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President Truman's Dismissal of General MacArthur:
A Case Study in Bureaucratic Politics

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Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

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1. REPORT DATE 1995	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED 00-00-1995 to 00-00-1995			
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE President Truman's Dismissal of General MacArthur: A Case Study in Bureaucratic Politics		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER			
		5b. GRANT NUMBER			
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER			
6. AUTHOR(S)		5d. PROJECT NUMBER			
		5e. TASK NUMBER			
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER			
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) National War College, 300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319-6000		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER			
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)			
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)			
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT see report					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified		22	

Bureaucratic Politics

President Harry Truman's dismissal of General Douglas MacArthur from Korea in 1951 occurred as a result of bureaucratic politics. For forty years, historians have portrayed this decision as a straight-forward conflict between two strong-willed individuals. In reality, the President's decision was a result of a breakdown in communication due to misconceptions, inadequate third party advice, and partisan politics.¹

The decision to dismiss General MacArthur will be analyzed using Graham T. Allison's Governmental Politics Paradigm. The model views government decisions as products of "compromise, conflict, and confusion of officials with diverse interests and unequal power."² Using the bureaucratic politics paradigm, the paper will examine the President's decision by presenting the players' positions, perceptions, motivations, preferences, compromises and actions which resulted in General MacArthur's dismissal

First, the background of the controversy. On June 25, 1950, the Korean People's Army of North Korea invaded the Republic of Korea. In the first phase of the war, American forces under General Douglas MacArthur, deployed from Japan, to reinforce the small South Korean Army. Initially, the allies were driven back

¹D. Clayton James, "Command Crisis: MacArthur and the Korean War" The Farmon Lectures in Military History, number 24, (Given at the United States Air Force Academy, 12 November 1981), p. 4.

²Graham T. Allison, Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crises (Harvard University : Harper Collins Publishers, 1971), p 162

to a small perimeter at the base of the Korean Peninsula. The bleak tactical situation, during this phase of the war, resulted in MacArthur's recommendation to use troops offered by Chiang Kai Shek. On August 28, 1950, General MacArthur sent a letter to the Veterans of Foreign Wars which "opposed appeasement and defeatism which would lead to the abandonment of Formosa." It was later withdrawn at White House request.³

Phase two of the war began with General MacArthur's amphibious landing at Inchon. This brilliant maneuver resulted in the destruction of the North Korean forces south of the 38th parallel. Seoul was liberated and the rightful government installed. Thus the original political objective of the war was achieved. However, the allies crossed the 38th parallel to complete the destruction of the North Korean Army. The political objective of the war had changed from restoring the 38th parallel to reunification of Korea under a democratic government. This new political objective was to be accomplished without provoking the Chinese into the war. On October 15, 1950, President Truman and General MacArthur met at Wake Island. After this meeting President Truman announced that "a very complete unanimity of view" was reached with General MacArthur over Pacific policy.⁴

³U.S. Senate, Military Situation in the Far East Hearings. to Conduct an Inquiry into the Military Situation in the Far East and the Facts Surrounding the Relief of General of the Army Douglas MacArthur from His Assignments in that Area, 82nd Cong., 1st Sess (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Senate, 1951), p. 7

⁴Ibid., p. 7

On November 27, 1950, four Communist Chinese Armies attacked the United Nations forces and drove them back. This commenced the third phase of the war. General MacArthur released a statement which protested orders not to attack Chinese Communist forces north of the Korean border as "an enormous handicap without precedent in military history." Five days later, on December 6th, President Truman directed that in the future General MacArthur clear all press releases and statements concerning foreign policy through the Secretary of Defense. Despite this directive, General MacArthur undercut the President's peace initiative by publishing an insulting surrender demand on March 24th. He also sent a letter to Congressman Joe Martin, the House Minority Leader, which harshly criticized the President's foreign policy. After this last letter was read on the floor of the House of Representatives, General MacArthur was relieved.⁵

Players' Positions

The breakdown in communications between MacArthur and Truman was not solely a result of the Korean war. Misconceptions, conflict and confusion had been the norm in the five years prior to the outbreak of the war. MacArthur's own ego isolated him from the principal leaders in Washington. Graham T. Allison's model of bureaucratic politics can be observed in the interaction between MacArthur and Washington prior to 1950. The poor quality of this relationship had a dramatic impact in the stressful environment

⁵ Ibid , pp 8-9

of the Korean war.

