T. General MacArthur’s Message on FOMO Formosa

In response to a message of August 17 from the Commander-in-Chief of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, General MacArthur cabled a message intended to be read into the Fifty-First National Encampment of that organization. He included in this message a detailed statement of his views on the relationship of Formosa to the American “strategic potential in the Pacific”.

World War II, according to MacArthur’s analysis, had changed the American “strategic frontier” from one lying “on the littoral line of the Americas with an exposed island salient ... to the Philippines” to one embracing “the entire Pacific Ocean which has become a vast sea to protect us”. No predatory attack from Asia, MacArthur said, could be successful as long as the United States and its allies held the island chain from the Aleutians to the Marianas, properly maintained and with naval and air supremacy and “modern ground elements to defend bases”. If this chain were lost, war would be inevitable.

Formosa in the hands of a power unfriendly to the United States, MacArthur stated, would constitute an enemy salient in the center of this defensive perimeter from which an enemy force, using installations currently available, could increase by 100 percent “the air effort which could be
directed against Okinawa as compared to operations based on the mainland and at the same time could direct damaging air attacks with fighter type aircraft against friendly installations in the Philippines which are currently beyond the range of fighters based on the mainland. The use of Formosa by a hostile power as a counter-balance or overshadow the strategic importance of the central and southern flank of the U.S. front line position. Formosa in such hands could be compared to an unsinkable aircraft carrier and submarine tender ideally located to accomplish offensive strategy and at the same time checkmate defensive or counter-offensive operations by friendly forces based on Okinawa and the Philippines.

"Nothing could be more fallacious," MacArthur continued, "than the threadbare argument by those who advocate appeasement and defeat in the Pacific that if we defend Formosa we alienate Continental Asia." It was the Oriental psychology, he declared, to respect "expressive, resolute, and dynamic leadership" and to turn on a leadership "characterized by timidity or vacillation". The American determination to "preserve the bulwarks" of the American strategic position in the Pacific had insured the Far East, he concluded, and to pursue any other course would ... shift any future battle area five thousand miles eastward to the coasts of the American continents.1

1Undated chit by Merchant, with message from MacArthur attached, unclassified.
This message came to the attention of the Department of State late on August 28 and was the subject of discussion by the Secretary of State.

Webb, Matthews, Jessup, and Harriman early the following morning before a conference which had been arranged with the President and Secretary Johnson.

Harriman was asked to stop at the Department on his way to this conference and, after discussing with Acheson and his aides the political problems which MacArthur's message would raise, he saw the President privately before the 9:30 conference meeting.

At this conference the President raised the question of the MacArthur message and read it aloud, with comments, referring to it as having been given him by Harriman. After considerable discussion of the matter, in which Acheson did not take part, the President decided that the only course was to order withdrawal of the message and instructed Johnson to issue such an order.

Shortly after this meeting had broken up, Johnson telephoned Acheson and suggested that, in lieu of an order to withdraw the message, MacArthur be sent a statement that, if his message were issued, it would be necessary to issue a statement in Washington that it was one man's opinion and not the official policy of the Government. Acheson took strong exception to this course of action as one which would cause confusion as to what American policy was, and stated that he saw nothing to do but to send MacArthur's message that the President directed him to withdraw his statement.
Inasmuch as Johnson had not understood that the President had actually agreed to send a direct order to MacArthur, there followed further consultations by telephone among Johnson, Acheson, and Harriman. In the course of these, Acheson, after consulting his staff, approved the text of a directive sent the President had meanwhile dictated to Johnson by telephone and continued to oppose suggestions from the Department of Defense for handing the matter on a "one man's opinion," MacArthur's basis, through the Political Adviser in Tokyo, or by a telephone call to MacArthur from the President. Consideration was given to reopening the matter with the President, but in a conversation with Harriman the President said that he had dictated what he wanted to go and that he still wanted it to go.  

Late in the afternoon of August 26, therefore, the Department of Defense sent a telegram to MacArthur informing him that the President directed the withdrawal of his message to the Veterans of Foreign Wars "because various features with respect to Formosa are in conflict with the policy of the U.S. and its position in the U.N."  

1 Memorandum by Battle on the events of August 25, 1950, top secret.  
2 To Tokyo, tel. DEF 88888, Aug. 26, 1950, 2617272, top secret.
On August 27 MacArthur announced that he had been directed to withdraw his message to the Veterans of Foreign Wars and on the following day the White House announced that President Truman had directed the withdrawal. Advance copies of the message, however, had already been distributed to the press, and, in spite of the withdrawal, the message itself soon became public knowledge.

Secretary Acheson analyzed the situation in a memorandum of August 27 as follows:

1. There can be only one voice in stating United States positions in foreign relations.... The President has spoken very clearly and very specifically on the subject of American policy toward Korea. It is essential that the clarity, sincerity, and good faith of our position...should not be brought in doubt.

"The President cannot debate with the General as to who states the United States position the better nor...whether the General's statement supports or does not support the President's position.

"The President's statement must stand before the world unconfused and uninterpreted as the official position of the United States."

Acheson affirmed that it was essential that the fundamental points of American policy as enunciated by the President and communicated by Ambassador Austin to the Secretary-General of the UN on August 6 remain absolutely clear... and the dust storm of propaganda which Mr. Hellik is
raising on this very subject." The Secretary concluded:

"The President's action in directing the withdraw-

al of the General's message was an effort to

preserve the clarity of the position of the United

States before the world.

"It must not be forgotten that General MacArthur

is the United Nations Commander in Korea, that the

question of Formosa has now been brought before the

Security Council of the United Nations, that members

of the United Nations have differing points of view

regarding Formosa, and that the American position which

has been so clearly stated by the President and

Ambassador Austin must not be clouded in any way

by any person." 3

A memorandum along similar lines was given to the

President's Press Secretary for background in briefing

the press, 4 and the Department late on August 27 submitted

to the President a draft letter to Ambassador Austin.

This letter, as signed without change and dispatched the

same night, 5 restated seven fundamental points of American

policy with respect to Formosa to the "end that there be no

 misconception concerning the position of the Government

of the United States: (1) "The United States has not


3 Auchincloss to Webb, memorandum, Aug. 27, 1960, top secret.

4 Director chit by Merchant with attached notes referred to

as 'background supplied Charlie Ross', confidential.

5 The text was also read to Austin by phone at

6 a.m. Aug. 27. Merchant to Webb, memorandum, Aug. 27, 1960,

no classification indicated.
encroached on the territory of China, nor has the United States taken aggressive action against China; (b) a conflict between Formosa and Communist China "would have threatened the security of the United Nations forces operating in Korea; (c) the "action of the United States was an impartial neutralizing action," the United States having "no designs on Formosa; (d) the American action was "without prejudice to the future political settlement of the status" of Formosa, which would require such international action; (e) the United States had a record of friendship for the Chinese people; (f) the "United States would welcome United Nations consideration of the case of Formosa; XXXXXX but (7) the Security Council should not be diverted from its consideration of the aggression against the Republic of Korea."

This letter, which had been drafted to clarify the situation arising from MacArthur's message to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, was immediately made public, and, so far as the Department of State was concerned, closed the incident.

1Truman to Austin, letter, Aug. 27, 1950, unclassified.
2Department of State Bulletin, Sept. 11, 1950, p. 312.