Diplomat in Khaki

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By 1949, the Far Eastern Commission had become moribund. Its chairman was a seventy-five-year-old man whose declining health interfered with his duties with growing regularity. These circumstances prompted McCoy to retire from public life once and for all. Effective the last day of November 1949—fully a half-century since he had joined Leonard Wood’s staff in Cuba—McCoy resigned as FEC chairman and chief American delegate. In recognition of McCoy’s service, the State Department presented him with its Superior Service Award. Despite nagging medical problems, McCoy enjoyed an active and productive retirement. After leaving the FEC, he and Frances remained at 1633 31st Street N.W., in a house acquired when they had moved to Washington in 1945. It was the first house that McCoy’s peripatetic career permitted them to own. The retired soldier and diplomat busied himself with a variety of projects. Membership in the Philippine Club of New York, of which he was a former president, offered opportunity for reminiscing about the days of empire with old cronies such as Cameron Forbes and Peter Bowditch. As honorary chairman of the American Leprosy Foundation, formerly the Leonard Wood Memorial, he took an active interest in the campaign to alleviate the effects of the disease that had been Wood’s great personal cause. McCoy devoted most of his energies to the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Association. After becoming the organization’s president in 1951, he led the effort to purchase and donate to the people of the United States an island in the Potomac River to be maintained as a natural preserve in Roosevelt’s memory. He also laid the groundwork for the purchase of Sagamore Hill, Roosevelt’s home at Oyster Bay, as a memorial to him. McCoy followed with satisfaction the continuing success of younger comrades such as Matthew Ridgway, now a four-star general. He may even have felt a certain
vindication when Ridgway became supreme commander in the Far East in April 1951, following MacArthur’s relief by President Truman. (From Tokyo, Ridgway graciously wrote his old mentor: “Through all my efforts runs the unfailing inspiration of your guidance and leadership through the years.”)

In 1953, McCoy made a final jaunt from home, spending a leisurely vacation in Honduras. By the end of the year, his health had deteriorated considerably. For several months, he was either hospitalized or confined to his home with what doctors had diagnosed as leukemia. Finally, on June 4, 1954, he died at Walter Reed Army Hospital. At funeral services conducted on June 8, George C. Marshall and Ridgway, now army chief of staff, led two squads of pallbearers from the post chapel at Fort Myer, Virginia, to nearby Arlington National Cemetery. There McCoy was laid to rest on a knoll overlooking the deceased veterans of the Spanish-American War—just a few feet from the gravesite of Leonard Wood.

In an editorial published after his death, the New York Times praised McCoy as an “outstandingly brilliant” public servant who had been “one of the best soldiers this country has produced.” Reviewing McCoy’s career, the Times concluded that “military terms are far too restricted to describe his unusual service to his nation.” What qualities earned McCoy such accolades? Despite the Times’s assertion of his brilliance, McCoy was not an exceptionally gifted man. Although able and intelligent, he possessed neither imagination nor critical insight, especially when it came to viewing with detachment the men and institutions to which he devoted his life. An appraisal by Sir George Sansom comes closer to the mark. “He was a man of no great intellect,” the British diplomat and scholar remarked of McCoy, “but he had character—so much more important than intellect.” Chief among the attributes of that character were a sense of duty, unimpeachable personal integrity, and loyalty to those whom he served. Although often partisan, he was no ideologue. His strongest attachments were to the army, the nation, and cherished associates such as Theodore Roosevelt, Wood, and Stimson rather than to any particular body of thought. McCoy’s own views changed frequently, reflecting the temper of the day or the assumptions of the reigning political leadership. This remained the case whether those assumptions reflected turn-of-the-century Anglo-Saxonism, Wilsonian idealism, or the cautious collective security of Henry Stimson. Only after World War II did McCoy find himself out of step, espousing international cooperation while the Truman administration was girding itself for the Cold War.

This malleability helps to explain McCoy’s usefulness to divergent national administrations. To implement policy, political leaders want reliable agents, not free thinkers. To his masters, McCoy time and again demonstrated his ability to serve with competence, discretion, and self-effacing loyalty. This last quality deserves special emphasis. As a military professional, McCoy understood the need for discipline in any complex undertaking. Even when he disagreed with
American policy, as during his years with the FEC, he would not permit his own opinions to override his obligation to support his superiors. McCoy refused to engage in bureaucratic obstructionism, media leaks, or public protest. When pushed into the unfamiliar role of dissenter, he presented his objections quietly, respectfully, and hence, on the whole, ineffectively.

Given this country’s tradition of civilian control of the military, McCoy’s superiors had every reason to expect such obedience from a professional soldier. Rather than assuming, therefore, that McCoy made himself useful as an agent of American foreign policy despite being a soldier, we may well conclude that he did so because of that fact. McCoy understood authority and respected its prerogatives. However delicate, obscure, or ambiguous an assignment, McCoy’s masters could depend on him to carry it out. He was free from the most common disabilities of public officials of our own day. He catered to no special interests. He entertained no ambitions for elective office and so felt no obsessive concern for his “image.” He was no publicity monger—exposure in the press benefited his ego only slightly and his career not at all. And last, he did not view public service as a means to enrich himself.⁵