President Harry Truman was a strong, decisive leader. He relished the role of "Commander in Chief" and was at his best in a crisis. He saw his role "as the man-in-charge of government, as the maker of a record for his party, and as voice for the whole body of Americans." The President, as the nation's "Boss-and-Spokesman", was the final authority for all policy decisions. Truman was sensitive to any challenge to his role as decision-maker or to the dignity of the position of President.⁶

Truman cultivated a modest, unassuming public image. He played poker, drank bourbon, and cursed on occasion. He dressed simply and his appearance was described by one historian as that of a "main street shopkeeper." However, underneath this carefully devised persona, he possessed a keen intellect and was a peerless politician. He also had a strong disdain for "egotistical, aloof, and pretentious persons."

Truman never met MacArthur before the start of the Korean War; however he had a strong preconceived dislike for the General. In his diary, on June 17, 1945, Truman described his innermost feelings about MacArthur:

What to do with Mister Prima Donna, Brass Hat, Five Star MacArthur...It is a very great pity we have to have stuffed shirts like that in key positions. I don't see why in the hell Roosevelt didn't order Wainwright home and let MacArthur be a martyr. We'd have had a real general and a

⁶Richard Neustadt, Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership From FDR to Carter (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1980), pp 128-130

⁷James, Crisis in Command, p. 5

fighting man if we had Wainwright and not a play actor and a bunco man such as we have now.⁸

Truman invited MacArthur back to the United States on several occasions before the start of the Korean war. MacArthur always claimed pressing duties precluded him from coming. MacArthur should have interpreted these invitations as an order, but he didn't. In his memoirs, Truman described the purpose behind these invitations, "I thought that he ought to know his Commander-in-Chief and that I ought to know the senior field commander in the Far East...He should have come back to familiarize himself with the situation back home..."⁹ Truman felt that because MacArthur's had not returned to the United States for fourteen year's, he had "lost some of his contacts with the country and its people."¹⁰

General of the Army Douglas MacArthur was seventy years old at the outbreak of the Korean War. He had been a General for thirty-two years. Twenty years earlier he had been Herbert Hoover's Chief of Staff of the Army. He had no peers on active duty. President Franklin Roosevelt had been cautious in dealing with MacArthur during World War II.¹¹ His performance in the

⁸Robert Ferrell, Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry S. Truman (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1980), p.47.

⁹Harry S. Truman, Memoirs: Years of Trial and Hope (New York: Doubleday Publishers, 1956), p 363

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Francis Heller, The Korean War A Twenty-Five year Perspective (Lawrence, Kansas. The Regents Press Of Kansas, 1977), p 235

Southwest Pacific theater was nothing short of legendary. Omar Bradley, The Chief of Staff of the Army during the Korean War described MacArthur as, "awesomely brilliant." However, Bradley noted his flaws as well. "An obsession for self-glorification, almost no consideration for other men with whom he served, and a contempt for the judgement of his superiors."¹²

MacArthur lived in almost complete isolation in Japan. The Japanese people treated him almost as a deity. He never returned to the United States after the war, even for a short visit. In fact, he spent fourteen years outside of the United States. His staff was composed almost entirely of sycophants, who constantly massaged his ego. Because MacArthur rarely traveled, even in Japan, he was entirely dependant on his staff for input. This staff, unfortunately, did not provide honest, incisive advice.¹³

Lack of personal contact seriously hampered the relationship between these two strong-willed and talented individuals. MacArthur never adjusted to the change in leadership styles between Roosevelt and Truman. Truman was much more sensitive of his position, authority and role as the president, than was Roosevelt. Without personal contact, each depended on third parties to understand each other's motives and intentions.¹⁴ Furthermore, MacArthur's close affiliation with the

¹²Omar Bradley, A General's Life (New York. Simon and Schuster Inc , 1983), p.523

¹³D Clayton James, Refighting the Last War (New York. The Free Press, 1993), pp. 40-42.

