Commandant’s Professional Reading List

- Why Read *Supreme Command*? -

“I have no political system, and I have abandoned all political principles. I am a man dealing with events as they come in the light of my experience.”

Georges Clemenceau, from *Supreme Command*, p. 212

In *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime*, author Elliot Cohen makes an argument that in warfare there are in principle no decisions which are not potentially subject to political direction and control. Historically this has been a difficult position for many to accept, including not only military leaders, but, ironically enough, political leaders, as well as commentators on war, and broad reaches of the public. Indeed, the very opposite of Cohen’s argument is almost the consensus view. Widely accepted theories of civilian control of the military, such as Samuel Huntington’s “objective control” model of military professionalism and the “normal” theory of strategy making, would also seem to contradict Cohen’s argument. Cohen uses primarily the historical example of four indisputably great wartime leaders—Lincoln, Clemenceau, Churchill, and Ben-Gurion to make his case for a much more intrusive model of political control of war.

Anyone interested not only in the question of appropriate direction of a war effort, but in understanding the phenomena of war itself, would do well to read this book. Cohen’s examples of political leadership of warfare that was both very intrusive into the details of military operations, and very successful, make a convincing counter to the idea that there are aspects of warfare that political leaders should simply leave to military leaders.

Except for those who have had extensive experience at high levels in the political or military direction of warfare, the extent to which politics influences not only the selection of goals in war, but the conduct of the struggle to attain them will come as a surprise. The point is not altogether new of course. It appears in Clausewitz’ *On War*. But a point and an argument which Clausewitz treats somewhat glancingly, Cohen addresses head-on in a book-length treatment, in very readable prose. Reading the book will help prepare anyone who may need to participate fruitfully in what Cohen calls the “unequal dialogue” between the political and military leadership in war—whether from the military or from the political side.