Statement by General MacArthur on the Occupation of Japan

Date: September 14, 1945
Author: Douglas MacArthur
Genre: letter

Summary Overview
Shortly after the official surrender of Japan in September 1945, General Douglas MacArthur issued a statement in response to press reports that the American occupation of Japan was not proceeding in optimal or timely fashion. MacArthur argued that Japan was on the brink of total military, political, and economic collapse thanks to the American victory. He added that the occupation should not proceed hastily, however, as the total demobilization of the Japanese military, as well as the reconstruction of the postwar Japanese government, would take time, patience, and precision.

Defining Moment
In 1941, the United States was embroiled in military conflicts in both Europe and the Pacific. US engagement in the Pacific was brutal and exhaustive. As US forces advanced toward Japan, the casualties grew. At Guadalcanal, sixteen hundred American servicemen were killed in action. At Iwo Jima in 1944, more than twenty-five thousand US and Japanese troops lost their lives. At the Battle of Okinawa, more than ninety thousand Americans and Japanese were killed. The Japanese fiercely defended their homeland, while US forces pushed closer toward the invasion and occupation of Japan.

Because of both the mounting casualties and the Japanese refusal to surrender, US president Harry S. Truman decided to use the atomic bomb on two Japanese cities (Hiroshima and Nagasaki) in August 1945 in an attempt to end the war. In light of the cataclysmic casualties and destruction the atomic bombs caused, Japanese emperor Hirohito and his advisors agreed to surrender on August 14, announcing the decision to the Japanese people via radio the following day. Three days later, a US delegation landed on an island near Okinawa to meet with a Japanese delegation. General MacArthur, the supreme commander for the Allied Powers, did not participate in the negotiations, which included Japanese acceptance of the terms of surrender set forth by the Potsdam Conference in early August.

MacArthur later flew to Tokyo to finalize the agreement reached at Okinawa. MacArthur proclaimed that Japan’s military power was to be destroyed, its war criminals prosecuted, and the government in Tokyo replaced with a democratic system, and Japanese society was to be liberated from the oppressive environment Hirohito had imposed. MacArthur’s attitude toward the postwar Japanese was to assume a “paternal” role, attempting to remake Japan into a peaceful country by reshaping Japanese society through democracy. Meanwhile, US forces took over virtually every aspect of Japan’s government, economy, and society as the occupation of that nation began.

Author Biography
Douglas MacArthur was born on an Army base in Little Rock, Arkansas, on January 26, 1880. His father, General Arthur MacArthur, Jr., was a celebrated military leader during the Spanish-American War, but he was ousted in 1901 for insubordination. MacArthur graduated from West Point at the top of his class in 1903. Although he was reprimanded occasionally for insubordination, MacArthur rose quickly through the ranks in light of his heroics during World War I. After serving as superintendent at West Point, MacArthur was recalled to active duty by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1941. A general by this point, MacArthur led the US Far East campaign. In 1945, President Harry S. Truman appointed him supreme commander for the Allied Powers, overseeing the US occupation of Japan until war broke out on the Korean Peninsula in 1950. He was relieved of his command in 1951, after repeatedly criticizing Truman’s strategy in Korea. MacArthur
I have noticed some impatience in the press, based upon the assumption of a so-called soft policy in Japan. This can only arise from an erroneous concept of what is occurring.

The first phase of the occupation must of necessity be based on military considerations which involved the deployment forward of our troops and the disarming and demobilization of the enemy. This is coupled with the paramount consideration of withdrawing our former prisoners of war and war internees from internment camps and evacuating them to their homes.

Safety and security require that all of the steps shall proceed with precision and completeness, lest calamity may be precipitated.

The military phase is proceeding in an entirely satisfactory way.

Over half of the enemy’s force in Japan proper is now demobilized and the entire program will be practically complete by the middle of October. During this interval of time, safety and complete security must be assured.

When the first phase is completed, other phases as provided in the surrender terms will infallibly follow. No one need have any doubt about the prompt, complete, entire fulfillment of the terms of surrender. The process, however, takes time. It is well understandable that in the face of atrocities committed by the enemy there should be impatience. This natural impulse, however, should be tempered by the fact that security and military expediency still require an exercise of some restraint. The surrender terms aren’t soft and they won’t be applied in kid-glove fashion.

