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Douglas MacArthur: Disordered Narcissist

Abstract

General Douglas MacArthur is one of the United States Military's most controversial commanders as well as one of its most celebrated. Despite being highly decorated for his many years of service, his legacy is marred by criticisms of his tactical skill and accusations of arrogance. This essay presents a psychohistorical examination of MacArthur's personality and its effect on his career. It supports the claims that his actions and attitudes fit the criteria for narcissistic personality disorder and that this disorder led to his eventual firing.

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Douglas MacArthur: Disordered Narcissist
Robert Gilbert

General Douglas MacArthur is perhaps the most polarizing figure in the history of the United States Military. He was widely regarded by the public as one of America's greatest war heroes during his years in the military, but many historians and fellow military strategists have questioned his abilities as a general and theorized that his superior national image was bolstered by his "excessive public relations efforts."¹ Even his most ardent supporters recognize his notorious egotism as a character flaw. Although it is difficult to conclusively analyze the mental health of the deceased, a psychohistorical examination of MacArthur strongly suggests that he fit the diagnostic criteria for narcissistic personality disorder, and that his affliction with this disorder led to his removal from command of the U.S. Army.

Psychohistory is one of the most controversial approaches to history. Its supporters see it as essential to the study of history, and argue that one can only understand historical events and figures through a psychohistorical lens, while skeptics feel that it has no place in the discipline due to its inherent subjectivity.² In *Decoding the Past*, historian Peter Loewenberg argues that history and psychoanalysis are not as different—or as difficult to combine—as one might think. He writes that both disciplines "study past human actions, thoughts, and motives" and that they share a key difference from other natural and social sciences: they "seek multiple explanations for single phenomena."³ Historian Peter Gay agrees, and argues in *Freud for Historians* that "the profit the historian may reap from applying psychoanalytic explorations" outweighs the method's potential downsides.⁴

Some historians have not been quite so eager to embrace the entrance of psychology into their field. Perhaps the two most frequently raised and damaging complaints against psychohistory are these: one cannot reliably psychoanalyze the dead, and psychoanalysis itself is unreliable. In *Shrinking History: On Freud and the Failure of Psychohistory*, David Stannard complains that psychohistorical works tend to be "dismissive of the most elementary canons of evidence, logic,

¹ Michael Schaller, "Douglas MacArthur," In American National Biography, Oxford University Press, <http://www.anb.org/articles/07/0700178.html?a=1&n=douglas%20macarthur&d=10&ss=0&q=1> (accessed April 9, 2013).

² "Psychohistory," in International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences, edited by N.J. Smelser and P.B. Baltes, 12339-12342, Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2001.

³ Peter Loewenberg, *Decoding the Past: The Psychohistorical Approach* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1996), 16.

⁴ Peter Gay, *Freud for Historians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 142.

and, most of all, imaginative restraint.”⁵ He proceeds to make the argument that Freud’s psychoanalysis is a flawed therapeutic method, and that psychoanalytic theory is, as a result, not a valid historical tool.⁶⁷

Due to the controversial nature of this discipline, any historian who presents an argument rooted in psychohistory must defend his or her use of the approach. I believe that my use of psychohistory in examining the mental state of Douglas MacArthur capitalizes on the strengths of psychohistory while avoiding its most serious weaknesses. Psychohistory’s greatest strength is that it can provide us with a more complete understanding of past events by presenting us with valuable insight into the mental processes of the people who influenced them. I believe that a psychohistorical examination of Douglas MacArthur can advance our understanding of both his personality and his actions as a general.

The claim that psychohistory is flawed because it is based on dubious Freudian theory may very well be a valid one. However, it does not call into question the merit of my particular work. The Freudian approach to psychohistory is problematic for two main reasons: it employs subjective psychoanalytical methods that are largely unproven, and it seeks to explain the subject’s adult thoughts and behavior using theories about the subject’s childhood experience, which in turn are justified based on the subject’s adult thoughts and behavior. Although this type of psychohistory can be useful, it often leads to unconvincing, circular arguments that tend to frustrate traditional historians.⁸ My approach compares MacArthur’s documented actions, words, and personality traits to the diagnostic criteria for narcissistic personality disorder found in the current edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)*. This method enables me to make a psychohistorical argument that does not rest entirely on subjective or Freudian theories and finds support in proven diagnostic criteria. My conclusions are still based on my own admittedly subjective interpretations of MacArthur’s words and actions, but they are more concrete and defensible than many previous works of psychohistory.

