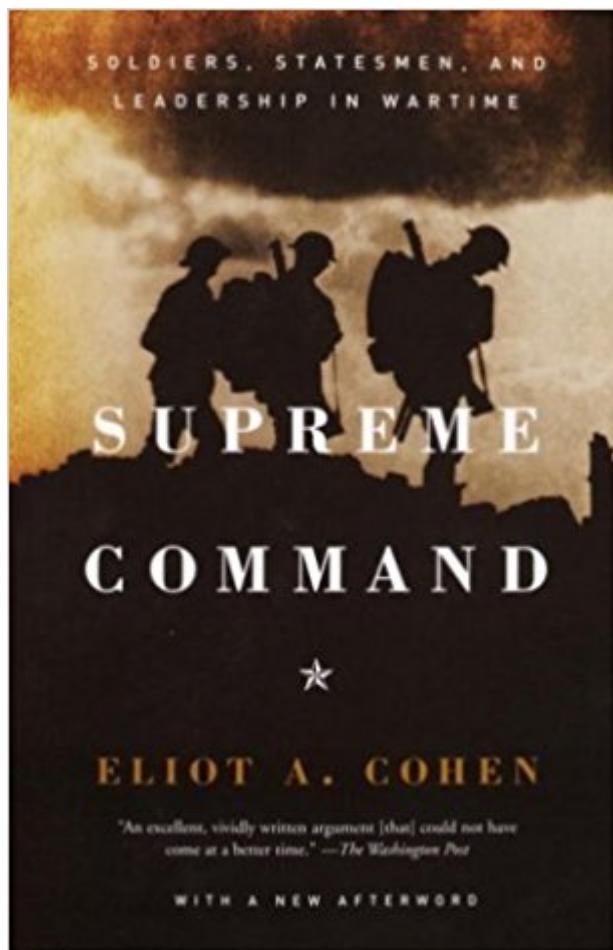


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Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, And Leadership In Wartime



Synopsis

The orthodoxy regarding the relationship between politicians and military leaders in wartime democracies contends that politicians should declare a military operation's objectives and then step aside and leave the business of war to the military. In this timely and controversial examination of civilian-military relations in wartime democracies, Eliot A. Cohen chips away at this time-honored belief with case studies of statesmen who dared to prod, provoke, and even defy their military officers to great effect. Using the leadership of Abraham Lincoln, Georges Clemenceau, Winston Churchill, and David Ben-Gurion to build his argument, Cohen offers compelling proof that, as Clemenceau put it, "War is too important to leave to the generals." By examining the shared leadership traits of four politicians who triumphed in extraordinarily varied military campaigns, Cohen argues that active statesmen make the best wartime leaders, pushing their military subordinates to succeed where they might have failed if left to their own devices. Thought provoking and soundly argued, Cohen's *Supreme Command* is essential reading not only for military and political players but also for informed citizens and anyone interested in leadership.

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Customer Reviews

This well researched book will have an impact on civilian-military relations as long-lasting as Samuel Huntington's "Soldier and the State," published fifty years ago but still a landmark. The author examines four examples of excellent democratic leadership of the military during wartime: Lincoln,

Clemenceau, Churchill, and Ben-Gurion. These four break the current "normal theory of civil-military relations," which holds that civilian leaders should set political goals and leave the details of implementation to the neutral competence of military professionals. The "normal theory" is currently the predominant orthodoxy: Lyndon Johnson meddled in Vietnam military matters, irretrievably messing up that effort; George H.W. Bush set the goals in the Persian Gulf and left the military unimpeded to execute policy. The four supreme commanders Cohen expounds upon break the current orthodoxy: they were deeply involved in military matters, Churchill to the point of driving his generals nuts with questions about the details of operations. If anything, the author argues, Lyndon Johnson was not involved enough, failing to question Westmoreland's attrition strategy. Cohen's books will have significant impact and will be debated in U.S. war colleges for years to come. He significantly contributes to the quality of the debate on civil-military relations. He also brings new life to the question: what exactly is the military profession? Huntington and the traditional definition describe it as the management of violence for political ends. Yet many military work their entire careers in support fields which aren't directly related to combat, and even military who spend their entire careers in combat forces often are only in combat a small percentage of their service time.

Cohen's thesis is that wars cannot be left to generals. Using four case studies involving successful heads of state who took an active role in their nations' wars (Abraham Lincoln, Georges Clemenceau, Winston Churchill, and David Ben-Gurion), he debunks the "normal theory of civil-military relations." That theory holds that once war is upon us, politicians must step out of the way and let the military take over and, unfettered, win it. This view goes back at least to the American Civil War (for example, read the same admonition in Sherman's memoirs). It became most fashionable in this country after the Vietnam War, when comparing it and Korea to civil-military relations during the two World Wars. I was skeptical. Having fought in Vietnam and still a bit upset at our not having achieved victory (albeit still today I'm not sure what our goals were...ahh, but I get ahead of myself), and having ascribed that failure to this nation's civilian leadership, I, too, espoused this theory. Cohen has turned me around. Cohen keeps a narrow focus: civil-military relations at the highest levels. Each case study deals with a head of state's involvement with the conduct of a war for national survival (in Lincoln's case, national unity). He makes the point, "The odds in each of these cases were so finely balanced that leadership could and did make the difference. Take away each leader, and one can easily imagine a very different outcome to 'his' conflict." In the process, he describes the leadership style that made these statesmen great: None dictated to subordinates. Each tolerated, even advanced, men who strongly disagreed

with them.Â Intuition and judgment, based on an ability to observe, make sense of, and use a huge amount of information.

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