MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD OF THE EVENTS OF SATURDAY, AUGUST 26, 1950

Mr. Acheson met about 8:15 a.m. with Mr. Rusk with regard to the message which General MacArthur had sent to the VPW. The meeting had been called the preceding night. Mr. Matthews, Mr. Jessup and Mr. Webb joined the Secretary in that order.

Mr. Rusk asked me to call Ambassador Harriman and ask him to stop by the Secretary’s office on his way to his own office. Mr. Harriman agreed to do this and arrived at the State Department about 8:30. Consideration was given to the message which General MacArthur had sent and to the political problems which such a message would raise.

Mr. Harriman came out and told me that he wanted to see the President prior to the 9:30 meeting which was scheduled. He asked me to call Matt Connally and arrange for him to see the President before this meeting. I was unable to reach Mr. Connally but spoke to Mr. Hopkins who told me that he would arrange for Mr. Harriman to come in.

After the meeting at the White House, the Secretary said that the President had raised the question of the message which General MacArthur had sent out. The President then read the message in its entirety, commenting on certain portions of it as he did so. The Secretary did not discuss the message during the course of this meeting. The President referred to the message as having been given to him by Mr. Harriman. The President considered the matter carefully and decided that the only course was to order withdrawal of the message. He instructed Secretary Johnson to issue an order to General MacArthur for the withdrawal of this message.

Following this, there were numerous telephone conversations which are reported separately.

LDBattle
August 26, 1950

Secretary Johnson telephoned Secretary Acheson shortly after the latter’s return from the White House meeting. Secretary Johnson said he had been thinking over the order to MacArthur to withdraw his statement to the VFW. He thought that to do so would cause a great deal of embarrassment, and said that the Joint Chiefs of Staff and he thought that a message should go to him stating that if the General’s statement were issued “we” will have to issue one stating that it is one man’s opinion and is not the official policy of the Government.

Secretary Acheson said he thought that the matter raised the issue as to who is the President of the United States; that MacArthur had made a statement contrary to what the President and Austin have stated was our position on Formosa. Simply to say that the statement is one man’s views gets the President and the Government into complete confusion as to what parts of the statement are not the Government’s policy; as to whether the Government knew about the statement before it became public; why it is not our policy, etc., etc. The Secretary said he thought there was nothing to do but for the President to assert his authority, and in this way make it clear that the President’s stated position on Formosa stood.

Secretary Johnson at this point asked Secretary Acheson if he thought “we dare send him a message that the President directs him to withdraw his statement?”. Secretary Acheson said he saw nothing else to do.

Secretary Johnson then said he did not understand from the meeting this morning that the President had actually agreed to send a direct order to MacArthur. Mr. Acheson said that it was his recollection that Ambassador Harriman had put forward the view quite clearly that MacArthur should be ordered to withdraw the order, and that the President had clearly agreed that this was the course to follow.

Since there seemed to be doubt in Secretary Johnson’s mind and the minds of the JCS that this was the clear decision, Secretary Acheson agreed to call Ambassador Harriman and straighten out the matter.

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Secretary Acheson telephoned Ambassador Harriman and reported that he had been talking with Secretary Johnson, who had been discussing the matter with the JCS, who thought it would be very unwise to order MacArthur, and that they recommended sending him a telegram saying that if the message is delivered, they will have to put out a statement that it is one man's opinion and not official.

The Secretary said to Ambassador Harriman that he had thought it clear that the President had agreed with the position which Ambassador Harriman had set forth at the meeting this morning at the White House—that MacArthur should be ordered to withdraw the statement. If Ambassador Harriman had any doubt about Secretary Acheson's understanding, then they should go back to the President. The Secretary reiterated his own view that it was a question of who is President of the U.S., and that when one of the highest army officials says something directly contrary to what the President says, he must be ordered not to do so.

The Secretary said he would like to ask Mr. Harriman (1) whether the President did issue a clear order that an order should go to MacArthur; (2) whether Mr. Harriman still considered this a wise order.

