

A War That Was Not Left to the Generals

By ELIOT A. COHEN

There were two men at the top who really fought out and finally agreed on the major moves that led to victory. They were Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill. They really ran the war . . . we were just artisans building definite patterns of strategy from the rough blueprints handed to us by our respective Commanders in Chief.

—William D. Leahy

It was more than a pious deference to senior politicians that led Admiral Leahy to give the credit for war leadership to Franklin D. Roosevelt and his great colleague, Winston Churchill. Rather, the sober truth was that Roosevelt, and to an even greater measure Churchill, exercised a directive, forceful control of a kind that most members of the defense establishment today would find unusual—and perhaps improper. They prodded subordinates, questioned their orders, and on occasion drove them into paroxysms of either anger or despair. Yet the end result was better strategy, not merely better democracy.

The most notable example of assertive control in the United States was FDR's insistence on invading North Africa in 1942, a move vehemently opposed by his main military advisors, General George C. Marshall

and Admiral Ernest J. King. Both favored an assault on occupied France in 1943, not a diversion to a secondary theater in 1942. Both suspected machinations by the British and were contemptuous of the President's argument that action somewhere in the European theater of operations—even North Africa—was essential to the politics supporting the strategy of Germany First. Yet Roosevelt was right. Indeed, he was even more correct than he knew, since it appears unlikely in retrospect

that an invasion in 1943 would have succeeded against a *Wehrmacht* not yet bled white by the Red Army or a *Luftwaffe* not yet shattered by the Army Air Forces and the Royal Air Force.

Churchill, who actually never overruled his generals in such a dramatic and irrevocable fashion, once remarked to one of the most valuable members of his wartime team, General Hastings Ismay, that the extent to which the generals had been discredited in World War I meant that in World War II their successors could not pretend to be professionally infallible.

In practice, this view did not translate into arbitrary reversals of the generals' orders by Churchill, or grand and impracticable designs of the kind in which Adolf Hitler indulged. But it did mean that Churchill would subject his generals and admirals to a merciless cross-questioning about military minutiae.

One illuminating example is that of Operation Victor, an anti-invasion exercise held in January 1941, which suggested that the British army would have a difficult time holding off a German onslaught. In March, after reading exercise reports, Churchill interrogated the Chiefs of Staff:

1. In the invasion exercise Victor two armoured, one motorised, and two infantry divisions were assumed to be landed by the enemy on the Norfolk coast in the teeth of heavy opposition. They fought their way ashore and were all assumed to be in action at the end of 48 hours.



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Taking Cover from Strafing Fire on Arawe Beach by David Fredenthal.

2. I presume the details of this remarkable feat have been worked out by the staff concerned. Let me see them. For instance, how many ships and transports carried these five divisions? How many armoured vehicles did they comprise? How many motor lorries, how many guns, how much ammunition, how many men, how many tons of stores, how far did they advance in the first 48 hours, how many men and vehicles were assumed to have landed in the first 12 hours, what percentage of loss were they debited with? What happened to the transports and store-ships while the first 48 hours of fighting was going on? Had they completed emptying their cargoes or were they still lying in shore off the beaches? What naval escort did they have? Was the landing at this point protected by superior enemy daylight fighter formations? How many fighter airplanes did the enemy have to employ, if so, to cover the landing places?

Churchill observed sardonically, “I should be very glad if the same officers would work out a scheme for our landing an exactly similar force on the French coast at the same extreme range of our fighter protection and assuming that the Germans have naval superiority in the Channel.”

A spate of memoranda back and forth ensued, with the commander of British home forces, General Alan Brooke, stoutly defending the exercise and Churchill rebutting his arguments one by one. Two points stand out. First, in part based on his assessment of the difficulty of invasion Churchill was willing to risk diverting scarce armor to North Africa, where it could make all the difference in the spring and summer of 1941; second, he ultimately appointed the dour Brooke as the Chief of the Imperial General Staff and later as the Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee.

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The examples of Roosevelt's and Churchill's assertive civilian control could be multiplied. The American decision to aid Britain in 1940; the timing, weight, and direction of the Combined Bomber Offensive; the allocation of resources for combating the U-boat menace in the North Atlantic—all bore the imprint of assertive civilian leadership.

A great deal of friction resulted, and more than one senior military figure contemplated resignation in despair and outrage. Nor were the civilians always in the right: indeed, it is a mark of their good sense that they yielded, on almost all occasions, to military argument that met the test of massive and ruthless common sense. But the war was run by politicians who knew that the ultimate responsibility for victory or defeat rested with them, and who acted accordingly.

The current models of civil-military relations are very different. We think of either civilian micro-management, à la Vietnam, or a supposedly hands-off and out-of-the-way handing over of strategic responsibilities to the military in the Persian Gulf. Both views

are historically inaccurate, but what counts here is the legend more than the reality. A Roosevelt or Churchill would not have given a Westmoreland a free hand to pursue a wasteful, destructive, and politically unsustainable strategy of search and destroy, nor would he have allowed a Schwarzkopf to negotiate an armistice without guidance on the peace terms to be exacted at the end.

In part, the situation of World War II leaders was simply very different: the margin between success and failure was much narrower. American strategists of that war, unlike those of late, had to allocate military resources that were scarce and difficult to replace. The Army, after all, ended up deploying almost every available division overseas, leaving no strategic reserve in the United States. Here were real strategic choices.

Civil-military relations in the Axis states were either corrupted by one-man rule as in Italy and Germany or nonexistent as in Japan, a military dictatorship throughout



Fighter in the Sky (Solomon Islands, 1943) by Tom Lea.

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Landing Operations
by David Fredenthal.

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the war. Only among the Anglo-Saxon powers—and oddly, to a lesser extent, in Stalinist Russia—did civilians engage military subordinates in prolonged and orderly argument, a dialogue of unequals but a dialogue nonetheless. In the course of that dialogue civilians learned when to accept professional opinions proffered by their military subordinates and when to question or discard them. Indeed, their very understanding of professional judgment differed from that of today.

Roosevelt and Churchill knew full well that generals could, in the nature of things, make disastrous military mistakes, not merely political ones. They discriminated clearly between those generals whom they regarded as operationally talented and operationally incompetent and had no hesitation about sacking the latter. Both would have rejected the view, currently prevalent in some circles, that a politician can no

more exercise critical judgment about a campaign plan than about the procedure to follow for open heart surgery.

The upshot was civil-military relations fraught with conflict. Today commentators view conflict as something dysfunctional and dangerous, forgetting that it characterizes many successful governments at war. Who recalls, for example, that General William Tecumseh Sherman refused to shake the hand of Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton at the Review of the Armies held at the conclusion of the Civil War? No doubt the unequal, tension-ridden dialogue between civilian and military leaders took a heavy psychological, even physical, toll on the participants. But in the end it was an essential ingredient for victory—and in all likelihood will be so again in the future.

JFQ

General Colin L. Powell, USA

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

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Our soldiers know that they are the best on the battlefield; our sailors know that they are the best at sea; our airmen know that they are the finest in the skies; our marines know that no one better ever hit the beach. But every one of these men and women also knows that they play on a team. They are of the team and for the team; “one for all and all for one,” as Alexandre Dumas put it in The Three Musketeers. We train as a team, fight as a team, and win as a team.

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U.S. Army (Jeff Wright)