One of MacArthur’s prominent character traits was an inability to accept responsibility for his mistakes that was driven by his obsession with his public image. He demonstrated this trait throughout his career, and many of the people with whom he worked took notice of his outright refusal to accept blame or criticism. Philip F. La Follette, who served closely under MacArthur during

⁵ David E. Stannard, *Shrinking History: On Freud and the Failure of Psychohistory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 33-50.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 147-156

⁸ *Ibid.*

World War II, notes in his memoir that the general “could never laugh at himself; never admit mistakes or defeats. When these occurred he not only did not admit them, but he resorted to tricks—sometimes sly, childlike attempts—to cover them up.”⁹ La Follette classifies this trait as confidence rather than arrogance, and argues that it was a result of MacArthur’s superior intelligence.¹⁰ I believe, however, that this character flaw was independent of his intelligence, and that it suggests disordered, narcissistic thinking. The *DSM* lists “shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes,” has a “grandiose sense of self-importance (e.g., exaggerates achievements and talents...)” and “requires excessive admiration,” as three of the main diagnostic criteria for narcissistic personality disorder.¹¹ MacArthur’s pattern of arrogance and pathological refusal to admit to mistakes certainly suggests disordered thinking in line with those three criteria.

One example of this behavior that La Follette cites occurred during a meeting between General MacArthur and President Roosevelt regarding strategy in the Pacific. Roosevelt briefly mentioned that he felt the operation MacArthur led on the coast of New Guinea had been costly for the American army. MacArthur did not take kindly to this statement; he “walked over to the President and said: ‘I do not know who has given you that kind of information, but whoever he was, he told you lies.’” MacArthur then “used his outstretched fingers as a ramrod to poke the President’s chest for emphasis.”¹²

La Follette himself was not present at this meeting, and the editors of his memoir admit in a footnote that this recollection was based on a “somewhat simplified version” of the meeting that La Follette heard from MacArthur’s military secretary (Brigadier General Fellers, who had accompanied MacArthur).¹³ It is, therefore, somewhat difficult to be confident in the accuracy of the quote La Follette attributes to MacArthur. However, assuming General Fellers’s account captured the essence of the meeting, it seems that MacArthur reacted to the President’s mild criticism in an overly emotional and defensive manner. This reaction, if it did in fact occur, would be in accordance with the *DSM*’s description of narcissistic personality disorder; the manual states that individuals with the disorder are “very sensitive to ‘injury’ from criticism or defeat,” and that when they are faced with criticism, “They may react with disdain, rage, or defiant counterattack.”¹⁴

⁹ Philip F. La Follette, Edward M. Coffman, and Paul H. Hass, “With MacArthur in the Pacific: A Memoir by Philip F. La Follette” *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 64 (Winter 1980-1981): 95.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, edited by Michael B. First, 4th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2000), 301.81

¹² La Follette, “With MacArthur,” 97.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, 301.81.

Dwight D. Eisenhower also noticed MacArthur's inability to admit mistakes; he once remarked that MacArthur "had an obsession that a high commander must protect his image at all costs and must never admit his wrongs."¹⁵ This belief is somewhat understandable, as it is clearly important for a general to be regarded highly by both his soldiers and the country he serves. However, the fact that even other high-ranking officers such as Eisenhower viewed this behavior as eccentric suggests that MacArthur's fixation that he must be perceived as infallible may not have been entirely rational.

Perhaps the most striking example of MacArthur's obsessive need to always be right is his reaction to the Bonus Army situation. In 1932, thousands of World War I veterans gathered in Washington with their families to insist that the government pay them bonuses. These bonuses were not scheduled to be paid until 1945, but the economic turmoil brought on by the Great Depression had left many veterans without adequate incomes, and they felt they needed an advance on the money. President Hoover was forced to intervene, and he charged the Army with the task of dispersing the protesters. MacArthur, who saw the Bonus Army as a communist conspiracy rather than a relatively peaceful group of financially challenged veterans, led the Army as it "drove out the demonstrators and destroyed their encampments, using tanks and tear gas."¹⁶ The destruction of the protesters' tents violated explicit orders from President Hoover, and the operation as a whole resulted in several injuries and at least one death.¹⁷ It eventually became clear that there was no communist conspiracy and the protesters "were only hungry Americans."¹⁸ MacArthur, however, continued to insist otherwise. In his memoir *Reminiscences*, he asserts that "The movement was actually far deeper and more dangerous than an effort to secure funds," and that "the Communists hoped to incite revolutionary action."¹⁹ The fact that he held these views at the time is somewhat odd; that he defended them decades later when it was clear they were incorrect is irrational. I believe that the most plausible explanation for his unwavering defense of such a demonstrably false viewpoint is that he simply could not bring himself to tarnish his perceived image as an infallible commander by admitting that he had made an inaccurate judgment.

