

General Douglas MacArthur's Congressional Address: A Simple, Powerful, and Emotional Speech about an Old American Soldier

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On April 19, 1951, when General Douglas MacArthur ended his address before Congress, Representative Dewey Short, educated at Harvard, Oxford, and Heidelberg, exclaimed: "We saw a great hunk of God in the flesh, and we heard the voice of God."¹ A former president, Herbert Hoover, saw in MacArthur the "reincarnation of St. Paul into a great General of the Army who came out of the East."² George Kennedy described the scene as such that "when it was over you had the feeling that everyone took a deep breath, that they had forgotten to breathe as they didn't want to miss any of his words."³ Senator James Duff of Pennsylvania said that the entire country was "on a great emotional binge."⁴ These comments and responses demonstrate the strong emotional force that MacArthur's speech had on audiences.

This paper will examine MacArthur's congressional address as a work which most successfully moved the audience in the following respects that the

¹ D. Clayton James, *The Years of MacArthur: Vol. III Triumph and Disaster 1945-1964*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985) 616; Michael Schaller, *Douglas MacArthur: The Far Eastern General*. (Oxford University Press, 1989) 244.

² John W. Spanier, *The Truman-MacArthur Controversy and the Korean War* (Harvard University Press, 1959) 220.

³ William Manchester, *American Caesar: Douglas MacArthur 1880-1964* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1978) 661.

⁴ Manchester, 661.

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speech epitomized beliefs, ideals and values deeply rooted in traditional American patriotic virtues, and that what the speech presented was the very message that the audience wanted to hear at that particular point of time. Additional factors which contributed to this unusually impressive speech were the speaker's popularity, his charismatic image, his credibility, and the atmospheric sentiment of uneasiness in the day of the Cold War.

During the Korean war, General Douglas MacArthur and President Harry S. Truman clashed, and on April 10, 1951, Truman relieved MacArthur not only of his post as United Nations Commander in Korea but of all of his commands, which included Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers in Japan.⁵ MacArthur, with his family and his closest aides, left Japan on April 16, and flew to Washington, D. C. to present his case directly to the country.

Immediately after the announcement of Truman's decision, some major Republican figures, including Robert Taft, decided to invite MacArthur to Capitol Hill. They felt Truman deserved impeachment for relieving MacArthur and thought that "General MacArthur should be invited to give his complete views to Congress."⁶ On accepting this invitation, MacArthur notified them that he would rather address all of Congress or none of it, much less Congressional committees.⁷ Thus, MacArthur's address before a joint meeting of the United States Congress was settled to be on the 19th of April, 1951, in

⁵ Spanier, 204.

⁶ Spanier, 212.

⁷ *New York Times* 11 Apr. 1951.

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the House Chamber of the Capitol.⁸

Some principal papers in America, such as the *New York Times*, *New York Herald Tribune*, *Washington Post*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Boston Globe*, *Minneapolis Tribune*, *Denver Post*, and *Atlanta Journal* agreed with the President's decision on relieving MacArthur.⁹ Similarly, American correspondents assigned to Washington, D. C., the UN, Korea and Japan overwhelmingly supported Truman on this issue, and many thought that the President should have done it sooner.¹⁰ Truman's decision was also well received in Europe. *Le Monde* commented that the allies could not yield to "such a tall, eloquent Calibre."¹¹ The British Commonwealth brigade parted along the 38th Parallel.¹²

However, the majority of Americans sided with the General. At the news of MacArthur's relinquishment of command, the White House was swamped with protests.¹³ A Gallup Poll found two-thirds of the public opposed to the recall.¹⁴ A Houston clergyman spluttered, "Your removal of Gen. MacArthur is

⁸ *New York Times* 11 Apr. 1951.

⁹ James, 607-608.

¹⁰ James, 608. The survey was conducted by the *Saturday Review of Literature*.

¹¹ Manchester, 647.

¹² Manchester, 647.

¹³ Manchester, 643.

¹⁴ Schaller, 242.

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a great victory for Joseph Stalin".¹⁵ The president was burned in effigy, and a dozen local governments condemned Truman.¹⁶

Richard H. Rovere and Schlesinger, Jr., cited in Manchester, observed the situation as such that "The citizen was on MacArthur's side. His private emotions had been deeply engaged."¹⁷ They compared this violent and spontaneous discharge of political passion to the excitement at the time of the Civil War.¹⁸ Since April 11, all the country had much anticipated the American hero's homecoming in a "nation-wide cacophony of howls of indignation, shrieks of hysteria, and screams of anger."¹⁹

In addition to this dramatic homecoming, General MacArthur himself was a drama. MacArthur, a great military superhuman, was already a legendary figure by then: A hero of World War II, and a successful commander in occupied Japan, who, on his first homecoming in fourteen-year-service from far, foreign places, confronted the President because of his convictions.²⁰ In speeches of welcome that MacArthur received in San Francisco en route to Washington, D. C., he was praised as "one of the greatest Americans who served as defender,

¹⁵ Manchester, 649.

¹⁶ Manchester, 649; Schaller, 241.

¹⁷ Manchester, 648.

