

Documentary on Douglas MacArthur raises issues of contemporary importance

Shannon Jones
27 May 1999

The American Experience: MacArthur, May 17 & 18 on PBS. Margaret Drain, executive producer; Mark Samels, senior producer

The recent two-part PBS television series “MacArthur,” which aired May 17 and 18, highlighted events from the life of a military leader who directly challenged the constitutional authority of the president of the United States as “commander-in-chief.” To the producers’ credit the program attempts to deal with the subject in a serious way. It features comments from a number of prominent historians as well as eyewitnesses to the events described. However, as one expects with American television, the commentary, while often informative, does not probe too deeply the political issues raised by Douglas MacArthur’s career, nor does the production seriously challenge the image of the general as a “hero,” even if one who had “flaws.”

The firing of General MacArthur by President Harry Truman in April 1951 in the midst of the Korean War brought to a head a bitter conflict within ruling circles in America. Truman dismissed the “hero” of the war against Japan after the general repeatedly and blatantly violated the principle of the subordination of the military leadership to civilian authority.

MacArthur’s contempt for the institutions of bourgeois democracy and his ties to extreme right-wing elements in US politics were longstanding and well known. In 1932 Franklin Roosevelt, at that time the Democratic nominee for president, had called the general one of “the most dangerous men in America.”

The issues raised in the Truman-MacArthur conflict have contemporary relevance given the resurgence of US militarism. The Pentagon brass do not conceal their contempt for President Bill Clinton. For his part, the supposed “commander-in-chief” has repeatedly bowed before the demands of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

If anyone thinks that Truman’s sacking of MacArthur settled the issue of civilian control over the military, the PBS documentary contains a rather astonishing interview with Alexander Haig, US Secretary of State during Reagan’s first term and former commander of NATO. Of MacArthur’s insubordination Haig says, “Blind loyalty to a unit commander or even a president must be overwhelmed by one’s subjective perception of the best interests of the people. I think MacArthur was driven by that. I think it was the right solution.”

Haig, who served as an aide to MacArthur during the Korean war, exhibited his own lust for power when he proclaimed to a startled Washington press corps “I am in charge,” following the attempted assassination of Reagan in 1981.

That MacArthur should play the role he did is not accidental, nor, as Haig’s remarks indicate, was he an isolated individual within the military establishment. His career illustrates in stark form the anti-democratic tendencies inherent in imperialist militarism.

MacArthur’s early life prepared him for the role he was subsequently to play. He was not a self-made man. His father, Arthur MacArthur, Jr., had been one of the highest ranking officers in the United States army and was

appointed first military governor of the Philippines. His family connections helped the young MacArthur in his early career and by World War I he had reached the rank of Brigadier General. He emerged from the war as the most highly decorated US soldier, but not without a cost to his troops. During one “successful” attack on the Germans, PBS points out, one-third of his command was killed or wounded.

In the interwar period MacArthur’s most notable action was to oversee the suppression of the bonus march. Tens of thousands of unemployed WW I veterans, many of them destitute, encamped in Washington to demand that Congress appropriate money for early payment of a cash service bonus, a proposal opposed by President Hoover. In moving to disperse the bonus marchers MacArthur exceeded the instructions given him by Hoover, revealing his hatred of the working class and contempt for civilian leadership.

MacArthur viewed the protest as a “communist” conspiracy, declaring, “There is incipient revolution in the air.” Hoover explicitly instructed MacArthur, then army Chief of Staff, only to clear the area around the Capitol. However the general, taking personal command, sent his troops across the Anacosta River to destroy the encampment sheltering the families of the veterans. In the attack two babies suffocated from tear gas and a boy was bayoneted through the leg.

PBS points out that the episode aroused public anger and contributed to the humiliating defeat of Hoover at the hands of Roosevelt in the 1932 elections. The attack on the Bonus March prompted *Washington Post* columnist Drew Pearson to denounce MacArthur as “dictatorial” and “insubordinate.” The general filed a \$1.75 million libel suit against Pearson and another *Post* columnist. The two sides eventually came to a seedy compromise with MacArthur agreeing to drop the suit and Pearson promising not to publish love letters the general had written to his Philippine-born mistress.

The producers draw attention to MacArthur’s fierce hostility to Roosevelt and his attempt to save capitalism through the New Deal. MacArthur felt efforts to ameliorate the plight of the unemployed to be a dangerous precedent that threatened the free enterprise system. He was particularly outraged when Roosevelt cut military spending to help pay for New Deal programs.

Roosevelt was well aware of MacArthur’s fascistic inclinations. However, he valued his military skills and attempted to maintain good relations as far as possible. In July 1941, just before the outbreak of war with Japan, he appointed him commander of all US forces in the Pacific.