As a personality, McCoy displayed none of the flamboyance of MacArthur or Wood. Unlike Pershing or Marshall, he never exercised great wartime responsibilities. Lacking intellectual originality, he left no legacy comparable to Billy Mitchell’s theory of air power. And so, despite the generous praise that marked his passing, McCoy was soon forgotten—even as his friends and associates were being elevated into the pantheon of American military heroes. This was to be expected. Theodore Roosevelt was supposed to have remarked once that “Frank McCoy is the best soldier I ever laid eyes on.” One can agree with TR that McCoy was in many ways an extraordinary soldier. But weighing his achievements against his limitations, Frank McCoy was not a great man.⁶

Even if McCoy himself merits only a narrow place in history, the implications of his career deserve scholarly consideration. McCoy’s ties to civilian elites and his frequent ventures outside the traditional military realm call into question commonly held assumptions about the fabric of American civil-military relations. The interaction of civilian and military elites that McCoy’s career illustrates suggests a reality more complex than most scholars acknowledge in portraying the pre-1940 military establishment as isolated and alienated. Such a conclusion does not dispute the existence of popular suspicion of the military in McCoy’s day. Nor does it take issue with the notion that the average soldier of the pre-1940 era felt neglected. Yet, if historians should not discount altogether the concept of an isolated military, neither should they overstate it. To be sure, throughout McCoy’s life, many Americans, from religious leaders to intellectuals, arrayed themselves against the encroachments of militarism. At the same time, important segments of the governing elite found military views compatible with their own
and came to see military men as useful instruments of policy. As far back as the Spanish-American War, the shrewdest and most talented members of the officer corps exploited this sympathy to great advantage. By aligning themselves with helpful civilian allies, they advanced their own careers and gained a chance to play a broader role in public life. By joining Leonard Wood’s circle in Cuba, McCoy secured his entry into this select group. His subsequent career in colonial government and diplomacy testifies to the opportunities available to members of this military elite. His friendship with like-minded political leaders, diplomats, businessmen, and journalists illustrates the bonds linking the civilian elite to their military brethren.

McCoy’s recurring participation in foreign policy challenges the contention that civilian leaders before 1940 neglected to consult military officers on diplomatic issues. Instead, lacking bureaucratic mechanisms for coordinating policy with the army and navy, civilian officials routinely sought the counsel of individual officers whom they held in high regard. Friendship, not position in the hierarchy, sustained this informal channel of civil-military coordination, as the relationship between McCoy and Stimson suggests. Thus, in the evolution of American civil-military coordination, McCoy stands as a transitional figure. With others, he bridged the gap between the negligible coordination that characterized nineteenth-century policy formulation and the elaborate apparatus and ritualized procedures that have piled up since World War II.7

The willingness with which McCoy embraced this role disproves the theory that soldiers believed that their military status precluded them from involvement in making national policy. Well-connected members of the military elite—building on the tradition of politicized soldiers such as Wood and responding to the encouragement of civilians such as Theodore Roosevelt—refused to accept officership as a bar to participation in the debate over broad national issues. Rather, they welcomed opportunities to contribute to the formulation and implementation of policy, thereby insuring that the military’s perspective on a variety of issues received a hearing.

Called upon to act as a partner—albeit a junior one—in shaping and executing American foreign policy, Frank McCoy appeared repeatedly outside the narrow domain to which soldiers were ostensibly restricted, serving his country in causes great and small, admirable and unworthy. Combined with the careers of such military contemporaries as Leonard Wood, Tasker Bliss, and James G. Harbord, an appreciation of McCoy’s life makes it impossible to confine the military strictly to the battlefields of the American past. A persuasive interpretation of the professional soldier’s role in American history must concede him a place in both war and peace. If seldom genuinely popular or decisively influential, leading military professionals did operate comfortably within the main currents of national life, thereby leaving a small but distinctive imprint on the events of their time.
Tucked within the quiet of Memorial Church in Harvard Yard hangs a gilded tablet honoring a once renowned Harvard graduate. Among the chapel’s tokens of remembrance, the tablet is neither prominent nor today much noticed. Yet it represents an unusual tribute: Apart from Leonard Wood, the other sons of Harvard commemorated in the chapel gave their lives in wartime service to their country. Installed in happy remembrance of Wood by McCoy and others of the general’s aides, the tablet impresses the present-day visitor as unusual for other reasons as well. The very setting seems anachronistic. For a great secular university to concede to God real estate that might otherwise support a laboratory or lecture hall suggests a throwback to a departed era. Nor, one imagines, does Harvard any longer celebrate as especially exemplary the ideals that lead dutiful young men to die doing the bidding of the state.

Above all, the inscription on this small memorial renders it a curiosity. The words are quaint, and the values they signify seem naive and almost embarrassingly unsophisticated. Yet the words depict their subject as he would want to be remembered, honoring him as

Soldier
Saver of Lives
Lover of Manly Sport
Restorer of Provinces Abroad
Forger of Sword and Shield
at Home

One can imagine McCoy, to whom eloquence never came easily, laboring over these phrases, determined in this simple testimonial to capture the essence of the man whom he had served so long and loved so dearly. If, in the end, the inscription recalls the essential Wood, it evokes something of his era as well: its robust and expansive spirit; its presumptuous idealism somehow combining benevolence with paternalism; its confidence in American righteousness; its ill-concealed, even unabashed bellicosity.

The tumultuous events of more recent times have rendered obsolete many of the values that animated Wood and that McCoy shared. Our differing outlook would not surprise McCoy because his own life and experience encompassed profound changes. McCoy never claimed to be other than a man of his own time; he would insist, therefore, that later generations judge him by the standards to which he himself had subscribed. It would have pleased him to think that words written to honor Wood might also serve as his own epitaph.