The President at Fort Stewart.

Fort Stewart (Don Teft)

# Supreme Command in the 21st Century

*By* ELIOT A. COHEN

The term *supreme command* figures in a book by the same title that is too rarely read today: a memoir of World War II by Maurice Hankey.[1] A small, neat, bald man, Hankey was a former Royal Marine officer and model civil servant known to two generations of British politicians as "the man of secrets." From 1912 to 1938 he served as the secretary to the Committee on Imperial Defence and the Cabinet, a position which gave him a unique perspective on supreme command. Ironically, this man of secrets struggled with the censors to get his sober memoir published. The tale told by Hankey is that of supreme command as bureaucratic

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process—interwoven political and military decisionmaking at top levels of government. The British, masters of the art of committee work, established the modern pattern of supreme command in the Committee on Imperial Defence, which was a rough model for the National Security Council in the United States in 1947.

Supreme command as bureaucratic process consists of three elements. The development of specialized and trained military staffs began in the 19th and matured in the 20th century. As late as the interwar period some American war plans called for Washington-based staffs to sally forth into the field or establish command posts at sea, but by the outbreak of World War II those ideas were understood to be impractical if not downright dangerous. War is a complex bureaucratic effort that requires evaluating intelligence reports, managing the flow of matériel, and preparing strategic and operational plans that look out six months to a year or more. Thus supreme command as process requires modern strategic command posts as centers of activity in the White House and Pentagon when war breaks out.

Churchill and his generals.

AP/Wide World Photo

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The second aspect of contemporary supreme command, standing committees to coordinate the work of the military and later of government agencies, was primarily a result of World War II, though the practice did not spread to some regions of the world until the end of the century. While the war gave birth to both the Joint Chiefs of Staff and a permanent secretariat to support them, it took nearly 40 years for the Joint Staff to assume its current form. Similarly, the National Security Council and its web of committees and multilevel working groups did not mature for decades and continues to evolve today with the organization of a homeland security department.

Finally, communication from the field to the center of government has progressed from the use by Abraham Lincoln of the telegraph office in the War Department as the first situation room to the live video feeds to presidential airborne or buried command posts of today. As world politics reacted to instantaneous television coverage, so did the requirement for supreme command. Despite fear of overcentralized decisionmaking, the impulse to pull more information to the highest level persists and does not appear to lag behind technological advances in the civilian sector.

However, supreme command is not only a set of extremely vital mechanisms, procedures, and innovations, but a more fundamental phenomenon. In this sense, it consists of the relationship between civilian leaders and military commanders; it is civil-military relations at the top in wartime, and as such involves problems as old as war itself. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, the story of supreme command is one of reciprocal complaints by politicians and generals. In the United States politicians fret over military options while soldiers complain about micromanagement, interference, and ambiguous guidance.

## The Normal Theory and Unequal Dialogue

Implicit in this latter set of complaints (the former gain scant attention) is a common view of what a healthy civil-military relationship should look like—that is, what one might call the normal theory of civil-military relations. This theory holds that there should be a division of labor between soldiers and statesmen. Political leaders should develop objectives, provide resources, set broad parameters for action, and select a commander—then step back, and intervene only to replace him should he fail at his task. But this almost never happens, and military history contains an unending account of resentments voiced by generals about political interference. Livy captures this approach in the irritable speech of a general about to embark for the Third Macedonian War in 68 B.C.:

*Generals should receive advice, in the first place from the experts who are both specially skilled in military matters and have learned from experience; secondly, from those who are on the scene of action, who see the terrain, the enemy, the fitness of the occasion, who are sharers in the danger, as it were, aboard the same vessel.*

*Thus, if there is anyone who is confident that he can advise me as to the best advantage of the state in this campaign which I am about to conduct, let him not refuse his services to the state, but come with me into Macedonia. . . . If anyone is reluctant to do this and prefers the leisure of the city to the hardships of campaigning, let him not steer the ship from on shore. The city itself provides enough subjects for conversation; let him confine his garrulity to these; and let him be aware that I shall be satisfied with the advice originating in camp.*[2]

Legislators level the same criticism on behalf of military leaders, though they usually reproach only members of the executive who represent the opposition party. Thus a Republican senator holding hearings on the conduct of the Kosovo conflict by the Clinton administration opined:

*I firmly believe in the need for civilian control of the military in a democratic society, but I also believe we can effectively adhere to this critical principle by clearly outlining political objectives and then, within the boundaries of those objectives, allowing the military commanders to design a strategy in order to assure the achievement of those objectives.*[3]

The normal theory is alive and well.

