### Supreme Command in the 21st Century

By ELIOT A. COHEN

\*\*Abstract:\*\* 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. 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 label. The tale told by Hankey of that period of supreme command as bureaucratic.

Eliot A. Cohen is professor of strategic studies at the Advanced International Studies at The Johns Hopkins University School as well as a member of the Defense Policy Board and the Editorial Board of JFQ.

#### 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 Defense, which was a rough model for the National Security Council in the United States.

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 that practice was understood to be impractical if not downright dangerous. War is a complex bureaucratic effort that requires evaluating intelligence reports, managing the flow of materiel, 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.

the story of supreme command is one of reciprocal complaints by politicians and generals

The second aspect of contemporary supreme command, standing committees and later of government agencies, was primarily a result of World War I, though the practice did not spread throughout the Western 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. As the organization of a large land security department is finally, communication from the programmed from the by Abraham.

#### 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 tells us that the Carthaginian general, in his speech of a general about to embark for the Third Macedonian War in 68 B.C.:

General 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 country, the enemy, the fines of the danger, as it were, who are shares 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 during 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 utilize this civil-military principle and then, nullifying political objectives and thus, 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 in 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.

#### 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 among the welcome blunt disagreement and even the occasional display of moral courage in the form of threatened resignation. 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 the norm for tension civil-military relations is tension and what often 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 decisions for which they are not 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 a finger in the senior officer tent. Thus the senator who 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 staffs over such issues as warfare roles allow one to see 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. If 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 norms 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 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 soldiers and politician is more important than ever because of the role of the United States in the world. It conducts foreign policy, the way it con- ties 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 certain deviation from normal 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 than any since Rome. U.S. Central Command, at war in Afghanistan, coordinates and attendants. Cold War 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, besides force with its weaknesses—

#### 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 the defense budgets of the two potentially hostile powers, China, 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 to dominate the Pentagon in the daily conduct of foreign affairs, and martial, and it staff problems.

bureaucracy. Unified commands have resources and geographical prominence that surpass the capabilities of regionally oriented assistant secretaries in Foggy Bottom or ambassadors abroad. Manders 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. Consider that normally, 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 this; military influence and participation in foreign policy is reflected officers in those and it reflects their experience and abilities. But with the gradual extension of the roles of military officers in policymaking has come an unhealthy 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 force structure, for example, retain far more political content than considerably more on politics.

Active civilian control can always 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 the war in Afghanistan. But the civilian control problem is not the old one—to get potentially difficult for civilians back in the way in anything from major tones for military activities that involve force. The problems exacerbated by the armed forces are the relationship welfare. The demands of the political system congruent with hearings and periodic obligation to report. It is no meddling a system that has many instances military institutions from a question of policy in 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. But problems and 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 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—the mutually uncomprehending complaints 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 such wars as the one in both Vietnam and the Persian Gulf—the former supposedly representing a cautionary tale of interference, meddling, and overwhelming 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 repeated intervention of civilian leaders in matters such as target selection, 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 succeed- fully navigate the perils that lie ahead depends in no small measure on the skill with which that unequal dialogue is conducted.

#### NOTES

¹ Maurice Hankey, Supreme Command, 2 vols. (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1960). On the issue of supreme command, see, for example, Paul Kennedy, ed., Grand Strategies in War and Peace (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); 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]; Michael R. Gordon, "Pentagon's Worry: Overextended Military Zones," and "Standing Up to State and Congress"; and Alexander A. Svechin, Strategy (Minneapolis: East View, 1992).

² Livy, Histories, Book XXIII, translated by Aubrey de Sélincourt (Baltimore: Penguin, 1965), pp. 150-63.

³ Remarks of Senator Gordon Smith (R-Ore.), "The War in Kosovo and a Postwar Analysis," U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 106th Congress, 1st Session, April 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, 1984), p. 608. Emphasis in original.

This article is based on the author's recent book, Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime (New York: Free Press, 2002).