MacArthur’s war record is still a matter of dispute. He is usually portrayed as the “architect” of the US victory in the Pacific. However even his admirers note his gift for self-promotion. The extent to which MacArthur, leader of ground forces, should be assigned credit for victory in what was essentially a naval war can be argued. Many, including General Dwight Eisenhower, were critical of his complacency in preparing US forces in the Philippines, which, he predicted, could be easily defended in the event of a Japanese attack. Instead, MacArthur

presided over the biggest single defeat in US military history.

MacArthur always claimed that he wanted to stay behind and fight to the death against the Japanese. However, PBS reports that before the general left his besieged troops in the Philippines for Australia aboard a navy PT boat he accepted a \$500,000 secret payment awarded him by Commonwealth President Manuel Quezon. This fact only came to light long after MacArthur's death when a historian obtained a corroborating document that had been preserved by one of MacArthur's aides.

PBS documents MacArthur's aborted attempt in 1944 to run for the Republican presidential nomination. MacArthur had to withdraw after a letter became public in which he endorsed the fascistic ramblings of a right-wing congressman who declared that Roosevelt's New Deal threatened to "destroy the American way of life."

Another significant episode in MacArthur's career was his role as leader of the US occupation of Japan. PBS deals at some length with MacArthur's efforts to retain Emperor Hirohito on the throne and prevent him from being tried for war crimes. He helped promote the myth that the emperor had no hand in planning acts of military aggression such as the invasion of Manchuria or the bombing of Pearl Harbor. PBS brings to our attention the fact that MacArthur even forced Hideki Tojo to alter testimony at his war crimes trial in order to absolve the emperor of any responsibility for Japanese militarism. Instead, Tojo and a handful of generals, who were chosen more or less arbitrarily as symbolic scapegoats, were sent to face the hangman.

However this was only one aspect of MacArthur's tenure as military ruler of Japan. The general demonstrated shrewdness and insight in many fields in his efforts to promote the restabilization of capitalism in postwar Japan. Not only did MacArthur virtually dictate a new Japanese constitution based on European parliamentary models, he insisted on dismantling holdovers from Japan's feudal past. One of the most significant changes was the abolition of the oppression of Japan's peasantry, which MacArthur sought to develop as a class of small capitalist landowners which could serve as a political counterweight to the powerful Japanese working class.

The PBS documentary implies that MacArthur adopted a liberal attitude toward the question of social reform and the trade unions. However, against the working class MacArthur employed not only the velvet glove, but the mailed fist. Following the war a mass strike movement erupted against conditions of semi-starvation. By one estimate daily caloric intake was 1350 in Tokyo in 1946. MacArthur responded by legalizing the trade union movement and encouraging its growth, taking the advice of those who saw it as a bulwark against revolution. He also legalized the Japanese Communist Party.

However, when Japanese unions threatened a political general strike in February 1947, MacArthur outlawed the work stoppage, warning that defiance would provoke "action of the most drastic nature against individual and organized interests." [1] He intervened to place severe restrictions on the activities of the Japanese Communist Party and other left-wing organizations.

In 1948 MacArthur proposed a "stabilization plan" for the Japanese economy based on recommendations by American bankers. It included a wage freeze, increased working hours and mass layoffs. Unemployment benefits and other social expenditures were slashed to balance the budget. Some 700,000 workers were sacked as a result of this policy.

To help enforce these measures MacArthur instituted a purge of Communist Party members from the labor movement. In 1950 the occupation government intervened to sack 11,000 Communist Party members, including 2,500 union officials. As a result the militant Stalinist Sanbetsu union confederation was destroyed. [2] The same period saw an enormous growth in the productivity and profits of Japanese business.

The debacle of American intervention in Korea brought MacArthur's military career to an end, but not before he directly challenged the

authority of President Truman. The failure in Korea was primarily political, based on an underestimation of the power of the colonial anti-imperialist revolution. MacArthur's decision to invade North Korea was backed by Truman, who believed the general's assurances that the Chinese would not intervene, and if they did, would be routed by superior American arms and equipment. However, MacArthur ignored Truman's qualification that US troops not approach the Yalu River, the border between North Korea and China.

The defeat of MacArthur's troops by the Chinese forced a sharp reevaluation of US imperialist policy. While PBS does not dwell on this disaster, it cites one figure that does indicate the scale of the defeat—one-third of the West Point class of 1950 were killed during the Chinese offensive across the Yalu.

If not for overwhelming air superiority the US forces would have been completely crushed. One aspect of the Korean campaign not dealt with by PBS is the colossal death and destruction inflicted by indiscriminate US bombing. Civilian deaths were around 2 million, approximately 10 percent of the pre-war population of the Korean peninsula.

