



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

By *Eliot A. Cohen*



**Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime** By Eliot A. Cohen

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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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Abraham Lincoln, Georges Clemenceau, Winston Churchill and David Ben Gurion what made them great wartime heads of state, according to Eliot A. Cohen (*Military Misfortunes*), a professor of strategic studies at the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, is that they were able to finesse a relationship with their military leaders that kept the balance of power squarely in (their own) civilian hands. In his lucid study, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen and Leadership in Wartime*, Cohen looks closely at the strategies of the four premiers and addresses broader questions about the tension between politicians and generals in a wartime democracy.

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From Library Journal

The constant tension between political and military leaders is exacerbated by wartime conditions. The director of strategic studies at the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins and author of *Military Misfortunes*, Cohen examines how four civilian statesmen Lincoln, Clemenceau, Churchill, and Ben-Gurion successfully exercised control over their military services during wars that threatened the very existence of their countries. The challenges and complexities that they faced were immense, and how each leader overcame them is the important issue in this study. Cohen stresses key individual traits (e.g., making tough decisions, not worrying about a general's feelings, being willing to stick it out to the end) rather than the totality of these men's experiences, showing that they took a direct hand in the operations of their country's armed forces. Cohen thus concludes that some selective skillful intervention is needed to keep the military on track. This well-documented book will be accessible to lay readers as well as scholars. For academic and public libraries and for anyone else interested in the civilian-military relationship. Daniel K. Blewett, Coll. of DuPage Lib., Glen Ellyn, IL

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From [Booklist](#)

Prevailing wisdom holds that in war as conducted by democracies, the civilian leadership establishes policies and goals, then lets the military leadership implement them unfettered by politics. Exponents of this viewpoint think the Gulf War of 1990-91 vindicates the thesis, but Cohen thoroughly criticizes it. His attacking argument is intrinsically significant to the study of strategy and important on a practical level as well, for he teaches serving officers at the Naval War College. In brief, Cohen says that civilian leaders who neglect military detail in the name of allowing the professionals to get on with the job expose their countries to strategic failure. He sees the Vietnam and the Gulf Wars as examples of such failures, and contrasts them with four strategic successes of civilian leaders who intervened in technical military matters: Abraham Lincoln, Georges Clemenceau, Winston Churchill, and David Ben-Gurion. Readers knowledgeable about these figures will recognize commonalities to their war leadership that, considering the likelihood of a renewed war with Iraq, are topical to the age-old question of what constitutes sound strategy. *Gilbert Taylor*  
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