Linked with his fixation over his image is another defining quality of both Douglas MacArthur and narcissistic personality disorder: a "pervasive pattern of

¹⁵ William Manchester, *American Caesar: Douglas MacArthur 1880-1964* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1978), 150.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 148-150.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁹ Douglas MacArthur, *Reminiscences* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 92-93.

grandiosity.”²⁰ Throughout *Reminiscences*, MacArthur writes in grandiose, self-glorifying prose. He attributes much of the U.S. Army’s success to himself (whether explicitly or implicitly) and places emphasis on the many awards he received throughout his career. In addition to demonstrating his grandiosity, this behavior fits another diagnostic criterion for the disorder: “requires excessive admiration.”²¹ During his discussion of the fighting in the southwest Pacific theater of World War II, MacArthur describes the army’s success against the Japanese as so impressive that it was “unique in modern war.”²² He ends this segment with the following sentence: “I was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal for the fourth time.”²³ This sentence does not really cohere with the rest of the section, and it seems to serve the sole purpose of ensuring the reader understands that MacArthur was the hero of that campaign (and that he had previously been recognized for similar heroics on three separate occasions).

Russell D. Buhite also cites MacArthur’s grandiosity as an indicator of his narcissism. In his recent book *Douglas MacArthur: Statecraft and Stagecraft in America’s East Asian Policy*, Buhite lists the general’s “portrayal of himself as the frontline leader in every military success even though much of the time he was in Australia” as one of the reasons for which he too concludes that MacArthur suffered from narcissistic personality disorder.²⁴

La Follette observed the general’s grandiosity in a conversation between MacArthur and General Harding in which they discussed their upcoming attacks on the Japanese. MacArthur seemed more concerned with seeking glory as a general than with the success of the U.S. Army as a whole; he discussed his plans to “demonstrate again how generalship can win with lightning strategic strokes against potentially overwhelming forces.”²⁵ He also reminisced about his distaste for the trench warfare of World War I: “I made up my mind then that when I commanded in the next war, as I knew I would, that I would use my brains instead of the blood and guts of my men.”²⁶ Although the goal of decreasing the brutality of war is a noble one, MacArthur’s assertions that he knew he would command the army in the next war and that his superior intellect could in some way be a substitute for actual soldiers are grandiose and arrogant. This quote also suggests

²⁰ Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, 301.81.

²¹ Ibid.

²² MacArthur, *Reminiscences*, 260.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Russell D. Buhite, *Douglas MacArthur: Statecraft and Stagecraft in America’s East Asian Policy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 167.

²⁵ La Follette, “With MacArthur,” 87.

²⁶ Ibid., 87-88.

that MacArthur may have fit another characteristic of narcissistic personality disorder: preoccupation “with fantasies of unlimited success.”²⁷

William Manchester’s *American Caesar* supports the view that MacArthur frequently exhibited self-important and grandiose behavior; he characterizes MacArthur’s behavior when he was Hoover’s Chief of Staff as vain. Manchester writes that he “sat at his desk wearing a Japanese ceremonial kimono...smoked cigarettes in a jeweled holder, increasingly spoke of himself in the third person...and had erected a fifteen-foot-high mirror behind his office chair to heighten his image.”²⁸ These examples coincide both with my own interpretations of MacArthur’s personality and with the *DSM*’s characterization of narcissism.

It seems likely to me that MacArthur’s narcissism led to his removal from command of the U.S. Army during the Korean War. His removal was the result of a pattern of insubordination and fundamental policy disagreement between himself and President Truman, and I believe it was triggered by one action in particular: the ill-advised ultimatum MacArthur issued to China.²⁹ I believe that this action is best understood in light of MacArthur’s narcissistic personality disorder.

By early 1951, President Truman had decided that the best course of action in Korea would be to pursue an armistice.³⁰ The President and his administration believed that since the momentum had shifted in the U.N.’s favor and they had succeeded in pushing the Communist forces above the 38th parallel and out of South Korea, the time was right for both sides to end the war.³¹ The Truman administration prepared a statement that they planned to issue to the opposition proposing that the two sides begin peace negotiations.³² However, before the President had a chance to release this statement, General MacArthur made a statement of his own that subverted Truman’s.³³ MacArthur’s statement was an ultimatum insisting that China surrender or face an attack upon their country. In addition to being blatantly in conflict with the President’s goals (of which the general was well aware), MacArthur’s statement was insulting to the Chinese. He wrote that their army was of “exaggerated and vaunted military power” and that it had a “complete inability to accomplish by force of arms the

²⁷ Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, 301.81.

²⁸ Manchester, *American Caesar*, 145.