¹⁸ Manchester, 648.

¹⁹ Manchester, 648.

²⁰ James, 620; Schaller, 244.

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and as conqueror. . . . one of the greatest spiritual forces in our land."²¹ Newspapers reported on MacArthur's breakfast menu at St. Francis Drake, the attempts of a high school student who made a valiant try to get the general's autograph, and so forth.²² Regardless of events in Korea, MacArthur as the epitome of traditional American virtues was in the news.

At every place where MacArthur and his party stopped en route from Tokyo to Washington, D. C., a large number of enthusiastic people came to greet him with outpourings of affection.²³ At Honolulu, for instance, about 100,000 people waited to see him on a twenty-one mile parade.²⁴ In San Francisco, a mob of about 500,000 gathered to welcome MacArthur, and about 3,000,000 people watched this historical moment on television.²⁵ At the airport in Washington, D. C., a crowd of 12,000 surged toward the airplane and made the MacArthur group take nearly a half-hour to reach the waiting cars. One of MacArthur's closest confidants, Major General Whitney "was shoved to the ground by the throng."²⁶

In Washington, D. C., all government departments and agencies were allowed to go home on Thursday afternoon, the day MacArthur was to deliver his

²¹ *San Francisco Chronicle* 19 Apr. 1951.

²² *San Francisco Chronicle* 19 Apr. 1951.

²³ *New York Times* 17 Apr. 1951.

²⁴ *New York Times* 17 Apr. 1951.

²⁵ James, 612; Schaller, 242; Spanier, 213.

²⁶ James, 612.

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speech at the Capitol. Further, Friday was designated as "MacArthur's Day."²⁷ RCA Victor advertised vigorously to sell television sets to witness "the greatest single dramatic news event of the generation...", asking its potential consumers what MacArthur's words would mean to the destiny of America.²⁸ Now that the stage of a theater was set up, enter the actor.

On April 19, 1951, MacArthur arrived in the House Chamber about thirty minutes behind schedule. MacArthur, with a trim Eisenhower jacket bare of ribbons or medals, was welcomed with a thunderous standing ovation. The public galleries were fully packed. Outside the Capitol, about twenty million people in America watched this dramatic occasion on television or listened to the speech on radio.²⁹ Absent, however, were the Cabinet members. The President passed a normal hard-working day, meeting with Dean Acheson on the usual Thursday appointment.³⁰

MacArthur began his speech with words expressing his sense of deep humility and great pride he felt at standing in the symbolic center of great American history; following his introduction he clarified the purpose of his speech, which was, "To serve my country."³¹

The logical defense of his views on the Korean conflict which were

²⁷ *New York Times* 17 Apr. 1951.

²⁸ Spanier, 214.

²⁹ James, 612-613.

³⁰ *San Francisco Chronicle* 20 Apr., 1951.

³¹ Douglas MacArthur, "Don't Scuttle the Pacific," *Vital Speeches of the Day* 1 May, 1951: 430.

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irreconcilable with the Truman government's containment policy was that, first, "The Communist threat is a global one," and then, he emphasized the changing situations in Asia and its strategic potential for the defense operation in the Pacific Ocean of the United States against Communism. Notwithstanding, the Truman administration did not take any decisive actions to defeat Communism and to put an end to the bloodshedding war on the excuse of inadequate strength. This, MacArthur criticized, was nothing but defeatism. MacArthur, then, expressed his distress as commander who had been hampered by military restrictions. At this point, the veteran soldier of warrior clan lineage³² who had fought numerous battles set forth the very fundamental principle of war: "But once war is forced upon us, there is no other alternative than to apply every available means to bring it to a swift end. War's very object is victory, not prolonged indecision. In war there is no substitute for victory." The speech was closed with that famous phrase, "old soldiers never die; they just fade away," which in fact MacArthur had used on several occasions since he retired from the army.³³

³² Douglas MacArthur, *Reminiscences* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964) 3-15. MacArthur's autobiography begins with a brief introduction to his Scottish ancestry, a warrior clan, MacArtair, whose traditions are linked with the lore of King Arthur and the Knight of the Round Table. MacArthur's grandfather fought for justice with courage on the bench. His father, who volunteered to fight at the Civil War at the age of seventeen, was also a man of adventure, a honored soldier served for the Civil War and the Spanish-American War. He chose a military life. Through them, young MacArthur might have elaborated the images of legendary heroes of MacArtair Warriors, absorbed the spirits of Founding Fathers who had risen up for the rights of men and democracy, and construed a sense of duty and undaunted courage pledged to America.; D. Clayton James, *The Years of MacArthur: Vol III Triumph and Disaster 1945-1964*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985) 3-6.

³³ Schaller, 244.

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His thirty-four-minute address was interrupted by cheers and applause over thirty times.³⁴ When he finished his speech, there was not a dry eye.³⁵ *Life* reported that the Olympian personality of the most controversial military hero magnetized the audience.³⁶ George Kennedy commented that MacArthur held audiences spellbound before.³⁷ The speech had a strong, emotional effect on listeners. The virtue of the speech was its emotional impact.

