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President Roosevelt and General MacArthur at the Honolulu Conference of 1944

HAWAI'I EMERGED from its relative obscurity in 20th century world events to play a prominent role in World War II. The war suddenly began for Hawaii and the United States when an expansionist, imperial Japan, on December 7, 1941, gambled that a surprise, disabling attack on Pearl Harbor would guarantee permanent access to needed strategic resources in the British and Dutch colonies of Southeast Asia. The first six months of the war were a time of unbroken Japanese military victories, while after May of 1942, Japan saw its thrusts into the south and central Pacific blunted by the carrier battles of the Coral Sea (May 1942) and Midway (June 1942). U.S. naval forces commenced the offensive against Japan in late 1942 in the Solomons and the Papuan areas of eastern New Guinea. These tentative steps toward victory were quickened by the successful amphibious offensives in the central Pacific from the Gilbert Islands to Okinawa joined by the advances across the northern coast of New Guinea into the Philippines. Ultimately a full scale invasion of Japan was rendered unnecessary through the deployment of the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August of 1945. The war in the Pacific officially ended September 2, 1945.

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As epochal as the attack on Pearl Harbor was, the often overlooked Honolulu Conference of 1944 played a critical role in determining the outcome of the successful completion of the Pacific war against Japan, and provided political cover for one of America's greatest presidents. Moreover, it played a significant role in convincing nervous American voters that a secretly dying President could complete an unprecedented fourth term in office. In addition, the conference, carried out in semi-secrecy, signified Honolulu's strategic role in America's post-war plans for the Pacific. Though no original transcripts were kept of the meeting, various participants recorded their memory of the events in subsequent memoirs.

In July of 1944, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was nominated for an unprecedented fourth term as president of the United States. His campaign opponent, Thomas E. Dewey, a popular former governor of New York and moderate Republican, had openly questioned FDR's health and ability to conduct the government through the dangerous and uncertain final months of World War II. Other than also questioning FDR's concessions to the Soviet Union and the ongoing Republican criticisms of purportedly wasteful deficit of New Deal spending, Dewey lacked a compelling case for his campaign. Yet with the national emergency not yet over in Europe or the Pacific, Dewey argued that Roosevelt's health was a liability that could not be ignored.

Today, we know that FDR's doctors, closest friends and advisors, and attending physicians did in fact hide from the public that he was, by 1944, dying of protracted cardiovascular disease. As the former Indiana University historian Robert Ferrell discovered in medical files only released in the late 20th century, FDR had lost vigor, suffered from constant weariness, and had trouble with his handwriting. His severe related hypertension and hypertensive heart disease, combined with dangerously high blood pressure, led doctors to conclude he would never finish a fourth term in office.

Partly in order to conceal his alarming condition, FDR decided to astound those who doubted his vigor by calling suddenly for a conference with General Douglas MacArthur, supreme commander of the South-West Pacific area, and Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, commander in chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, in Honolulu in July of 1944. In addition, it allowed him to have decisive conferences with Nimitz

and MacArthur over differences that had arisen over the final strategy for defeating Japan. MacArthur was of particular concern to FDR, as he had acquired powerful friends among civilian congressional leaders, former state department officials, and Herbert Hoover, the Republican president from 1929 to 1933. MacArthur, a stern critic of the New Deal and a popular figure among many Republicans, represented potential political problems for the president. FDR felt that a face-to-face meeting with this potential political adversary might dissuade him from causing trouble during the critical 1944 election. Finally, FDR hoped that the five-day ocean voyage to Hawai'i from San Diego would give him needed time to rest away from the glare of media.

The deuteragonist at the Honolulu Conference was the imperial Douglas MacArthur. One of America's most political generals, he had been America's most decorated soldier in World War I. Raised by ambitious parents to be a great military commander, MacArthur had worked assiduously to make alliances among powerful Republicans, the men who made up much of the government from 1921 until FDR's ascendancy in 1933. Although his career languished in the 1930s, he found his opportunity for greatness restored with the outbreak of World War II.

Yet, in 1942, MacArthur had presided over the biggest defeat in army history when he was forced to surrender 70,000 American and Filipino troops on the Bataan peninsula guarding Manila Bay, and the attendant fortress of Corregidor. Moreover, Japanese planes had destroyed much of his air force on the ground, despite warnings that a Japanese attack was imminent, in December of 1941. Forced by military orders to flee the Philippines for Australia in the spring of 1942, he felt that his redemption lay in crossing New Guinea and rescuing the men he had left behind. Specifically, his honor could be restored if he could advance across the jungles of New Guinea faster than the Navy could advance toward Japan through the central Pacific.

