Commandant’s Professional Reading List

Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime - Discussion Guide -

This guide is intended to help Marine think about and synthesize ideas from the book Supreme Command. All answers or responses during discussion should be embraced as relevant, and open for further discussion. To the guide leader: There is no single right answer.

Encourage the Marine to read, from this book and other books. Encourage them to think and challenge and debate, and arrive at a common understanding. Encourage them to consider the ideas of others (authors and peers) and push themselves intellectually.

Avoid leading the discussion group to a particular interpretation. Support continuous conversation. This guide does NOT support a lecture with mile-deep detail on every possible issue and scenario in the book Supreme Command.

Prep Work: Be prepared to discuss the following readings from the book: p. 1-248.

Discussion Questions:
A note to the discussion leader: Discussion leaders should know the answers to the questions they pose. However, they should not necessarily expect to get exactly those answers from the audience. The answers they get from the audience, particularly the initial ones, may need to be clarified by further questions or comments, ideally from the audience, if necessary from the discussion leader. The point to this discussion is to arrive at a sophisticated understanding in particular to Question Number 5 (Why there are no aspects of warfare which, potentially, should not be subject to political control), and Question Number 15 (What would it mean for you as a military leader to participate in Cohen’s “unequal dialogue?”) The answers or “Key Takeaways” to the questions below are offered in this spirit.

1. What is the thesis or the main argument of the book?

Key Take Away: The main thesis is that there is no aspect of warfare which should not be subject, at least potentially to political control, no matter how minor or “professional” or how much a matter of “military science.”

2. What does Cohen mean by “objective control” of the military?

“Objective Control” of the military was a theory popularized by political scientist Samuel P. Huntington. It 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.” (Cohen, Supreme Command, p. 4)

3. What does Cohen mean the “normal theory” of strategy?
Key take-away: The “normal theory” of strategy is that political leaders set national goals and select military leaders, but they leave the selection of the means to attain those goals to the military leaders selected.

4. Does Cohen believe there are any aspects of warfare which should not be subject to control, even “interference” by politicians?

Key Takeaway: Basically, no he does not. He deliberately offers as an example even an apparently intrinsically minor issue, such as the positioning of an outpost. If the positioning of an outpost has political implications (as it might very easily for instance near an international border, or in a “peacekeeping” operation), then even the positioning of the outpost must be subject to political control.

In general, Cohen sees no validity in “principled” exceptions to political control of military actions (along the lines of “the military must be granted its own sphere of autonomy”), although he is willing to concede “prudential” exception to political control of military actions (i.e., there are no political issues at stake, so the matter should be settled on the basis of what works best).

5. Why does he think this?

Key take away: The answer to this question is the heart of the issue. Cohen’s arguments are very Clausewitzian (who he frequently cites). Politics permeates war, and not just in the sense of the selection of the goals of the war, but also in the selection of the ways and means of attaining those goals. As Cohen, and Clausewitz, put it, war is itself a political instrument. It makes as little sense to regard war, or any aspect of it, as non-political, as it does to regard an election campaign or a nominating convention as “non-political.” Obviously, political campaigns and nominating conventions are “political instruments” (in the Clausewitzian phrase), so, less obviously, are wars.

One indication of the truth of this statement is the fact that generals often acquire considerable weight as political actors in their own right, particularly in wartime, and particularly if they are successful generals. In fact, successful generals may come to command more political support than the politicians who nominally control them, which of course only compounds the difficulty of politicians in ensuring political control and direction of the war effort.

As Cohen points out, following Clausewitz, generally speaking people who disagree with courses of action in war “on purely military grounds” actually disagree with the policy those actions are designed to attain, and they should make their criticisms on that ground.

One way to understand this is to say that even a seemingly minor action, one well down the chain of decisions made in war, such as the selection of a site for an outpost, may directly affect the attainment of national goals in war, or the manner of their attainment. This minor action “interacts,” in other words, with the national goals. As such, it is no longer a “minor” matter, but in fact a strategic matter, just as “major” actions that affect the attainment of national goals are “strategic.”

6. How would you characterize Lincoln’s interactions with his generals during the American Civil War?

Key take-away: His occasional protestations aside, Lincoln was very active and hands-on (although often indirectly, as in his choice of Charles Dana to spy on U.S. Grant, both before and after he was offered the supreme command). Part of this was his insistence of following and learning as much as possible about the actual course of military operations.

