

Over the Fence



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HOW COULD A SMART GENERAL BE SO STUPID?

One of the most fascinating books I have read – and re-read – is *Plain Speaking*, Conversations with Harry S Truman [US President 1945-1953], by Merle Miller. This was a series of interviews with Truman, with comprehensive notations, recorded in 1962, but (conditionally) published after his death in 1973 – at the height of the Watergate scandal, which made Truman's 'plain speaking' seem all the more admirable.



His presidency coincided with a turbulent period in world history. One of the main – explosive really – events of his administration was his sacking of the WW2 hero general Douglas MacArthur. This was at a time when Truman's poll rating was truly in the tank; China had been 'lost' to the communists, the war in Korea was not going well (at least, unlike the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, this one was not started by the president, although the administration was accused of giving North Korea the "the green light"), and the venom of McCarthyism was poisoning political discourse. The uproar over MacArthur's dismissal was huge and Truman was being burned in effigy across the continent.



Truman acknowledges victory over Thomas E. Dewey, 31 January 1948.

But the feisty little President was undeterred. MacArthur returned to the States after a fourteen year absence and the public went mad over him. He got a tickertape parade in New York and they threw 800 tons of confetti at him. Truman received 78,000 letters, 20 to 1 against him. But within six weeks the public were becoming bored with MacArthur's theatrics, which is just what Truman predicted. It took a while but history came to rate Truman's Presidency very highly. For the last four decades it is Truman's portrait or statuette more than that of any other President that sits somewhere in the Oval Office.

In one interview he was asked why he sacked MacArthur. This was his classic response: "I fired him because he wouldn't respect the authority of the President. I didn't fire him because he was a dumb son of a bitch, although he was, but that's not against the law with generals. If it was, half to three-quarters of them would be in jail." (In fact, the whole 39 pages of the interview regarding the lead up to, the firing of, and its aftermath are a classic.)

With deep regret, I have concluded that General of the Army Douglas MacArthur is no longer able to give his wholehearted support to the policies of the United States Government and United Nations in matters pertaining to his duties. In view of the specific duties imposed upon me by the Constitution of the United States and the added responsibility that has been entrusted to me by the United Nations, I have decided I must make a change of command in the Far East. I have, therefore, relieved General MacArthur of his commands and have designated Lieutenant Matthew B Ridgeway as his successor.

At 2.30 one morning last week General Stanley McChrystal, commander of the coalition forces in Afghanistan, was woken with some grim news. It involved friendly fire damage, but had nothing to do with battle. An aid told him that there was an article out in the magazine *Rolling Stone* “and it’s very, very bad”. In it the General – willingly interviewed – disparaged the Obama Administration, from his Commander in Chief (the President) down. 40 hours later he emerged from a brief meeting with Obama back at the White House stripped of his command, his 34 year military career in tatters. And he had a team of public relations minders! How could a seemingly smart general be so stupid as to blab his frustrations to a reporter with a recorder?

Columnist Gwynne Dyer says that McChrystal deserved to be fired “because he and his staff were openly contemptuous of their civilian superiors. It’s a popular attitude among the dimmer sort of military officers, but for a theatre commander to tolerate and even encourage it among his senior officers is reckless and stupid. Such a man is not fit to command.”

There has developed a culture of condescension, even contempt, in the U S Military towards the elected politicians to whom they are answerable, and who in turn are answerable to the people, as it fights wars it can no longer win – if it ever could. Obama’s decisive removal of McChrystal will go some way to restore appropriate authority.

McChrystal has been replaced by the highly respected General Petraeus, who has effectively taken a demotion to try and salvage some progress in this God-forsaken war in this God-forsaken country, the graveyard of empirial aspirations and individual reputations. The American people are now tiring of this war but Obama can’t figure out how to extract himself from this tar baby. Increasingly he is being held accountable for it but the real villain is of course George W Bush who invaded not just one Middle Eastern country but two. Both wars have turned to custard. (Tar? Custard? How’s that for mixed metaphors?)

As New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd recently said, “After nine years [of fighting in Afghanistan], more than a thousand troops dead, and hundreds of billions spent that could have been put toward developing new forms of fuel so that all our miseries and all our fun doesn’t derive from oil, we’ve fought our way to a stalemate.”

FARMERS WILD LIFE PLAN – Should They Have One?