¹⁴James, Crisis in Command, p 4

conservative wing of the Republican party, while an important source of power, proved a greater irritant to Truman than Roosevelt. MacArthur's political allies were the "China Lobby," who were Truman's most implacable political foes.¹⁵

The Secretary of State was Dean Acheson. Acheson was the most influential advisor to President Truman. Truman said, "There never has been a more able Secretary of State than Dean Acheson."¹⁶ Acheson was Truman's most trusted confidant. The President admired Acheson's judgement and intellect. More important, he was comfortable expressing his innermost thoughts and political views with him. No one had more power with the President than the Secretary of State.¹⁷

Dean Acheson had an implacable hatred for MacArthur. He had four major clashes with the General before the Korean War and had lost all four. In 1945, he had vehemently opposed the retention of the Emperor in Japan. Acheson felt the Emperor was "the enemy" and should be removed. He was overruled. In September 1945 MacArthur, sensitive to Congress' pressure "to bring the boys home", undercut the President's demobilization policy.¹⁸ The General announced that since the Japanese were behaving he needed only 200,000 men in Japan. Truman acquiesced to this political

¹⁵James, Refighting the Last War , p.34.

¹⁶Harry Truman to Maurey Maverick, 3 July 1952, cited in Ferrell, Off the Record, p.258.

¹⁷David McLellan, Dean Acheson The State Department Years (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1976), pp 142-143.

¹⁸Ibid , p 53

statement. However, Acheson held a press conference in which he criticized MacArthur and pointed out that policy was "being made in Washington and not in the field." This outburst by Acheson caused conservative Republicans to castigate Acheson in his confirmation hearings for Under Secretary of State.¹⁹

In April 1946, Acheson did not feel the Japanese people were ready for free elections. MacArthur ignored Acheson's recommendation and held the elections.²⁰ In March 1949, Acheson tried an end run in Washington to move MacArthur out of Japan. Acheson recommended that military and political positions be separated. An Ambassador would replace MacArthur and the State Department would "control all non-garrison aspects" of the occupation. When MacArthur discovered this plot, he contacted his Republican supporters in Congress and they quickly defeated it. After four defeats, Acheson intensely disliked MacArthur and held a powerful grudge. After the fall of China, the feud got worse as MacArthur's allies in Congress savagely criticized Acheson.²¹

The Joint Chiefs of Staff were completely intimidated by MacArthur. General Matthew Ridgeway said that the JCS held MacArthur in "almost superstitious awe". He was much older than any of the Joint Chiefs. General Vandenberg, the Air Force Chief,

¹⁹Ibid. , p.58

²⁰Gabriel Kolko and Joyce Kolko, The Limits of Power The World and the United States Foreign Policy, 1945-1954 (New York. Harper and Row, 1972), p. 310.

²¹ Clayton James, The Years of MacArthur. Triumph and Disaster 1945-1964 (New York; Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985), pp 268-269

was a cadet at West Point when MacArthur was the Superintendent. General Bradley, the Chairman, and General Collins, the Army Chief, were captains on the faculty of the Military Academy at the same time. Admiral Sherman was the only Chief that knew MacArthur, but he, too, was intimidated.²²

This relationship was further exacerbated, in phase I of the Korean War, when all of the Chiefs recommended against the Inchon landing. General Bradley even told Congress, before the war, that he doubted, "there would ever again be an amphibious landing, because of the nature of modern war."²³ Inchon was such a brilliant success that in Bradley's words, "the Joint Chiefs seemed like a bunch of nervous nellys to have doubted". After the Inchon landing the Joint Chiefs "were afraid to challenge him" ²⁴

The Secretary of Defense, after September 12, 1950, was George C. Marshall. By position he, like the Joint Chiefs, should have been an important power broker during the conflict between the President and MacArthur. The President had the greatest respect for Marshall and his judgement. As Chief of Staff of the Army, he was the principal architect of victory in World War II. However, Marshall was tired by 1950. After the war he had gone to

²²Bradley, General's Life, pp. 604-605.

