when he came out against the policy of the Truman administration.

In World War II and in Korea, MacArthur had his military judgment tested in twenty major campaigns. He won one victory after another. The Joint Chiefs of Staff, who had feared he would fail with his September 1950 Inchon invasion plan — the stroke that turned the tide of the Korean War — supported the firing by President Truman at a time when MacArthur's troops were within weeks of demonstrating that the Red Chinese army could be beaten militarily.

"It is my own personal opinion," General MacArthur told a congressional committee shortly after his firing, "that the greatest political mistake we made in a hundred years in the Pacific was in allowing the Communists to grow in power in China. I believe we will pay for it, for a century."