MacArthur also disagreed with the navy's general strategy for defeating Japan. He favored moving up on Japan through the Solomons and Bismarcks by what he called the New Guinea-Mindanao Axis. He wanted to have the entire fleet and amphibious forces under his command to liberate the Philippines before advancing on Japan itself. Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, in charge of navy general strategy,

however, was for a quicker advance in the Pacific, taking key points in the Gilbert, Marshall, and Caroline Islands on the way through the Marianas, to Taiwan, and finally to China's coast to establish a base to attack Japan. The plan that was adopted in May 1943 was a combination of these two positions, allowing a dual advance with China as the ultimate strategic launching pad for the final invasion of Japan. Under this compromise, and by the end of February 1944, the Gilbert and Marshall Islands had been secured and the Bismarcks Barrier had been broken. From then on, MacArthur's forces advanced steadily, taking the Admiralties at the same time that Nimitz' forces drove into the Marianas, Tinian, and Guam. During the months that followed, MacArthur continued to lobby for liberating all of the Philippines and using Luzon as the springboard to Japan.

But by the spring of 1944, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Ernest J. King wanted a faster, more direct route to Japan. The navy had developed newer, faster carriers that could reach Japan through the Marianas and Formosa. There they would establish strategic bombing sights for the B-29 bombers, and the will of Japan to continue fighting could be challenged through massive bombing missions. MacArthur was crushed to learn that many in the navy wanted his famous New Guinea campaign to end in the Southern Philippines. The recapture of Luzon and the freeing of his captured soldiers would have to wait until the real war was won through taking the fight directly to Japan. An indignant MacArthur had long distrusted the motives of his political enemies in Washington, D.C., and demanded an audience with FDR to argue his case. The Pentagon, alarmed at his constant complaints, ordered MacArthur to meet Roosevelt on July 26, 1944, in Honolulu. MacArthur hurriedly packed his bags and headed for Honolulu knowing that he had political cards to play with Roosevelt, a man he personally detested for his character and his policies.

Roosevelt departed for Honolulu from San Diego on the heavy cruiser *Baltimore* on July 21. Surrounded by family, he spoke to reporters of the need for his re-election in order to conclude the war and to make a strong peace. He also promised to lay the groundwork for additional government programs to provide economic and social stability in post-war America. Privately, Roosevelt seethed that MacArthur's political dislike for him had become public. Using his politi-

cal connections with leaders in Congress, MacArthur had implied that he would allow himself to be drafted by the Republicans to run for president in 1944. He had, for example, correspondence with Hoover's former undersecretary of state, William R. Castle, scion of a prominent New England and Hawai'i family, in which he sharply criticized Roosevelt's friendliness with the Soviet Union and his expensive New Deal programs. When his dalliance with party operatives and congressional Republicans came to light, Roosevelt was shocked with the disloyalty in the midst of war. Although he did not comment publicly, the political intrigues of MacArthur ratified Roosevelt's long dislike and distrust of a general who would use a political club to leverage supplies, attention, and strategic priorities.

Departing San Diego amidst unconfirmed reports of Japanese naval activity 200 miles north of Honolulu, FDR's cruiser took a zigzag route for much of the five-day trip to Honolulu. As the report of Japanese activity proved incorrect, FDR took advantage of the calm of the Pacific voyage to lie on deck with officers and sailors. His dog Fala by his side, he spun stories, snoozed, read through coded mail, and chatted with the few advisors he had brought along for this quickly called and unofficial conference.

The *Baltimore* docked at Pearl Harbor at 3:00 P.M. on July 26. Only an hour before, MacArthur had arrived after a 26-hour flight from Brisbane, Australia. Hardly settled at Fort Shafter, home of the Pacific Command, he was summoned by Roosevelt to his cabin room. Always one for a symbolic gesture, MacArthur kept FDR and the top Pacific command waiting on ship as he rounded up a grand open touring car procured from a well-known Honolulu brothel madam. As FDR, Nimitz, and other high officials prepared to go below deck, MacArthur arrived to the cheers of the crowd, waved regally, and strutted to the top of the gangplank in an open shirt and leather jacket. After a brief meeting, the two giants had their pictures taken for release during the campaign season. Agreement was reached on the meeting times the next day as well as a carefully orchestrated set of photo opportunities of the two inspecting Hawaii's troops. Then, FDR was transported, in a humble closed car, to spend the night in Waikīkī at the beach estate of the prominent businessman Chris R. Holmes, a three-story home with an outside elevator.

Back in his officer's quarters at Fort Shafter, MacArthur raged to

aides that FDR knew nothing of military matters, was "a fake," and had come to Honolulu on a junket to fool the American people about his health. Moreover, he raged that Roosevelt was only intending to use him for photo opportunities to win votes. He also told aides that the president was clearly dying and that he ought to admit his real condition to the American people and drop out of the race. Moreover, he fumed to devoted aides about how his entire career had been a battle with incompetent bureaucrats for proper resources to do his job.