²³Stephen Ambrose, "The Armed Service and American Strategy, 1945-1953" in Kenneth Hagan and William Roberts, Against All Enemies Interpretations of American Military History from Colonial Times to the Present (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1986), p. 310.

²⁴Bradley, General's Life, pp. 557 and 604

China as the President's special envoy. He had then served as Secretary of State. He had been brutally castigated by the Republican Party for the loss of China. Marshall and MacArthur had been rivals since 1917. As Secretary of Defense, Marshall adopted a hands off policy with MacArthur.²⁵

Senator Robert Taft and the conservatives in the Republican party were avid supporters of MacArthur. Taft had presidential aspirations. The Republicans disagreed with Truman's policy that Europe was essential to American security.²⁶ After the 1948 election they viewed Truman as vulnerable. They rejected bipartisanship. Taft said, "We cannot possibly win the next election, unless we point out the utter failure and incapacity of the present administration to conduct foreign policy and cite the loss of China and the Korean War as typical examples." Taft and the Republicans sought any means to embarrass the President.²⁷

Players' Preferences

In the ten months, June 1950-April 1951, MacArthur openly questioned the policy and strategy of President Truman and his administration. Truman and Acheson, adhering to the Containment Policy, sought to keep the Korean War limited while focusing on the defense of Europe. MacArthur, engaged in a combat in Korea,

²⁵Neustadt, Presidential Power, p.107.

²⁶John Spanier, The Truman-MacArthur Controversy and the Korean War (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1965), pp. 158-159.

²⁷James Patterson, Mister Republican: A Biography of Robert A. Taft (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972), p. 491.

saw that theater as the most important. After the Chinese intervention, as the tactical situation deteriorated, MacArthur grew more desperate to impose his view.²⁸

Truman showed great patience and forbearance in dealing with MacArthur. He wanted to avoid a costly showdown with the General. As a consummate politician, Truman realized a fight with MacArthur would not be good for the Democratic Party. After December 1950, as the Chinese forces pushed south, MacArthur became increasingly concerned with his reputation.²⁹ He wanted to end his career in victory. Taft and the Republicans constantly sought MacArthur's views in an attempt to discredit the President and his policies.³⁰ It was not until MacArthur politicized the issue by dealing with the Republicans, thus violating both traditional military perogatives and traditional senior-subordinate relations, that Truman acted.

Acheson was the President's principal advisor advocating MacArthur's relief. One historian noted, "Acheson was the abiding voice in Truman's ear from 1945 onward urging him to dump 'the Big General,' and it was he who primarily continued to stoke the long-cold coals even after most of his cohorts had let the fire die as far as public statements were concerned."³¹ Acheson's

²⁸Matthew Ridgeway, The Korean War (New York. Da Capo Press, 1967,, p.149.

²⁹Spanier, Truman-MacArthur, p. 149

³⁰U S Senate, Hearings, pp.45-50.

³¹James, Refighting the Last War, p 216

advice became critical because the Joint Chiefs and Marshall tried to avoid the issue. However in the end, Marshall also would lend his considerable influence with Truman in advocating MacArthur's relief.

The First Compromise

MacArthur sent a message to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, on August 28, 1950, in which he opposed the "abandonment of Formosa". The Republicans, adhering to their strategy of attacking the administration's foreign policy, jumped on MacArthur's statement. Truman said this statement gave the, "Acheson-haters an argument behind which they could gather their forces for an attack."³² Acheson reacted to the Republican attack by demanding MacArthur's relief. Acheson said, "that this insubordination could not be tolerated."³³

Truman's response was mild. He sent Averell Harriman to MacArthur's headquarters to explain the President's policy. Harriman explained that Truman wanted to avoid a confrontation with Communist China. MacArthur didn't agree, but told Harriman he would obey orders. Harriman explained policy but did not articulate the consternation the message had created in Washington.³⁴ He did not articulate how angry Truman and Acheson were over the message. MacArthur, therefore, did not appreciate

³²Truman, Memoirs , p.430

³³Bradley, General's Life, p 551

³⁴Averell Harriman, "Mr Truman's Way With Crises" in Heller, Korea, p 233

the problem he had caused.