Yet the finest democratic war statesmen of the past did not act in accord with the dictates of this theory. They prodded, nagged, bullied, questioned, and harassed subordinates, although they rarely issued direct orders or overruled them. They invariably excited the irritation and even anger of talented military subordinates. William Tecumseh Sherman refused in cold fury to shake hands with the Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, at a parade celebrating the end of the Civil War; Chief of the Imperial General Staff and Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff, Field Marshal Alan Brooke, ranted at Winston Churchill in his published diaries in a manner that at times verged on hysteria. Nonetheless, the fruit of this style of civilian leadership—which respected military professionalism but never merely deferred to it—was victory.

Clinton, Cohen, and Shelton.

AP/Wide World Photo (Greg Gibson)

Johnson and McNamara.

AP/Wide World Photo

Moreover, popular myth notwithstanding, the military failures of modern democracies have not resulted from micromanagement or interference, but the reverse. Lyndon Johnson and Robert McNamara did select targets in North Vietnam, but never questioned the assumptions of search and destroy operations. They repeatedly wrote something approaching blank checks for manpower and matériel for Vietnam and paid little attention to command arrangements devised by the military for conducting that conflict. For years they put up with generals whose professional qualities seem remarkably dim—William Westmoreland, for example, lasted four years in command. Abraham Lincoln, who could decide that an officer was incapable in a matter of months, would not have abided that. In a similar vein disaster resulted between 1967 and 1973 when Israeli political leaders accepted the nearly reckless assumptions of their military advisers on the capabilities of the Arab states.

First and foremost, active control entails what can be called an *unequal dialogue* between civilian politicians and senior officers. Most great political leaders rarely give orders to generals and insist that they obey: rather, they abide by Churchill's dictum that "it is always right to probe." They expect and even welcome blunt disagreement among the military and civilians in the privacy of a council chamber but require solidarity and obedience outside. Indeed, during World War II, American generals and admirals failed to realize just how much British civilian and military leaders were at odds. This style of supreme command does not admit to principled boundaries between civilian and military authority. Rather it recognizes that, depending on circumstances, civilians can find themselves involved in decisions that might appear to be none of their affair. It is, however, an approach to supreme command that varies in intensity of oversight and control: if it is meddling it is selective meddling.

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The unequal dialogue is necessary for three reasons that are constant through history. The first is the profoundly political nature of war. When Clausewitz stated that "war is only a branch of political activity . . . it is in no sense autonomous,"[4] he made a radical and correct claim. Much in war, even seemingly tactical details, may have political consequences. Churchill found himself presiding over decisions on increasing the speed of transatlantic convoys by two knots. The issue confronting the Royal Navy was tradeoffs between greater risks of exclusion from faster convoys and greater safety for those in them. At a time when every shipload contributed to the survival of Britain, the question of what risks were acceptable became political, as did decisions on what kinds of weapons to use, what sort of collateral damage to inflict, and what level of casualties to accept. The only issue is whether politicians rely on the assessments by generals or their own judgment which, in all likelihood, is better; but, in any case, political leaders are ultimately responsible. For example, if joint planners make decisions (rather than recommendations) on what kind of forces are acceptable to another nation, or what kinds of losses the American public can put up with, they are making choices for which they are neither particularly qualified nor ultimately responsible.

Active civilian control also appears because of a peculiar aspect of military professionalism, uncertainty. Generals and admirals often disagree vehemently on operational and tactical choices, and the stakes are sometimes too high for civilians to merely put faith in the senior officer present. The stakes have not been sufficiently high in recent wars to demand civilian intervention, but the potential remains. During World War I, Georges Clemenceau was compelled to arbitrate between his two senior generals, Ferdinand Foch and Philippe Pétain, over doctrine for defensive warfare. That case involved only one service: rivalries today among services and their perspectives on joint warfare rarely allow one to speak of a single view on the conduct of operations.

Finally, the uncomfortable truth is that those who often rise to the top in peacetime may be unsuited for high command in war. They may be too narrow, indecisive, or tolerant, or they may be insufficiently callous or merely unlucky. In the heat of war, politicians must reshuffle or relieve senior officers. That is a hard judgment to make: not all defeated generals are incompetent and not all victorious ones are able. Successful wartime statesmen create winning military establishments by forming sound judgments on character and personality. It is very different to determine whether a surgeon or engineer is professionally qualified. And only through intense dialogue can civilian leaders hope to evaluate the quality of military subordinates.

The norm for healthy civil-military relations at the top of government, then, is tension and what often looks like interference because civilians do things that can indicate a lack of confidence in their commanders. The resulting friction is real. One should note parenthetically that not every instance of civil-military comity indicates a healthy relationship. Recall that General Westmoreland wrote of the President, "I have never known a more thoughtful and considerate man than Lyndon B. Johnson," an indication that both men failed to manage their relationship.[5] A bland pleasantness in civil-military relations may also mean that civilians are evading their responsibilities or that soldiers have succumbed to the courtier mentality rather than that true harmony exists.