Economically and industrially as well as militarily, Japan is completely exhausted and depleted. She is in a condition of utter collapse. Her governmental structure is controlled completely by occupation forces and is operating only to the extent necessary to insure such an orderly and controlled procedure as will prevent social chaos, disease and starvation.

The over-all objectives for Japan have been clearly outlined in the surrender terms and will be accomplished in an orderly, concise and comprehensive way without delays beyond those imposed by the magnitude of the physical problems involved.

It is extraordinarily difficult for me at times to exercise that degree of patience which is unquestionably demanded if the long-time policies which have been decreed are to be successfully accomplished without repercussions which would be detrimental to the well-being of the world, but I am restraining myself to the best of my ability and am generally satisfied with the progress being made.

Document Analysis

General MacArthur issued this statement in the wake of what he believed to be an “erroneous” public perception that the occupation of Japan was proceeding neither at an agreeable pace nor in a successful manner. MacArthur reaffirms the immediate goals of the occupation—namely the dismantlement of the Japanese military and imperial government as well as the pacification of the Japanese people. In pursuit of each goal, he says, the occupying US force was achieving great success despite what he sees as great challenges (in both Japan and around the world) to their satisfactory accomplishment.

MacArthur describes the pursuit of each goal as a delicate and deliberate process. MacArthur says that each phase of the demilitarization program—the most pressing element of the postwar occupation—for example, is proceeding positively and at a reasonable pace. The total dismantlement of the sizable Japanese military would take time, he says, but any actions taken to hasten the process could result in a backlash with calamitous results. An approach that underscores the need for an emphasis on security and safety overrides the need for any effort to speed up the process, he says.

MacArthur says that providing an update on the state of Japan within the context of the occupation is important to do. He notes that every element of Japan’s infrastructure has been “exhausted,” and the military is
being deconstructed after having been defeated on the Pacific. The country’s industrial sector is depleted, he adds, as is the Japanese economy as a whole. Even the government, with its imperial underpinnings removed as a result of the surrender, is on the verge of total collapse. The US occupying forces are the only factor keeping the nation from imploding completely, MacArthur says. Still, he argues, the US has sufficiently kept these sectors upright to keep the country out of utter chaos until the Japanese can rebuild in a peaceful manner consistent with the terms of surrender.

MacArthur reiterates the complexity of the operation, which entails not only completely deconstructing the Japanese military and imperial infrastructures, but also replacing them. This work is delicate, he advises. After all, the effort is burdened with the stress of impatience from the United States and other nations, all of which witnessed and/or suffered from war atrocities committed by the Japanese military. With Japan finally defeated, these foreign nations have pushed for immediate results—the total demilitarization and pacification of Japan—from the occupying forces. MacArthur, who admits to wishing for a similar result, nonetheless advises that the pursuit of the goals outlined in the terms of surrender must proceed at a reasonable pace. He argues that expediting the process might create a backlash that could undermine the occupation’s ability to steer postwar Japan toward a lasting peaceful mentality.

**Essential Themes**
The 1945 surrender and subsequent occupation of Japan represented a major shift in the power structure of East Asia and the Pacific. Japan had been defeated on battlefields within its own territory, seen its civilian population bombed heavily, and was devastated by the awesome destruction of two atomic bombs. After years of ruthless war, Japan teetered on the edge of total collapse politically, economically, and socially. Helmed by General Douglas MacArthur, the US-led occupation was charged with replacing Japan’s militaristic infrastructure with a more democratic and stable framework.

MacArthur understood the enormous pressure exerted by China, Korea, the United States, and other nations to swiftly dismantle and pacify Japan. In this statement, he admitted to sharing such sentiment. However, he argued, the process of deconstruction and reconstruction in Japan was not one that could be hastened. Japan was in a delicate and precarious state; any effort to speed up this process could result in a backlash that could destabilize and undo the occupation’s efforts.

MacArthur reminded his audience that he was fully versed in the terms of Japanese surrender. He stated that the Japanese military was being dismantled at as fast a pace as possible. The more precarious phase—namely the replacement of the imperial government with a democratic system, management of nonmilitary industries, and the pacification of the Japanese people—would take more time than the simple collection of arms. Nonetheless, he concluded, the occupation was proceeding in a manner consistent with the goals set forth in the terms of surrender.

—Michael P. Auerbach, MA

**Bibliography and Additional Reading**