Another Compromise: Wake Island

After MacArthur's brilliant victory at Inchon, Truman decided it was time the two met. The first, and only meeting, between MacArthur and Truman took place at Wake Island on 15 October 1950. At this point in the war, the North Korean Army was in full retreat. The South Korean government was restored. The political objective of the war had shifted from restoring the 38th parallel, to unifying all Korea under a democratic government. MacArthur's popularity was at an all time high. Truman, ever the astute politician, tried to capitalize on this military success in the mid term elections, which were two weeks away. The elections were the real reason for the meeting.³⁵

The actual meeting only lasted one hour and thirty-six minutes. Unfortunately, Truman and MacArthur didn't take advantage of this opportunity to establish a personal rapport. Truman's liaison to MacArthur's staff, Frank Lowe, said he thought the two "actually saw things alike", but that they were "deliberately pulled apart and pitted against each other by third parties."³⁶ Acheson, Truman's main confidant, should have come on the trip to define policy. Acheson, however, refused "to kowtow to the Emperor of the East" and did not accompany Truman.³⁷ Thus,

³⁵Douglas MacArthur, Reminiscences (New York: Da Capo Press, 1964), p 363; James, Crisis in Command, p. 12

³⁶James, Refighting the Last War, p 24

³⁷McLellan, Acheson, p. 284

no real substance was discussed at the meeting.³⁸ MacArthur called the conference "innocuous." Truman held a press conference and said there was a "very complete unanimity of view."³⁹

The 1950 elections were a disaster for the Democratic Party. The Republicans gained five seats in the Senate and twenty-eight in the House. Truman was in the "depths of despair."⁴⁰ The Republicans had successfully exploited the loss of China.⁴¹

The political climate in Washington grew worse for Truman after the communist Chinese entered the war. As the United Nations forces retreated, the Republicans more vociferously opposed Truman's foreign policy. MacArthur issued a statement on December 1st protesting orders forbidding him to attack bases in China. Previously, MacArthur had questioned the administration's policy on Formosa. Now, he questioned the administration's limitations on strategy. Again Truman's response was mild. Truman simply had the JCS issue a directive, on December 6, ordering MacArthur to clear all public statements through the Secretary of

³⁸Most historians emphasize that MacArthur told Truman, at this meeting, that Communist Chinese would not enter the war. However, three days before the Wake Island meeting, the CIA also issued a report to the President assuring him that Communist Chinese would not intervene in Korea. This is cited in Bradley, General's Life, p. 570

³⁹U S Senate, Hearings, p. 7.

⁴⁰Blair, Forgotten War, p. 401

⁴¹Spanier, Truman-MacArthur, p. 47

State.⁴² This is an excellent example of the missed communication between MacArthur and Truman. Any other commander would have viewed this action as a reprimand, as Truman intended. But MacArthur's ego had grown so large after five years as undisputed law in Japan, that he did not take the message seriously.

MacArthur Crosses The Line

On March 24, as the State Department attempted to negotiate a peace with the North Koreans, MacArthur issued an ultimatum to the enemy commander. He demanded their immediate surrender. MacArthur had issued two previous surrender demands, once after the Inchon landing and again after the capture of the North Korean capitol. Neither of the previous demands caused any consternation in Washington.⁴³ The March 24 statement did. Truman felt that this statement was "a challenge to the authority of the President." However, his only response was to have the JCS send a memo reminding MacArthur of the December 6 directive.⁴⁴

Twelve days later Congressman Joe Martin, the Republican Minority leader in the House, read a MacArthur letter to the House of Representatives. This letter criticized the Truman policy of emphasizing Europe over Asia. The Republicans, especially the China Lobby, used this letter to castigate the Administration's foreign policy.⁴⁵

⁴²U.S. Senate, Hearings, p.8.

⁴³MacArthur, Reminiscences, p.389.