7. In particular, why did Lincoln specifically refuse to re-instate as an officer Major Key, who had stated in a private conversation after the Battle of Antietam that “the game” was not to force a military defeat on the Confederates, but to keep both armies in the field and force a compromise peace that would preserve slavery? This despite the fact that Major Key (who had just lost a son in the war) pleaded for re-instatement?
Key take-away: Lincoln refused to re-instate Key, although in a letter to him he essentially apologized for the necessary harshness of his action. As Lincoln remarked to one of his secretaries, if there was such a game among the officers of the Army of the Potomac, Lincoln intended to “break up that game.” In other words, Lincoln himself intended to formulate the policy of his government towards the rebellion, and would not tolerate an informal group of officers of the Army of the Potomac doing so, however well-intentioned they might be.

In effect, Keys and like-minded officers implicitly believed Clausewitz’ dictum that war, and by extension the acts or omissions of the Army of the Potomac, were political instruments. By influencing, or at least excusing, acts or omissions of the Army of the Potomac they sought to influence the course of the war in a direction they desired. Their error was in thinking it was justifiable to do so, or that Lincoln would tolerate their attitudes (or them) if he found out about them.

8. How would you characterize Clemenceau’s interactions with his military leaders during the war?

Key Take Away: Again, it was very questioning and involving. Clemenceau insisted on understanding and deciding even such “technical military questions” as the details of defense in depth doctrine, and its implementation.

9. Why did Clemenceau visit the front so often?

Key take away: Clemenceau visited the front lines for a number of reasons: to see that his policies were getting through to the troops while they were actually fighting, to gauge directly their morale, to build a bond between himself and the troops, and between himself and the nation, which was being asked to sacrifice its sons, seemingly at times all of its sons, in a closely drawn and bitter war. But perhaps most of all he visited the front to assert his right to do so—the right of the political leadership to visit the front had been contested early in the war—and by extension his right to regulate every aspect of the war effort.

10. What was the core of the disagreement between Clemenceau and the Supreme Allied Commander Foch over Armistice terms?

Essentially Foch wanted to ensure future peace by making it “impossible” for the Germans to start up another war, by for instance permanently occupying Germany up to the Rhine River. Clemenceau believed it would not be possible to enforce such provisions without losing the support of France’s allies, which in his judgment as the responsible political leader, was in the long run more important.

11. How did Churchill interact with his generals?

Key take away: Mainly by asking a continuing series of probing questions.

12. How did Churchill characteristically ensure compliance with his policy goals?

Key take-away: Churchill rarely ordered measures directly. By asking a series of probing questions, he forced military leaders to fully consider and justify courses of actions: a good example of “prudent” as opposed to “principled” non-interference in military issues.

13. How did Ben-Gurion characteristically interact with his military leaders?

As the leader of a new nation without an established military, Ben-Gurion led the effort to establish one on a sound basis—through continual questioning and probing, “the Seminar,” prior to the establishment
of general war. The questioning and “interference” with military operations continued once the war began.

14. Why did Ben-Gurion refuse to conquer the West Bank in 1940, even though it was militarily feasible?

Ben-Gurion wanted to maintain the good will of allies, a relatively favorable world opinion, and to minimize the hostility of Arab States. All of these things he, as the responsible political leader, rated more highly than control of the West Bank, as greatly as he personally desired that.

15. What would it mean for you as a military leader to participate in Cohen’s “unequal dialogue”?

Key take away: It means vigorous argument and the clear and forceful representation of points of view, but with the realization that in war the political point of view, and by extension the politician’s point of view, should prevail in the end. Ideally politicians will learn as much as possible about the issues facing the military. Their efforts to do so should be facilitated and not resisted.

16. What would it have meant (or did it mean?) for the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan if Cohen’s advice had been followed?

Key take-away: This should lead to some interesting discussion.

Some Common Key Take-aways:

As Cohen’s book remarks in various places, it is not just the political direction of war which is difficult, it is warfare itself. It is difficult, even retrospectively, to know what strategy would best lead to the attainment of national objectives, not to mention all the means below those of strategy: campaign design, operational art, tactics, and all the practical issues connected with war, such as logistics, maintenance of morale, maintaining support of the “home front.”

This understanding undermines both the “objective” theory of political control of the military, and the “normal” view of strategy. The best political and military leaders seem to be those who can simultaneously adjust, sometimes intuitively, to the changing situations of war, while at the same time keeping their great goals in mind, as the Elder Moltke put it.

Ironically enough, those nations which follow a version of Huntington’s “objective control” of the military (i.e., keeping the military from being politicized, fostering “professional” norms of understanding and conduct) seem to generate much more effective militaries, even though warfare itself is a highly political affair. This in a sense only illustrates the difficulties of the issues involved in the political direction of war.