²⁹ John W. Spanier, *The Truman-MacArthur Controversy and the Korean War* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1959), 205-206.

³⁰ Margaret Truman, *Harry S. Truman* (New York: William Morrow, 1972), 511.

³¹ Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956) 2:438.

³² *Ibid.*, 439-440.

³³ *Ibid.*

conquest of Korea.”³⁴ These comments instantly ruined Truman’s chances of seeking peace.

Truman did not fire MacArthur until about ten days later when he criticized the President’s foreign policy in a letter to Congressman Joe Martin. However, it seems that MacArthur’s ultimatum was the main cause of his dismissal, and that Truman likely would have fired him even if the Martin controversy had not occurred.³⁵

It is difficult to understand MacArthur’s ultimatum if not through his narcissism. His actions certainly were not in the best interests of the army he commanded or the country he was meant to serve. His insulting ultimatum was unlikely to end the war, and it risked escalation. Buhite theorizes that the general may have intended to be removed from command in the hopes that his return to the U. S. would “enhance his chances in a run for the presidency in 1952.”³⁶ Although this may have been the case, I think it is improbable. It seems to me that showing open defiance and disrespect toward the office of the president is not the most promising strategic path to election. I agree with the explanation proposed by President Truman: “it was of importance to the general to prevent any appearance that the credit for ending the fighting should go elsewhere.”³⁷ I believe that the same narcissistic traits that led MacArthur to fantasize about future glory during World War I and paint himself as the star of World War II compelled him to sabotage Truman’s attempt at peace in the hopes that he could be seen as the singular hero who ended the Korean War.

My analysis of the Truman-MacArthur conflict is perhaps a little one-sided; much of my information comes from the President and his daughter. However, the most crucial source in my argument that MacArthur’s narcissism led to his firing is the statement that he issued to China, and this statement is found in MacArthur’s own memoirs. I omitted MacArthur’s own explanation of his removal from command as I deemed it to be implausible. He theorized, in a lengthy public rebuttal of Truman’s *Memoirs*, that his firing may have resulted from a request he made to Washington that “a treason trial be initiated to break up a spy ring responsible for the purloining of my top secret reports to Washington.”³⁸ Given the irrationality of this theory, I think I was justified in omitting the general’s explanation of his dismissal from my discussion of the Truman-MacArthur controversy.

³⁴ MacArthur, *Reminiscences*, 387-388.

³⁵ Truman, *Harry S. Truman*, 513.

³⁶ Buhite, *Douglas MacArthur*, 145.

³⁷ Truman, *Memoirs*, 2:443.

³⁸ Douglas MacArthur, “Text of MacArthur’s Statement in Reply to Charges Made by Truman in *Memoirs*,” *New York Times*, February 9 1956, national edition, 25.

I believe that the examples I have presented strongly support my thesis. Admittedly, my arguments are based on subjective interpretations of MacArthur's words and actions, but I believe that the sources I use are likely to be reliable and the conclusions I draw, while certainly not definitive, are at the very least plausible.

A weakness of my paper is that nearly all of my primary source information comes from MacArthur, La Follette, President Truman, and Margaret Truman. None of my arguments rely solely on one of these narrators; my assertions regarding the general's personality and its impact on his military career are all supported by multiple valid sources. However, MacArthur encountered many thousands of people throughout his life whose opinions of him I omitted. This choice enabled me to explore the sources I chose to use at greater depth, but it is certainly a small sample size upon which to base my conclusions.

Despite this small sample size, I believe the sources from which I drew my information are likely to be reliable. La Follette seems to me to be an excellent source of information about MacArthur's character. He speaks quite highly of MacArthur overall (he saw the general as "an authentic military genius" and "the nearest replica of Caesar that has come our way") which leads me to believe that his assessments of MacArthur's flaws are fair ones and not the bitter accusations of a disgruntled former soldier.³⁹ Additionally, much of the strongest support for my claims comes from MacArthur's own words in *Reminiscences*. It seems unlikely that MacArthur would have been less narcissistic in reality than he was in his memoirs, so I see this book as perhaps the most reliable source of information about MacArthur's psyche.

Throughout his military career, Douglas MacArthur demonstrated several characteristics of narcissism. He pathologically refused to admit mistakes, spoke in grandiose, ego-centric language, fantasized about success and power, and sought excessive admiration from his peers in the military and the American public. Although it is undeniably difficult to accurately analyze and diagnose a dead historical figure's mental status, I believe that the evidence I have presented indicates that it is likely that MacArthur fit the criteria for narcissistic personality disorder, and that his disordered thinking led to his dismissal from the United States Army.

³⁹ La Follette, "With MacArthur," 87-95.