MacArthur's message was very simple and concrete. Drawing on historical generalizations, his ideas which were based on familiar, traditional American values, were expressed straightforwardly in "American" words³⁸: words of victory, words of confidence, honor, and praise for America, and words of condemnation. He carefully inserted sentences and phrases which would appeal to the audience's emotions. For instance, "To serve my country" has a strong effect on stirring up patriotic sentiment in the audience. This phrase gives an emotional frame on the speech. The focus on the speech is on General MacArthur himself rather than on the debate on the Korean issues.

By referring to people in Korea as those who, liberated from the long dated colonization, and now seeking for social justice and individual dignity,

³⁴ Manchester, 658; James, 613.

³⁵ James, 616; Schaller, 243.

³⁶ Manchester, 658.

³⁷ Manchester, 658.

³⁸ Spanier, 219.

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had courageously chosen "to risk death rather than slavery,"³⁹ MacArthur was asking his audience if it was not America who had once risen up for justice and liberty, and who used to help and guide those who sought and strove for these ideals.

MacArthur also turned his audience's attention to their "fighting sons in Korea", whom, against his will, he had to leave behind. He praised how splendid these young gallant Americans were. At the same time, he expressed his anguish over the growing bloodshed which he could not have stopped in spite of his every effort to lessen meaningless loss of the young life. On hearing this, there must have been many among his audience who thought of their husbands, brothers and sons having died or injured in the past wars, or then in Korea. To them, particularly, this old soldier's words gave meaning to what they had lost in the wars. Thus, this invincible American giant "struck the most responsive chord in the American temperament-- 'Americanism'."⁴⁰

President Truman made a radio address to the nation on April 11, 1951, to explain the Government policy in Korea as well as in the Far East, which was, essentially, the explanation for relieving General MacArthur.⁴¹ Although Truman recognized the Korean Crisis as the bold and dangerous move made by the Communists, the best way to maintain international peace and security that he suggested was to resist the Communist plan, to *slow down* their time-table, to

³⁹ MacArthur, 1951: 433.

⁴⁰ Spanier, 220.

⁴¹ Harry H. Truman, "Far Eastern Policy," *Vital Speeches of the Day* 1 May, vol. 17 (1951) 418-420.

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discourage the Communists rulers, and to *avoid* the spread of the conflict. These words sounded passive, inactive, and too unlikely to describe Americans' deeds. Truman further explained that America was no longer a lone, mighty country. America had to act together with other peace loving nations to meet the threat of aggression, because, the President continued, "If they don't act together, they are likely to be picked off, one by one."⁴² To those who felt frustration with the containment strategy which seemed to protract the uneasy situation, MacArthur's vivid, self-determined words strongly inspired American audiences.

Reviewing the symposium of critical comment on MacArthur's address, Karl R. Wallace noted that the academic critics paid little attention to the speaker's proposition and arguments. Wallace reasoned that MacArthur's speech did not have any explicit, intended purpose of the effect.⁴³ Herbert A. Wichelns' interpretation might best represent a shared stance on MacArthur's speech of the professional critics on the symposium. Wichelns perceived

⁴² Truman, 418.

⁴³ Frederick W. Haberman, "General MacArthur's Speech: A Symposium of Critical Comment," *QJS*, 37, Oct. (1951) 321-331. The symposium was organized by Frederick W. Haberman. The participants from the Congressional critics included Joseph W. Martin, Jr., Minority Leader of the House of Representatives; Senator Robert S. Kerr, of Oklahoma; Senator Karl E. Mundt, of South Dakota (formerly Prof. of Speech); Senator Hubert H. Humphrey, of Minnesota; Senator Alexander Wiley, of Wisconsin; and Representative Robert J. Corbett, of Pennsylvania (formerly a coach of forensics). The Journalist critics include Richard H. Rovere, contributor to *The New Yorker*; Quincy Howe, School of Journalism and Communications, Univ. of Ill.; and William T. Evjue, editor and publisher of *The Capital Times*, Madison, Wisconsin. The Academic critics included W. Norwood Brigance, Wabash College; Herbert A. Wichelns, Cornell Univ.; Wilbur Samuel Howell, Princeton Univ.; Henry L. Ewbank, Univ. of Wisconsin; and A. Craig Baird, State Univ. of Iowa.; Karl R. Wallace, "On the Criticism of the MacArthur Speech," *QJS*, 39 (1953): 69-74.

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MacArthur's choice as "not to 'make a motion,' but merely to offer comment and advice at large."⁴⁴ What the speaker did was to support his suggestion by drawing his self-portrait. The speech was, Wichelns said, an arresting self-portrait colored with the "'brief insight into the surrounding area'" which had not argumentative force but just set up the image of a leader of global vision and a masterful man of unique experience.⁴⁵

In his discerning comments, Spanier described MacArthur's speech as "an unforgettable performance,"⁴⁶ and says that the audience "will always recall the image of the man" of strong character and unshakable self-confidence, albeit "they may not remember what MacArthur said."⁴⁷

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⁴⁴ Harberman, 328.

⁴⁵ Harberman, 328-329.

⁴⁶ Spanier, 216.

⁴⁷ Spanier, 215-216.

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