



Douglas MacArthur: American Warrior

By Arthur Herman

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Reviewed by LTC (Retired)

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In his 19 April 1951 address to Congress, GEN Douglas MacArthur concluded by stating, “Old soldiers never die, they just fade away.” For many, this may ring true. However, in the case of MacArthur himself, military historians and writers have not let him fade away. At last count, there have been over two dozen biographies on MacArthur. The past few years have seen another resurgence on books focused on MacArthur. The latest addition is Arthur Herman’s excellent volume, *Douglas MacArthur: American Warrior*.

Any new book on MacArthur, immediately generates several questions. First, “What, if anything differentiates this volume from the many others written on MacArthur?” Second, “What, if anything does this volume add to our understanding of MacArthur or add to the body of knowledge existing on him?” Third, “How does this book compare to the others focused on MacArthur?” Finally, “Is this book worthy of reading?” Let me answer each of these below.

In distinguishing Herman’s effort from past MacArthur volumes, the clear difference is his use of previously unavailable sources. In the past few years, several have become available to the public. This includes newly declassified documents from the National Archives and the U.S. Center of Military History. Perhaps, more importantly, he had access to recently released Russian and Chinese archival documents, and availability of a 1998 oral interview MacArthur’s wife Jean gave, which was stored in the MacArthur Memorial. In total, they are a collection of sources which previous biographers were not afforded, and Herman utilizes them well within the volume to reinforce his position.

Despite the addition of the above sources, it would be a stretch to proclaim that *American Warrior* adds significantly to the existing body of knowledge on MacArthur. Certainly, these sources assist him in adding important background throughout the biography. They are particularly valuable in Herman’s discussion of MacArthur’s role in U.S. foreign policy. It is Herman’s ability to articulate this role that is one of the major strengths of this book.

With so many biographies written on MacArthur, comparison is a challenge. With critics, several have stood out in their quality. These include *American Caesar* by William Manchester, Geoffrey Perret’s *Old Soldiers Never Die*, and the recent *The Most Dangerous Man in America* by Mark Perry. Overall, I believe *American Warrior* clearly compares favorably in many areas with these books. In particular, I will address the objectivity and the readability of the volume.

The biggest test authors have in crafting a biography on MacArthur is being as balanced as possible in their approach. Truly, there are few more polarizing figures in history than MacArthur. It is extremely easy for authors to let their overall opinion of MacArthur make a biography overly positive or negative in tone. I believe readers will find this biography as pro-MacArthur — but not overtly so. Herman is unquestionably generous on his compliments of MacArthur, but he is also critical of his subject when he feels it is merited. In my opinion, it is one of the fairest depictions of MacArthur.

The quality which tremendously assists Herman in achieving this depiction is the superb readability of *American Warrior*. This is one of best written volumes I have read in recent memory. It is difficult to envision a volume weighing in at well over 800 pages as being a page-turner, but this is truly the case. It is crafted in a very conversant style and will immediately engage the reader.

In his introduction, Herman states, “In short, it is time for a biography that gives this larger-than-life figure his full due by peeling back the layers of myth, both pro and con, and revealing the marrow of the man, and his career.” In essence, his goal is to make his volume the definitive biography on MacArthur. To be honest, that is an incredibly ambitious goal. It is a goal that has not been attained yet, and because of the complexity of the man and his polarizing nature, it will likely go unachieved.

What Herman has accomplished is writing a biography which is balanced, highly readable, and informative. For those who have read some of the other outstanding biographies on MacArthur and are steadfast in their opinions on him, this may be a volume you can pass on. However, if you are seeking to read your first biography on the man, this is an excellent choice. Don’t let the length of the volume preclude you from reading *American Warrior*. They are pages well-worth consuming.