The next day, Roosevelt chose Honolulu's only other long open touring car, owned by the Honolulu fire chief, to inspect all of the nearby military bases with MacArthur (fig. 1). Teams of photographers caught their every move much to the pleasure of the president. Such photos would be published widely and would give every impression of a healthy president who was an active commander in chief. Interestingly, a few staff officers advised Roosevelt to exclude *Nisei* soldiers: that is, soldiers who were sons of Japanese immigrants born in the U.S., from camera range on the distant possibility that a fanatic

FIG. 1. The Presidential motorcade sweeping up the driveway of St. Louis College in Kaimukī, as part of the President's tour of military bases. The school was serving as the army's 147th General Hospital in 1944. DeSoto Brown collection/National Archives, U.S. Navy.

might attempt to assassinate him. Roosevelt quickly dismissed such fears and asked that any *Nisei* be photographed with him along with other soldiers.The conference itself did not begin until after dinner at the Holmes estate. Admiral Nimitz spoke first and argued cogently for the navy's position of speeding an attack on Japan through Formosa. Doing so, he argued, would place the U.S. squarely between Japan and the Philippines, with the coast of China within range of fast moving carrier forces. Japan, with American submarines blockading her shipping and facing daily bombing raids, would need to move its forces off of Honshu and Hokkaido and take the battle to Formosa.

With barely controlled intensity, MacArthur stood to take his turn in front of the maps laid out in front of the President. He reviewed his humiliation at Bataan, his promise to return and its importance to the morale of the American people, and his frustration in having to fight the joint chiefs of staff over making the Philippines a high priority. His plan, which he identified with "American honor," was to retake Manila.

FIG. 2. Tokyo is the target of Admiral Chester Nimitz's pointer as General Douglas MacArthur, President Franklin Roosevelt, and Admiral William Leahy look on during their Waikīkī conference. DeSoto Brown collection/National Archives, U.S. Navy.

Apparently at a strategic stalemate, FDR adjourned the planning group and spoke to MacArthur alone. Seizing the initiative, MacArthur used his political trump card. Reminding the president that this was a reelection year, he argued that abandoning 7,000 starving POWs and 17 million Filipino Christians would turn public opinion against him. According to what MacArthur would later tell former President Hoover, in 1946, Roosevelt was shocked with the general's blunt threat and abrasive manner. Nonetheless, when the others rejoined the discussion, Roosevelt announced that he would make no decision about strategy until the next day and praised both Nimitz and MacArthur for their grasp of grand strategy.

The next morning, at 10:30 A.M., the group reassembled for further discussion. The mood was friendlier, and those present agreed to work closely together on behalf of the common goal of defeating the Japanese. MacArthur also firmly restated his position and promised to hand the Philippines over to Roosevelt within six to nine months with minimal loses. He repeated his claim that if only the navy had been prepared for Japan's attack in 1941, he could have reinforced and properly defended his position in the Philippines. Now he had an opportunity to make up for the country's embarrassment by retaking the Philippines.

At about noon, on this final day of the conference, FDR said he had heard enough, waved his hands, and said he had accepted MacArthur's proposal and would expect Nimitz to assist MacArthur in the recapture of Luzon. With no further comment, he dismissed the group for lunch. Overjoyed at this successful resolution of a nagging strategic stalemate, MacArthur rushed to catch a waiting plane at Hickam Field. Before leaving, however, he made one more speech praising FDR for his sound strategic mind. With that he sped off to catch his plane while privately telling an aide that FDR would be dead within a year.

As Roosevelt prepared to leave Honolulu for military inspections in the Aleutians, he gave a brief press conference in which he praised MacArthur for his progress in the war with Japan, extolled the state of training and readiness on Hawai'i's bases, and noted with pleasure how many changes had come to Honolulu since his vacation in the city 10 years before. He compared Honolulu to the major sophisti-

cated cities in the U.S. and predicted a flourishing of its economy after the war.

Although no official transcripts of this conference exist, MacArthur would later tell several people that he had used Roosevelt's need to show progress in the war and an image of good health to strike his own bargain. Clearly no official decisions were made in Honolulu, and the debate continued in the Pentagon. The final decision to provide MacArthur his support came officially in mid-September after naval intelligence had revealed real Japanese vulnerability at Leyte in the central Philippines.

For historians, the short Honolulu conference is of interest more for what it tells us about Roosevelt in his final year of life and of MacArthur than of the strategic decisions adumbrated in its unofficial proceedings. Roosevelt, the supreme politician, was able to neutralize possible opposition for Republicans and the conservative press by placating the politically well-connected general. On the other hand, MacArthur's unusual political influence and powerful connections in Washington led him to test, at least indirectly, the constitutional divide between civilian and military authority. He would later test the commander in chief's authority in a more alarming and direct way when he challenged President Harry S. Truman's strategy in the Korean War in 1951. His success in negotiating his strategic preferences at the Honolulu conference would be an important precedent for this later infamous action.

NOTES

Good secondary accounts include Clayton D. James, *A Time for Giants: The Politics of the American High Command in World War II* (New York: Franklin Watts, Inc., 1987); Michael Schaller, *Douglas MacArthur: The Far Eastern General* (London: Oxford U P, 1989); James A. Bishop, *FDR's Last Year, April 1944–April 1945* (Pocket Books, 1975); Robert Ferrel, *The Dying President: Franklin D. Roosevelt 1944–1945* (Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P, 1998) and William D. Hassett, *Off The Record With FDR* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers U P, 1958).