Ambassador Harriman said that he was talking with Mr. Charles Ross at that moment and had told him that the President had said that the order should go to MacArthur and that he, Ambassador Harriman, agreed with it fully; that that was the only way to deal with it. Everyone knew that this was going to cause a bad mess at the White House. Ambassador Harriman had said that if Mr. Ross thought there was anything wrong about this course, something might still be done. Ambassador Harriman had said to Mr. Ross that he understood Secretary Johnson was going to call up MacArthur. Mr. Ross said he did not think this was sufficient; that there must be something in writing which could be released as soon as anything leaked.

Mr. Harriman said it was very clear in his mind that, unless MacArthur were ordered not to make the statement, there will be confusion all around the world. He did not believe repudiation of the statement after it was made public was the same thing as an order not to make it. The matter was so serious
that only drastic measures could cope with it. Repudiation simply
could not catch up with the results of the statement. Ambassador
Harriman said he was ready, in recommending the order of the
President, to face the possibility that it might mean MacArthur’s
resignation. But to do less would mean that there would be
repercussions which could never be caught up with.

Ambassador Harriman said he thought that Secretary Johnson
had seen the President for a moment after the meeting.

Secretary Acheson said he would call Secretary Johnson and
say (1) that Ambassador Harriman had understood that the President
had issued the order to withdraw the statement; and (2) that in
Mr. Harriman’s opinion that is the wise course; (3) if there is any
doubt we ought to reassemble and go over it again.

Ambassador Harriman said that he and Mr. Ross agreed that
something should be done here about the Matthews statement also.

Ambassador Harriman asked if Secretary Acheson could find
out how the MacArthur message was given out—by the VFW or by
MacArthur. Secretary Acheson said he would find out.

The information which the Secretary later conveyed to
Mr. Harriman is as follows:

By making discreet inquiries, it was learned that

There is some reason to believe that key newspaper
publishers around the country were supplied the complete
text of General MacArthur’s letter directly. We were unable
to find out whether it was sent directly from Tokyo or by the
VFW. The only formal press release was made in Chicago.

Secretary Acheson then telephoned Secretary Johnson and said
he had been authorized by Ambassador Harriman to say:

1. It was Ambassador Harriman’s very clear understanding
that the President had directed MacArthur by order to withdraw
the statement;

2. That Ambassador Harriman thinks that is the right course;

3. That if we are not clear about it, we ought to ask the President
to receive his advisers again and discuss it.
Mr. Acheson also told Secretary Johnson that Ambassador Harriman thought that because of MacArthur's prestige the repercussions would be heard around the world, and that without the order to withdraw, we could never catch up with the consequences.

It was agreed that Secretary Johnson would call Ambassador Harriman and ask him to see if the President would see the advisers to reopen the matter.

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Very shortly after the above, Secretary Johnson called back and said that when he had hung up from talking with Secretary Acheson (and before he could call Ambassador Harriman, as agreed), the President had called him and had dictated the following order which he said was to go to MacArthur:

"The President of the United States directs that you withdraw your message for National Encampment of 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 UN."

Secretary Acheson said he would put this before his staff and call Secretary Johnson back if they had any objection to it.

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The Secretary called Secretary Johnson a little later to tell him that he had been studying the President's draft order to MacArthur, and that he thought it covered the matter very well.

Secretary Johnson again raised the question as to whether it was wise to order MacArthur to withdraw, or whether it would not be better to send a message to the following effect:
"The President and I have seen a copy of the statement to the VFW. This statement includes several features in connection with Formosa which are in conflict with U.S. policy and with the position of the U.S. in the United Nations. When queried on this subject this Government must state that this statement is the statement of one individual only and is not the policy of the United States Government." (This may not be an exact and accurate transcription.)

Secretary Johnson said that Deputy Secretary Early had come into the conference and he was very much opposed to sending MacArthur a telegram ordering him to withdraw the statement.

Mr. Early then came on the phone and outlined his views as follows:

It seemed to him that the directive of the President asked the impossible. It was not mechanically possible to withdraw the statement, because it had been received by the VFW, which is a hostile group; it has been given world-wide distribution by them. Its withdrawal would never, in his opinion, prevent its publication, or answer the issue. A directive to MacArthur to withdraw the statement, not being possible of accomplishment, would add fuel to the fire, when the statement is issued. Mr. Early thought if we took the position, which he thought was truthful and factual, that the General had ignored Washington, the Government, the "League of Nations," and everyone here, and that traditionally we grant the right of free speech, and can consider this only as an expression by an individual, we would get off better than by sending a flat directive asking the impossible.

