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Bevin Alexander, *MacArthur's War: The Flawed Genius Who Challenged the American Political System*. New York: Berkley Caliber, 2013. Pp. 248. ISBN 978-0-425-26120-0.

Review by James R. Smither, Grand Valley State University (smitherj@gvsu.edu).

Over sixty years after his dismissal, General Douglas MacArthur remains a contentious figure, revered by some, reviled by others, and difficult to view dispassionately. In *MacArthur's War*, historian Bevin Alexander focuses on the confrontation between MacArthur and President Harry Truman. While acknowledging the general's considerable talents and accomplishments, he comes down squarely on the side of his detractors. Alexander, who served in Korea as a Marine Corps historian during the conflict, has spent a lifetime studying and writing military history. He effectively dismantles the arguments of MacArthur and his supporters regarding his handling of the Korean War and his desire to expand it into China; the cogency of the case he constructs will make his book worth reading even for specialists in the subject.

Alexander surveys the longer story of the spread of communism in East Asia, especially in China, going back to the 1920s. He describes, too, the US policy of containment of communism after World War II. This provides context for both the Korean conflict itself and the differing views of MacArthur and Truman. Both men, Alexander argues, were wrong to believe Asian communist parties were acting under the direction of the Kremlin as part of a quest for world domination. Unlike MacArthur's desire, shared by many in the "China Lobby," for all-out war against China, Truman's containment policy was at least practicable in the postwar world.

The author also discusses the division of the Korean peninsula into American and Soviet zones following the Japanese surrender in 1945 and the machinations of the North Korean leader Kim Il-Sung in persuading the Soviets and Chinese to accept his plans to invade the South. He stresses, too, the failure of the Truman administration in January 1950 to include South Korea in its "Far East defense perimeter." He then traces the seesaw nature of the war in its opening months, as dramatic advances and retreats were made up and down the peninsula until the front stabilized in early 1951 near the original start line of the 38th Parallel.

Alexander fairly assigns credit and blame in discussing the political and military developments that led to the final confrontation of president and general. He notes MacArthur's successful rebuilding of Japan, for instance, but also his neglect of Korea as a potential military theater, even as his own intelligence services were warning him of an imminent invasion. At the same time, he shows that neither the Soviets nor the Chinese wanted to start a war in Korea involving the Americans and that the Truman administration's casual attitude toward Korea in formulating its containment policy led Stalin and Mao to allow Kim to go forward. He credits MacArthur with the decision to land at Inchon despite the opposition of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and most of the military leadership. In the wake of the landing's success, Truman and his advisers abandoned their policy of containment and backed MacArthur's incursion into North Korea in hopes of reuniting the peninsula under a friendly regime. When the Chinese warned they would intervene if the Americans continued to advance and even deployed troops already stationed in the mountains of North Korea to attack US forces, MacArthur ignored the threat and Washington did little to restrain his advance to the Yalu. Greater prudence at this point might have averted disaster late in 1950, when the Chinese counterattack drove back American forces.

Alexander argues that Truman and his advisers now—quite rationally—returned to their containment approach, whereas MacArthur lost his grip on the realities of the conflict. The general exaggerated the danger of the situation in Korea and urged the commitment of a much larger force and even nuclear weapons. He envisioned not only defeating the Chinese in Korea, but reversing the results of the Chinese Civil War and restoring Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalists to power. Adducing their own words and deeds, Alex-

ander demonstrates that MacArthur and his supporters were actively working against the president in order to make policy themselves. Once the Chinese counterattack had exhausted itself in early 1951, he writes, they would have been amenable to a settlement, but MacArthur found ways to sabotage any hope of this, ultimately causing another two years of bloody and inconclusive fighting. The general continued to promote expansion of the war, claiming this was American policy, not merely his own personal objective. Alexander contends that this threatened the country with a military dictatorship that would override civilian authority and perhaps incite an apocalyptic war; thus Truman's decision to fire MacArthur, while politically unpopular, was essential to preserving the constitutional principle of civilian control of the military and with it democracy itself.

The book concludes with a look at the congressional hearings on MacArthur's dismissal in 1951, which he sees as to some extent a Republican attempt to damage Truman before the 1952 presidential election. MacArthur, for his part, saw the hearings as a chance to vindicate himself before the American public. Alexander juxtaposes MacArthur's own testimony against the available evidence and even his own prior words and actions to show just how deluded he had become. The general and his defenders initially stuck to their guns in responding to the testimony of administration officials. But when the Joint Chiefs came forward one by one to contradict each of MacArthur's contentions, the mood of the proceedings changed. Omar Bradley summed up his critique of MacArthur's ideas with the famous line: "Frankly, in the opinion of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, this strategy would involve us in the wrong war, at the wrong place, at the wrong time, with the wrong enemy." Starting World War III in China would undercut the central goal of containing the Soviets in Europe.

The sheer weight of argument finally wore down nearly everyone. The two committees heard more than two million words of testimony from fourteen witnesses, including MacArthur, the secretary of state, the secretary of defense, and all the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The results did not support the ideas of MacArthur. Rather, MacArthur's reputation suffered when it became clear that the Joint Chiefs of Staff did not agree with his ideas on war—although MacArthur had assured the committee that they did. This revelation was a great disappointment to the extreme Republicans. They had hoped to find a major conflict between the military establishment and the Truman administration to use as an election issue. When they found out that the JCS solidly supported the president's concept of a limited war, their involvement in the proceedings diminished rapidly. (195–96)

In the end, civilian control won out: apart from a few holdouts, MacArthur's congressional backers deserted him once his claims were proved fraudulent. While the discredited general remained a popular national hero, his threat to civilian control of the military and thereby to the government had passed.

Alexander draws throughout on a full command of the sources to support his principal theses. These are not, of course, in themselves new.<sup>1</sup> The real strengths of *MacArthur's War* are its clarity of argumentation and systematic demolition of conceivable counterarguments. Its lucid, engaging prose will make it accessible to general readers. Specialists may quibble over nuances of interpretation, but will find nothing of substance to dispute seriously.

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1. See, e.g., David Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War* (NY: Hyperion, 2007).