## The Age of Global Predominance

The unequal dialogue between soldier and politician is more important than ever because of the role of America in the world, the way it conducts foreign policy, and the complexities in the use of force.

French officials and writers refer to the United States as a *hyperpuissance*—hyperpower. Americans shy away from that term, and most object to *global hegemon* or *imperial preeminence*. *Sole surviving superpower* or *indispensable nation* have a better ring to them because both of these terms imply a status derived from fortuitous circumstance rather than aspiration or benevolence and not domination. And yet when national political leaders speak it is unconsciously in the tones of a hyperpower. Foreign leaders are told what the United States expects of them and informed when the President is disappointed in their performance. More to the point, American power floods the planet to a greater extent even than in 1945. Cold War alliances and attendant commitments remain intact even if diminished. Meanwhile, American soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen implement foreign policy in every corner of the globe—overturning regimes in Afghanistan, building bases in Central Asia, patrolling the Persian Gulf, throwing a protective shield around Taiwan, and chasing terrorists in the Philippines. Behind this force with its weaknesses—

**Foch and ensemble, Armistice Day.**

AP/Wide World Photo

aging weapons and unneeded facilities—is an establishment fueled by a budget rising to nearly $400 billion a year, something like seven or eight times as much as the next largest potentially hostile power, China, and two and a half times the combined spending of its NATO allies.

Furthermore, U.S. foreign policy had become increasingly militarized in a number of ways even prior to September 11. Theater or combatant commanders, whose powers were greatly enhanced by the Goldwater-Nichols Act, led to dominance by the Pentagon in the daily conduct of foreign affairs. DOD can do things: it can move people and matériel, and it can staff problems more effectively than other parts of the bureaucracy. Unified commands have resources and geographical prominence that surpass the capabilities of regionally oriented assistant secretaries in Foggy Bottom or ambassadors abroad.

Not surprisingly, theater commanders have been thrust to the fore in making foreign policy. The struggle of General Wesley Clark with the Pentagon (including the Secretary of Defense) over intervention in Kosovo in 1999 demonstrates what can result. No matter what one thinks about the outcome, it is clear that Clark was a semi-independent actor who negotiated with European nations as well as Washington and sought to impose solutions (such as blocking the Russian advance on Pristina airport) in the face of opposition from both allies and parts of his own government.

Unified commanders have become proconsuls, and it should come as no surprise that they move easily in the realm of diplomacy—sometimes formally. A former general is Secretary of State; in the last administration two important diplomatic posts, Great Britain and China, were held by retired flag officers; and when the President recently needed a special envoy to the Middle East, he turned to a retired four-star general. There is nothing sinister in the rising influence and participation of active duty and retired officers in foreign affairs. It reflects their experience and abilities. But with the gradual

extension of the roles of military officers in policymaking has come an unhealthily blurred outlook. When generals, active or retired, speak out on national security issues, they now do so less as military experts than as members of a broader policy elite. Pronouncements by senior officers on China, Yugoslavia, or the Persian Gulf contain considerably more on politics than military operations.

Active civilian control can always breed resentment, and the situation today is no exception. Surely the present Secretary of Defense is one of the more assertive in recent memory, particularly (as far as one can tell) in terms of managing the actual conduct of operations. Yet stepping back, it is admittedly difficult for civilians to get their way in anything from major changes in acquisition programs to options for military activities that involve something less than a massive use of force. The problems are exacerbated by the slow pace with which administrations are staffed, the relative weakness of the Office of the Secretary of Defense compared to the Joint Staff, and the demands of a political system that keeps senior civilians on a treadmill of congressional hearings and periodic reports. But they also reflect the stability of a system that has in many instances shifted the terms of reference in civil-military relations from a question of military means and political ends to policy in a much broader sense.

## The Future of Supreme Command

The process of supreme command in the United States works well. We have an elaborate National Security Council system, with both the organization and technology (in particular, video teleconferencing) to make sound decisions on using force. To insiders, no doubt, the government often looks chaotic and incoherent, but by comparison with decisionmaking elsewhere it is sound. There is tinkering to be done, and any system only works as well as those who administer it. Nonetheless, the problems of supreme command as process are largely solved.

Supreme command as relationship is always difficult. This situation is partly a result of the inevitable friction between those who are products of closed, hierarchical, rigid organizations and those with different backgrounds—in politics, business, law, or academe—who have nominal and sometimes real authority over them. These intrinsic difficulties are exacerbated in two ways.