Mr. Early then brought up the question of handling the matter by having Mr. Sebald talk with MacArthur in Tokyo. He said that he could not believe that MacArthur would have made the statement if he had known what the policy of the Government was. Mr. Early said he was 100% sure that MacArthur knew nothing about it all. He thought it would be worthwhile to get Sebald on the telephone and have him check. He thought Sebald might, by talking with MacArthur and explaining the position he had put us in, get MacArthur to act on his own and withdraw it without a directive.

The Secretary's reply was that since Sebald was a subordinate, he did not think he would be received by MacArthur without a directive from the President.
In response to Mr. Early's general line, the Secretary said he understood that the whole matter would get out. If that is so, the main question is: how does it get out? The Secretary again outlined the confused position we would be in if there was simply a repetition of the statement made by MacArthur, with no directive not to do so; whereas if it comes out after the order to withdraw has been sent, the President has asserted his authority, and the position of the US in relation to other governments will be maintained. In answer to the consideration of whether an order to withdraw would be a suppression of MacArthur in his right to free opinion and free speech, the Secretary thought that this would be understood, since this Government has taken a position and high officials of the Government cannot be allowed to make statements opposite to that position. Even though this meant a serious row, the Secretary thought this was the cleanest way to have the matter come out.

Mr. Early still maintained that he thought his proposal would cause less trouble. He suggested that perhaps the President might talk on the telephone to MacArthur. The Secretary replied that this would put the President in the position of supplicant, which he did not think was wise. Mr. Acheson thought also that a written order should be sent and that the decision should not be left to a telephone call.

Mr. Early said he was just trying to get his views across. If Secretary Acheson did not agree, he would not press this further.

(There may have been a little more here, but my impression was that the Secretary hung up without either Mr. Johnson or Mr. Early making any definite commitment one way or other to send the order, or to go back to the President.)

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The next conversation was between Messrs. Harriman and Acheson (although who called whom at this point, I am afraid I don't know).

Ambassador Harriman said he supposed the Secretary had talked with Secretary Johnson, and the Secretary said he had; that he did not agree with any of Secretary Johnson's or Mr. Early's
views. Secretary Acheson's understanding of the present position was that, since the President had issued a definite order to Secretary Johnson to send the order to General MacArthur, after putting forth their views in a last ditch stand, they were prepared to issue the order.

However, evidently Mr. Johnson and/or Mr. Early had also called Mr. Harriman and expressed their doubts to him and had read him the same proposed message that Mr. Early had read to the Secretary. Ambassador Harriman said he was of the opinion that the President should have everybody's views before he takes such a serious step, although he, Ambassador Harriman, was still of the opinion that the course advocated by the Defense people did not make sense. The Secretary said he thought the President had decided and that Secretary Johnson had told him he would not reopen the matter unless Secretary Acheson and Ambassador Harriman also wanted it reopened. He said he would do nothing further about it.

But, Ambassador Harriman thought that, leaving aside the froth of the matter, as the situation stood, the essentials were that the handling of the matter showed disagreement "on both sides of the Potomac", and that the MacArthur statement would plague us through the election. (The Secretary later asked for clarification of what the Ambassador meant by "disagreement on both sides of the Potomac"; i.e., whether that meant that the JCS and the Defense agreed with the substance of the MacArthur statement. Ambassador Harriman said he did not think this was so; that what he meant was only that there was disagreement on how to handle the matter.) In these circumstances, Ambassador Harriman thought it would be well to know that the President had weighed the matter carefully.

Secretary Acheson agreed that the President should not take an important decision without getting everyone's opinion, but he thought that the President had done this.

The Secretary and Mr. Harriman had a good deal of discussion as to whether or not the President should be asked to reopen the matter, during which Secretary Acheson was quite non-committal, and Mr. Harriman seemed disposed to go back to the President. The question then arose as to who should go to the President if it were done; and it was agreed that Mr. Harriman
would ask Secretary Johnson to ask the President for further consideration, since it was he who wanted it.

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Shortly after this, Mr. Harriman again called and said that before he could call Johnson back, he had talked with the President and found that the President knew exactly what he was doing and what was in Mr. Early's mind. The President had said to Mr. Harriman that he had dictated what he wanted to go and he still wanted it to go.