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# Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime

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war or for U.S. involvement. Though this book is out to sell a policy option, Pollack's detailed analyses provide readers with an excellent basis for understanding the situation in the Middle East.

PRESTON C. RODRIGUE  
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Cohen, Eliot A. *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime*. New York: Free Press, 2002. 288pp. \$25

This is an extraordinarily timely work, published when the United States may be about to conduct large-scale combat operations in the Middle East. It examines the relationship in a democracy between military and political leadership, “or more precisely, . . . the tension between two kinds of leadership, civil and military,” especially in time of war.

Two themes run implicitly throughout the book. First, war is about more than purely military considerations (Clausewitzians, rejoice!), and consequently “war statesmanship . . . focuses at the apex of government an array of considerations and calculations that even those one rung down could not fully fathom.” The resultant differing imperatives at each level explain much of the inherent tension between civilian and military leaders over strategy.

Second, the essence of successful wartime leadership depends crucially on the civilian leadership's receiving constant, reliable “truth” from its military commanders. The hierarchical military structure militates against delivery of harsh facts or unpleasant news; as per Winston Churchill, “the whole habit of mind of a military staff is based on

subordination of opinion.” Hence the importance of civilian leaders constantly asking questions, forcing military leaders to lay bare their assumptions and explain their reasoning, because nothing else will force the harsh but vital intellectual debate about whether military plans actually will achieve the desired strategic ends. Military expertise is not decisive here; as David Ben-Gurion noted, “In military matters, as in all other matters of substance, experts knowledgeable in technique don't decide, even though their advice and guidance is vital; rather an open mind and a common sense are essential. And these qualities are possessed—to a greater or lesser degree—by any normal man.”

Citing Samuel Huntington's classic *The Soldier and the State*, Cohen describes the “normal” theory of civil-military relations, “which holds that the healthiest and most effective form of civilian control of the military is that which maximizes professionalism by isolating soldiers from politics, and giving them as free a hand as possible in military matters.” This idea is widely and often unquestioningly accepted by serving military officers, reinforced by the apparent lessons of Vietnam, when such tenets were held to be violated, in contrast with the successes of DESERT STORM, when the military was ostensibly properly left alone to win the war. Indeed, for civilians to “ask too many questions (let alone give orders) about tactics, particular pieces of hardware, the design of a campaign, measures of success, or to press too closely for the promotion or dismissal of anything other than the most senior officers is meddling and interference, which is inappropriate and downright dangerous.”

Cohen suggests that this is simply wrong. “The difficulty is that the great war statesmen do just those improper things—and, what is more, it is *because* they do so that they succeed.” He tests his thesis using case studies of four great and successful war leaders—Abraham Lincoln, Georges Clemenceau, Churchill, and Ben-Gurion. Each man led a different kind of democracy under extraordinarily difficult circumstances, “meddled” greatly in military and strategic affairs, was subject to and driven by the normal pressures and constraints in his respective state, confronted great changes in the ways and means of conducting warfare, and had difficult relationships with his senior military leaders.

In none of these cases was there a fundamental doubt about the subordination of military leaders to civilian control. However, the acceptance of the legitimacy of that control coexisted, and still coexists, with “a deep undercurrent of mutual mistrust,” based on major differences in outlook, experience, temperament, and culture. Such differences are exacerbated in wartime, because unlike other professions such as law and medicine, a military leader rarely has actual war-making experience at senior levels, so in a sense he is no less a “novice in making the great decisions of war” than his civilian counterparts. Thus, while “for a politician to dictate military action is almost always folly,” as Churchill noted, “it is always right to probe.” That is the common element in these cases—each leader insisted on close and frequent contact with his senior military officers, often to their discomfiture and resentment. Lincoln wrote probing letters to his generals and “exercised a constant

oversight of the war effort from beginning to end.” Clemenceau, to the dismay of the French high command, insisted on frequent firsthand visits to the front lines to observe the performance of senior military leaders and review the selection of generals down to division command. Churchill’s queries and interventions were legion.

Cohen notes that the United States has, for the past four decades, essentially “waged war according to the ‘normal’ theory of civil-military relations,” whereby politicians “refrain from engaging in the kind of active, harassing, interventionist probing of the military leaders about military matters” that characterized his four great leaders, contrary to the received (but wrong) wisdom in the U.S. military. In consequence, “loose assumptions, unasked questions, and thin analysis” led to catastrophic failure in Vietnam.

More recently, the Goldwater-Nichols Act, by making the chairman of the Joint Chiefs the president’s chief military adviser, serves to separate further the civilian and military leadership realms. One of the baleful consequences of “letting the military do their jobs,” essentially independently of the political leadership once the shooting started, was the premature end to DESERT STORM, in which the military was chiefly responsible for two critical decisions—General Colin Powell recommended an early end to the fighting, and General Norman Schwarzkopf made concessions at Safwan that allowed Saddam Hussein to survive internal revolts that might have ended his regime. Missing in both decisions was clear civilian control of events. There is little indication of civilian leadership asking the

necessary probing questions and providing key guidance.

These issues are especially salient now, as the United States contemplates undertaking military operations that would have profound strategic and political implications, and when indications of significant differences exist between civilian and military leaders concerning strategy and objectives, be it against terrorism or militant Islam.

Eliot Cohen is professor of strategic studies at the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University. A prolific author on strategy, he has served on the Office of the Secretary of Defense policy planning staff and is currently a member of the Defense Policy Board, advising the secretary of defense. *Supreme Command* is a must read for the highest civilian and military leadership and should also rank high on military professional reading lists.

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*Captain, U.S. Navy*



Bacevich, Andrew J., and Eliot A. Cohen, eds. *War over Kosovo: Politics and Strategy in a Global Age*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2001. 223pp. \$22.50

During the 1999 Nato-U.S. war against Serbia over Kosovo, an unprecedented number of strategic and defense thinkers published their opinions on what became known as Operation ALLIED FORCE. Most thought and comment at the time was extremely critical of the Clinton administration's efforts to formulate and execute the operation.

Critics bemoaned a warfighting policy that appeared pointed in the direction of a new Vietnam, focusing on gradual

escalation of air strikes without the threat of ground forces. In the end, the Nato coalition forces appeared victorious but weighted with the indefinite mission of peacekeeping in that troubled and violent province. The leader of the Serbian effort, Slobodan Milosevic, ended up on trial for war crimes at the Hague. The leader of the Nato-U.S. armed forces, General Wesley Clarke, left his post shortly after the victory under circumstances that looked at the time like a relief for cause. In late summer 2002, Nato soldiers continued their frustrating mission of keeping ethnically divided Kosovars from killing each other—welcome to “Victory,” post-Cold War style. While such behavior and commentary seem unusual, the real issue is this: does the 1999 Kosovo “war” provide a signpost for future conflicts in the early twenty-first century, or is that conflict an aberration best relegated to discussions among armchair warriors comfortably fortified with vintage brandy?

In their book *War over Kosovo*, Bacevich, Cohen, and their contributors make compelling arguments that the Kosovo War is a signpost, a cautionary tale of the extent and limits of post-Cold War superpower politics. Besides the articles by the editors, the contributions are by William Arkin, James Kurth, Anatol Lieven, Alberto Coll, and Michael Vickers.

Readers should note well that this is a book with an attitude. Its articles, uniformly excellent and insightful, accept, even embrace, controversy. Given the nature of the war, such a position for the book should seem normal.

William Arkin's lead article, summarizing the history of the conflict, should become the standard for historians and