Truman concluded that it would be in the best interests of US imperialism to sign a peace agreement with China and North Korea, leaving the peninsula divided. He justifiably feared that an attack on mainland China, as advocated by MacArthur and the Republican right, could lead to a confrontation with the Soviet Union and a possible nuclear war.

MacArthur, informed by Truman in advance of his plan to propose a truce, intervened to sabotage this policy by issuing an ultimatum to China to negotiate or face bombing and invasion. A few weeks later Congressman Joseph Martin, Republican House leader, made public a letter he received from MacArthur. In it the general strongly endorsed a speech given by the congressman in which he declared, among other things, that Truman should be indicted for treason for not pursuing a policy based on total victory in Korea.

The conflict raised profound issues. As one historian notes, "MacArthur's defiance prompted some to wonder if the Cold War was pushing American state makers down the road to a garrison state in which traditional political values gave way to a dangerous authoritarianism, civilian rule to a military dictatorship." [3]

MacArthur's defiance raised the question of how US imperialism would respond to the growing power of the Soviet Union and China. Would the United States capitalists seek to defend their interests by pushing humanity into World War III and a possible nuclear holocaust? Within the US many military and political leaders felt that, at the very least, MacArthur's demand for all-out war on China was reckless and inopportune. As General Omar Bradley told Congress, MacArthur's policies would "involve us in the wrong war, at the wrong place, at the wrong time, and with the wrong enemy." [4]

Truman realized that if he failed to act he would seriously compromise the presidency. Therefore he had MacArthur removed from command. While the action was endorsed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and his civilian advisors, it took considerable political courage. MacArthur portrayed himself as the innocent victim of backstabbing politicians. The Republicans asked him to address both houses of Congress and he was feted to a massive ticker tape parade in New York. After hearing MacArthur one conservative Republican declared, "We heard God speak here today, God in the flesh, the voice of God."

The passions unleashed by the firing of MacArthur are at least in part explained by frustration and anger within ruling circles in the United States as realization dawned of the limits of US power, which had been viewed as omnipotent. For the first time US forces entered a war and failed to emerge victorious.

Support for MacArthur tied in with the McCarthyite witch-hunt of supposed communists, then in high gear. Richard Nixon, a California

senator at the time, said of MacArthur's firing, "The happiest group in the country will be the Communists and their stooges." Among those rallying to the defense of MacArthur were redbaiters within the trade union bureaucracy, including United Auto Workers President Walter Reuther and Joseph Curran of the National Maritime Union.

Not until 1953, following the election of Eisenhower, did the United States secure an armistice in Korea. By that time domestic and international opposition to the war gave the US no choice but to end the conflict on terms amenable to China.

The fact that the US ruling class committed a similar strategic blunder in Vietnam, with tragic consequences once again, demonstrates that few lessons were drawn from the experience of Korea about the limits of US military power. One of the reasons for this was the impact of the McCarthyite purges. The witch-hunt had the effect of driving out the more experienced and informed American foreign policy makers. The United States government went into the war full of bull-headed arrogance and largely ignorant of the pitfalls it faced.

After he retired MacArthur remained a public figure, whose counsel was sought by the powerful and famous, including presidents Kennedy and Johnson. His memorial in Norfolk, Virginia—he declined a more modest burial plot in Arlington National Cemetery—is presidential in its size.

PBS says little about the conclusion to be drawn from the career of MacArthur. To the extent that the producers treat MacArthur as a unique individual, they remain on the surface. In fact MacArthur manifested a tendency inherent in imperialism that today is coming once again to the fore. Considered in light of the present domestic and world situation, the factors acting to constrain US militarism and the possible unleashing of a nuclear holocaust are much weaker today than they were at the time of MacArthur and Truman. The collapse of the Soviet Union means that the United States no longer has to contend with a significant military rival. This fact has emboldened the most rapacious elements within the ruling class, who feel that world domination is within US grasp.

Further, the democratic and constitutional traditions that Truman called on to confront the extreme militarist faction represented by MacArthur have been considerably eroded, witness the attempted impeachment of Clinton spearheaded by the ultra-right. Indeed, could anyone seriously conceive of Clinton facing down a mutinous admiral or general a la Truman?

Given the limits of PBS's treatment of MacArthur, thoughtful viewers will still hopefully be alerted from this historical example to the danger to democratic rights embodied in the growth of American militarism.

Footnotes:

1. Quoted from *Capitalism since 1945*, Philip Armstrong, Andrew Glen & John Harrison, Basil Blackwell, 1991, p. 46

2. Ibid, p. 93

3. *A Cross of Iron: Harry Truman and the origins of National Security State 1945-1954*, Michael J. Hogan, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 331

4. Quoted from *Grand Expectations: The United States 1945-1974*, James T. Patterson, Oxford University Press, 1996

Material from the PBS series on MacArthur can be accessed through the PBS web site at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/amex/macarthur/>



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact