

# Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen and Leadership in Wartime

Eliot Cohen

Reviewed by Bill Deane

Eliot Cohen, Professor of Strategic Studies at Baltimore's Johns Hopkins University, has produced a superbly researched and comprehensively detailed study of leadership: its fundamentals, application, constraints and the tensions the latter can generate when it is most intensely stressed—wartime. Cohen does not expressly make the distinction, but leadership in its purest form is inspirational, not managerial. It is displayed, not given. Its essence lies in persuading others to voluntarily follow a course of action they would otherwise be disinclined to take, be the risk death or glory. Merely heading a polity or organisation does not automatically endow the officeholder with this intrinsic quality, although the term 'leader' is now usually applied to anyone with executive power. Here the author views his four luminaries as leaders by virtue of the positions they occupied and great ones by the way they handled them.

As wartime leaders, Abraham Lincoln, Georges Clemenceau, Winston Churchill and David Ben-Gurion all displayed inspirational characteristics, but their main problems were managerial. Chief among these was their relationship with their senior military commanders and the question that has probably dogged the military-political interface since at least Sun Tzu's 4<sup>th</sup> century BC treatise *The Art of War*: how far should politicians go in telling generals how to wage a war? As a student of strategic studies at Harvard, Cohen was inspired by Samuel P. Huntington, 'arguably the greatest political scientist of our time', whose 'classic' 1957 book, *The Soldier and the State*, he cites extensively and challenges effectively. Briefly, Huntington favoured what Cohen calls the 'normal' theory of civil-military relations—give the military the tools, tell them what is required, isolate them from the politics and let them get on with it. After all, they are the professionals. 'To ask too many questions (let alone give orders) about tactics, particular pieces of hardware, the design of a campaign, to press too closely for the promotion or dismissal of others than the most senior officers is meddling ... inappropriate and downright dangerous'.

Serving and former senior military officers, particularly if they have Vietnam experience, will doubtless nod their heads in agreement. Cohen's thrust, however, is that history demonstrates that his four great wartime statesmen did all these things and succeeded not despite but because of them. Although leading four different types of democracy in exceptionally trying circumstances, they have enough in common to bear comparison, and they differ enough to exhibit the various problems associated with wartime civil-military relations.

Shortly before the American Civil War began, Lincoln overruled his military advisers and ordered the peaceful resupply of the isolated Fort Sumter to induce the South to fire the first shots. When battles were in progress, he practically lived in the telegraph office attached to the War Department's headquarters, perhaps sending a dozen or more messages daily to the field generals. He pressed for the adoption of breech-loading weapons, personally tested other weapons, ordered his generals to switch their preference for occupying ground to killing Confederate troops, and for much of the war had a trustworthy civilian observer reporting daily back to him from the front.

'War is too important to be left to the generals' opined Clemenceau. Fitting the action to the thought, he frequently visited forward positions, sometimes within machine-gun range, 'dodging shells and chatting to soldiers', ensuring that any directives he had issued, particularly in regard to defences in depth and their mapping, were being carried out, checking details such as the adequacy of tobacco supplies and sacking divisional commanders he believed too old and incompetent.

No stranger to close combat, Churchill, for Cohen 'the 20th-century war statesman *par excellence*', revisionist studies notwithstanding, advanced the careers of unpopular mavericks such a Chindit commander Orde Wingate, constantly bombarded Service Chiefs with requests for detailed information and got right up their noses by directly questioning junior ranks, initiated reforms that improved RAF bombing accuracy and irrational though some of his enthusiasms were, generally chivvied the military into an animation they would otherwise not have displayed.

Like Churchill, David Ben-Gurion, Israel's defence minister and premier, demanded complete compliance with a stream of detailed instructions he issued to the several, sometimes rival, terrorist and militia organisations from which he formed the Israel Defence Force that resisted the Arab coalition's attack on the newly formed state in May 1948, on occasion ordering what weapons would be sent to which units and which enemy positions would be attacked.

In summary, Cohen sees all four as typified by an obstinate, unyielding determination to win their war revealed in necessary ruthlessness—Churchill sinking the French fleet at Oran, Clemenceau's lack of hesitation in shooting defeatists, Ben-Gurion killing ostensibly friendly Jewish fighters to obtain their weapons, Lincoln's willingness to introduce martial law and suppress the rights of *habeas corpus*—yet a ruthlessness leavened by an intuitive wisdom that recognised the point when moderation and restraint were needed to avoid sullyng success. So Huntington's theory surrenders to Clemenceau's realism and Cohen's *aperçu*—'War is too varied an activity for a single set of professional norms'. ♦

*Eliot A. Cohen, 'Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen and Leadership in Wartime', Simon&Schuster, Sydney, 2003, paperback, 333 pp., RRP \$27.95.*