When I was undertaking a fellowship in 1994 I visited by appointment the Iowa State University, at the university town of Ames, close by Des Moines. Having been previously asked by the professor who was hosting me to give a talk on New Zealand’s farm forestry, I came prepared with a selection of slides. He had gathered a few of his colleagues for the talk, so I found myself in the unlikely position of giving a lecture to academics at an important American university. Well, okay, there were only about half a dozen of them and it took very much the form of an informal chat really.

Later my host took me for a field trip around the nearby countryside on those rich black-soil prairies which produce such a bountiful harvest of corn and other crops. His area of special interest was in working with the appropriate

local authority (equivalent of our regional councils) in developing wild life programmes for rural landowners. So farmers were being encouraged – and subsidised – to develop corridors of wild life habitat. It seemed quite an innovative programme really, especially in a rural environment based on massive production enterprises.

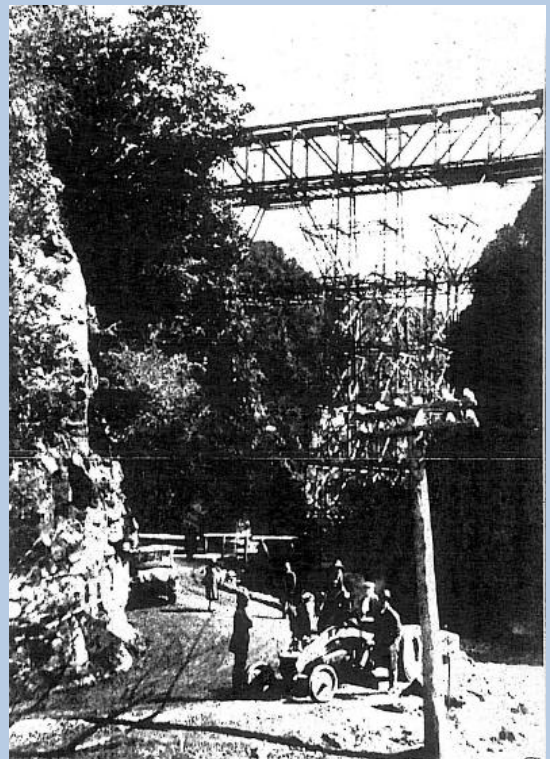
This came back to me when I attended an environmental conference in Auckland a few weeks ago. One of the more riveting (for me anyway) addresses came from Professor Caroline Saunders of Lincoln University. She made this statement: "If I go to a Canterbury farmer and ask if they have a wildlife plan, they turn around and say they shoot the magpies". Now here's something worth considering: a voluntary programme to encourage and assist, at least through advice and the citing of good examples, a dimension of farm plans that is far more focuses on wild life and biodiversity, not for production motives but to enrich the emotions of those who live in and visit the country. Harnessed up to this cause could be groups like Fish & Game, Forest and Bird, Iwi (eels), DOC, The Landcare Trust (where it exists) as well as your faithful, visionary, generous, innovative, well-organised, pro-active regional council – well the one in Hawke's Bay anyway.

MATAHORUA OVERBRIDGE – The First One

Readers will be well aware of the costly over-passing of the Matahorua Gorge on the Napier-Wairoa Highway. Of course such a straight-lining was necessary with the development of the railway.

Below is a picture from *The Weekly News* of December 1928 showing the construction of the railway span. (Sorry about the indifferent quality, but it is a photocopy from the microfilm. The original would be of greater clarity.)

Note the comprehensive, if apparently rather puny, wooden scaffolding, partly obscured by the telephone pole. (Also note the motor grader in the foreground, surely one of the first around.)



CHANGING FARMING FORTUNES

Farming is nothing if not commercially dynamic. Here's a good cartoon from *The Weekly News* of 100 years ago (9/12/1909).

The cow cockie's still creaming it, but wool? – oh dear!

Caption: The Farmers' Christmas Haka: Record Wool and Butter Cheques.



WELL SAID

1. "Sarah Palin has admitted she tried marijuana several years ago, but she didn't like it. She said it distorted her perceptions, impaired her thinking, and she's hoping that the effects will eventually wear off."

Late night comedian Jay Leno

2. "You're the only man I know who's actually *proud* of being *useless!*"

My wife after I spent an hour trying to light the fire because I had left the firewood in the rain.

I replied that she's lucky to have such a self-assured husband.

(Well, / thought it was a good answer anyway.)

LAST WORD

If you haven't already, don't forget to take a look at the new website: www.overthefence.org.nz

Cheers

Ewan Mac