First, the use of force abroad will increasingly put civil-military relations under pressure. There will be very few clean wars of the kind the American public thought was waged in 1991 against Iraq—a conflict won in a cathartic burst of violence followed by declarations of victory and parades at home. Future wars will be—and the current war is—ambiguous, open-ended, and inconclusive; they will require missions that the military does not like, to include different types of military governance. This prospect by itself will generate a great deal of friction. Compounding the issue will be contending views of warfighting within the Armed Forces, among which civilians must choose. In Afghanistan civilian leaders observed and were drawn by applications of force that combined Special Operations Forces and long-range airpower, differing significantly from the conventional means used in the Persian Gulf. The rising influence of the special operations, space, long-range strike, and other communities will compete with advocates of more traditional platforms and outlooks, such as heavy armor, aircraft carriers, et al. This will lead to a struggle not merely among services but within them. As civilians select military leaders, they will favor some interests over others and find themselves caught up not only in debates over priorities, but over approaches to warfare. The ill feeling engendered by canceling the Crusader artillery system is only a foretaste of such tension.

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Furthermore, even the resources of the United States will be taxed by attacking terrorists, dominating the Persian Gulf, and dealing with China while maintaining older commitments in areas like the Korean peninsula and Europe. In most recent major conflicts—Vietnam, the Persian Gulf, and the former Yugoslavia—America was flush with resources: the only question was choosing how much to project into a theater. As the demands of global predominance stretch the military, however, the time will come when civilian and military leaders find themselves compelled to accept real risks of a kind not seen since World War II. It is sobering to remember that by 1945 the Army had deployed all of its 89 divisions overseas, and all but two were committed in combat. It was, as one historian put it, a photofinish, which may have been a "surprisingly accurate forecast," or equally likely "an uncommonly lucky gamble."[6]

Such choices would be more manageable were it not for the second and larger problem of supreme command and a widespread unwillingness to talk or even to think about it seriously. Administrations always will deny that civil-military tension exists even as tenacious reporters uncover it. In public, soldiers and statesmen praise one another and stoutly maintain that they think and act in harmony, even as something quite different goes on behind the scenes. In fact, a careful reading of memoirs and press interviews after the event shows the normal difficulty of such relationships—as the artfully written reminiscence by Colin Powell, *My American Journey*, reveals. Such understandable and sometimes necessary disingenuousness must not obscure the truth or change expectations about difficult times at the top when the Nation goes to war.

The issue of civil-military relations has been exacerbated by a willful misreading of recent events. Simplistic and often erroneous interpretations of supreme command in both Vietnam and the Persian Gulf—the former supposedly representing a cautionary tale of interference, meddling, and

Clausewitz.

overweening subjugation of military judgment, and the latter offering an exemplary case of clear objectives, delegation, and civilian detachment—are extremely harmful. Both interpretations miss the mark: Vietnam for reasons already noted, in particular the strange detachment of civilians; and the Persian Gulf War because of the reality of political control (like compelling U.S. Central Command to throw assets at mobile missile launchers) and the deplorable consequences of absence in others (especially politicians who lacked involvement in negotiating the armistice).

Worst of all is the nearly irresistible temptation of political and military leaders (and for that matter journalists and pundits) to preach the normal theory of civil-military relations even when they must know in their hearts that it simply does not work. And yet platitudes on "letting the military do their job" and "not interfering" persist, with the result that military leaders are surprised and resentful when it happens, and civilian leaders sometimes at a loss to know precisely what role to play. The unequal dialogue in war requires a great deal of forbearance, mutual understanding, and good judgment. Even then it breeds friction and discontent. But that dialogue will never occur if military education fails to prepare officers for it and civilians deceive themselves and others about its utility. The Nation looks ahead toward a century that will be less brutal, but which promises no diminution of strategic difficulties. Whether we will successfully navigate the perils that lie ahead depends in no small measure on the skill with which that unequal dialogue is conducted. **JFQ**

## NOTES

[1] Maurice Hankey, *Supreme Command*, 2 vols. (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1960). On the issue of supreme command, see Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, eds., *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001); Dana Priest, "A Four-Star Foreign Policy?" *The Washington Post* (September 28, 2000), p. A1ff. [also see subsequent articles published on September 29 and 30, 2000, "Engagement In 10 Time Zones," and "Standing Up to State and Congress"]; and Aleksandr A. Svechin, *Strategy* (Minneapolis: East View, 1992).

[2] Livy, *Histories*, Book XLIII, translated by Alfred C. Schlesinger (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), Vol. XIII, pp. 159–63.

[3] Remarks of Senator Gordon Smith (R–Ore.), "The War in Kosovo and a Postwar Analysis," U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, 106th Cong. 1st sess., September 28 and October 6, 1999 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2000), p. 77.

[4] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 605. Emphasis in original.

[5] William Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), p. 307.

[6] Maurice Matloff, "The 90-Division Gamble," in Kent Roberts Greenfield, ed., *Command Decision* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1960), p. 381.

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