⁴⁴Truman, Memoirs, pp.442--43

⁴⁵Bradley, General's Life, p 550

This letter to Joe Martin was a watershed in the Truman-MacArthur relationship. Truman felt MacArthur was encouraging the China Lobby. MacArthur on the other hand, believed he was doing nothing more than he had done in December. Then, the response was mild.⁴⁶ When MacArthur challenged policy and strategy, Truman did little. Consorting with political rivals was different.

Truman called in his principal advisors, Marshall, Acheson and Bradley, for advice. Marshall recommended caution. He recommended that the President call MacArthur back to the United States for consultation. Bradley also advised caution. He was not sure that MacArthur "had committed a clear-cut case of military insubordination as defined in military regulations."⁴⁷ Bradley later admitted that his term as Chairman JCS was due to expire in four months, and he expected to retire from public life at that time. He did not want to take any action which would provoke an attack from the "primitives" in the Republican Party. He had observed the savage attacks on Acheson and Marshall and later said, "I did not relish going out on that sour note either."⁴⁸

Acheson was adamant that MacArthur should go. Acheson articulated the President's fears. He said that to recall MacArthur for consultations was the "road to disaster."⁴⁹ Acheson saw an alliance between MacArthur and the "primitives." This

⁴⁶Neustadt, Presidential Power, p 17.

⁴⁷Bradley, General's Life, p 631

⁴⁸Ibid , p 633

⁴⁹Ibid. , p 632

would destroy Truman. Acheson also worried "about repeat performances."⁵⁰

Marshall, after hearing Acheson's careful assessment, agreed that MacArthur should not be brought home for consultation. Marshall tried for several days to find an alternative solution. He agreed that MacArthur should go, but was concerned with the political fallout. In the end, Marshall and all the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recommended relief.⁵¹ Based on the advice of his advisors, Truman decided to do what he thought was right, regardless of the political fallout and dismissed MacArthur.

Casualty of Bureaucratic Politics

MacArthur was a casualty of bureaucratic politics. As Graham Allison's model points out, Truman's decision was the result of "compromise, conflict and confusion of officials with diverse interests and unequal power."⁵² MacArthur's failure to establish a personal relationship with President Truman proved

⁵⁰Gaddis Smith, The American Secretaries of State and Their Diplomacy: Dean Acheson (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1972), p.272.

⁵¹Pogue, George C Marshall: Statesman, pp. 481-483. Marshall was deeply disturbed by MacArthur's mood swings in January-February 1951. MacArthur sent a message, in January 1951, questioning the morale of his soldiers and threatening an evacuation of all forces from Korea. The tactical situation under General Ridgeway was actually quite good. Marshall said at that time, "when a general complains of the morale of his troops, the time has come to look into his own." After this incident Marshall doubted MacArthur's effectiveness, but was reluctant to relieve him and start a political controversy. Blair, Forgotten War, pp 626-627

⁵²Allison, Essence of Decision, p 162

fatal. MacArthur and Truman relied on advisors to interpret the intentions of each other. This system did not work.

MacArthur's only friends in Washington were the conservatives in the Republican Party. These friends did not endear him to Truman. The more Taft attacked the President's policy, the more isolated MacArthur became. He had no friends in the military to defend him. MacArthur had treated the Joint Chiefs imperiously and they did not intercede on his behalf with the President. Marshall did not help MacArthur. Because of past grievances, Marshall remained impartial so he would not be accused of revenge. MacArthur needed more than silence and neutrality. He needed someone to tell him the truth. He should have been told how Truman interpreted his intentions. In the end Marshall's loss of confidence in MacArthur influenced Truman. Marshall tried to find an alternative solution but couldn't. Marshall was the last advisor to advocate relief. When he did so, Truman listened.

The President's principal advisor, Dean Acheson, had no qualms on giving his interpretations. Acheson did not appreciate the attacks from the "primitives" in the Republican Party. Acheson held MacArthur responsible for those attacks. Eventually MacArthur's ego, misconceptions, and poor choice in allies made him a victim of bureaucratic politics.

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