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## Coalition Warfare

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# COALITION WARFARE: A SUCCESSFUL EXPERIMENT IN COMBINED COMMAND, 1914-1918

by

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*(How much consideration should a plan to create a combined command give to the means of realizing the individual national objectives of each participating country? Can combined operations be maintained effectively without requiring a collective subordination of national will and authority among the various coalitional states?)*

\* \* \* \* \*

## INTRODUCTION

### THE NATURE OF COMBINED OPERATIONS

If Country A attacks Country B and the latter resists with armed force, the result is usually a war of indeterminate ferocity and duration. Each state pursues its national aims, whether they are territorial aggrandizement, ideological extension, economic exploitation, or self-preservation. If a third country, C, enters the war on the side of either A or B, the difficulties of waging war are compounded for the ensuing entente. Now, the national objectives of the partners, often divergent, become comingled; and cooperation, even among the most sincere of

allies, is impeded. Differences in language, tactics, organization, and historical patterns can obstruct the successful establishment and maintenance of a joint effort.

Despite the loftiest of intentions, the leaders of nation states are extremely reluctant to compromise when national sovereignty and prestige are at stake. The two-state collaborative relationship in wartime is the simplest case in the analysis of coalition warfare. As additional states enter the conflict the problem becomes extremely complex. The resultant involved situation is caused by the algebraically increasing number of interactions among the states which is compounded by the ceaseless pursuit of an elusive consensus.

Each allied state must subordinate its national authority to the extent necessary to align its resources with those of its sisters-in-conflict toward a common end. In the military sense, such an alignment implies creation of a combined force, consisting of the national military contributions of two or more wartime partners, under a single commander who is vested with requisite authority to direct the operations of the various national components toward an objective. When the partner-states agree to the subordination of sovereignty to the extent that such an organization can be formed, it is termed a "combined command." The command's methods of employing its forces are called "combined operations."

The fundamental purpose of a combined command is to direct the united military effort of allied nations towards the accomplishment of commonly accepted objectives in the area to which the command has been assigned. To accomplish this task, many problems of combined command and planning, purely military in nature, have to be solved at the international level.

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Like most generalizations, the one just stated offers no clue to the solution of the myriad problems and conflicts which arise among partners. The passing reference to solution "at the international level" oversimplifies the resolution of conflicts of interest, entangled philosophies, and the uncoordinated efforts of a host of personalities which invariably accompany the formation and performance of a combined command. Contemporary military documentation does not provide an authoritative, useful handbook for combined operations. As international adversaries, partners, and the scenes of conflict shift throughout the march of history there has been a marked difference in each attempt to assimilate separate national forces.

#### THE SETTING: WESTERN EUROPE 1914-1918

World War I was the cradle of combined operations for the modern age. Never before had such large, dissimilar armies been integrated into a relatively homogeneous force, responsive to a single commander. For that reason, the Great War merits special attention. Allies had fought together before, and national forces had been placed under foreign commanders, but in the main these were small contingents in small wars, mercenaries, or volunteer levies. Not even the Allied coalition against Napoleon involved the total international effort, the tremendous territorial expanses, the high casualty figures, and the monetary outlay brought about by World War I.

The Great War provided an appropriate stage for the first combined operations experiment. It involved all the great powers of the world in addition to a host of lesser ones. For the first time in the history of warfare, mass destruction weapons were introduced—the gas shell and a greatly improved version of the machine gun, which accounted for a large proportion of casualties on both sides. The armored vehicle and the airplane appeared and, although playing relatively minor roles, were grim heralds of a later conflict, the tragic offspring of the first. On the other hand, the struggle also involved the martial relics of another era. The hooves

of cavalry echoed a fading glory and the artillery caisson rumbled towards oblivion. Thus, the war was a transition between ancient and modern, hurling mankind into an age of technological achievement which in 50 years would equal the endeavors of all previous centuries.

Observers and historians have decried the uselessness of the war for its dissipation of human and material assets, particularly in view of the feeble peace which followed. Yet, paradoxically, amid the carnage and disillusionment, the leaders of four great powers momentarily put aside their differences to achieve a common goal. Men matured with the times. Nationalism was subdued and a degree of international harmony prevailed for seven brief months. Tragically, this transient spirit was not present during the fateful months of 1919 when the destiny of future generations was decided.

Combined operations were a persistent dilemma for the Allies. The tortuous development of these operations mirrors the reverses of fortune, the exigencies, and the rise and wane of hopes of the Allied leaders throughout the war. The lessons were painfully learned, yet quickly forgotten. America's General Tasker H. Bliss' comment



US Army

*As US military representative on the Supreme War Council in 1917, General Tasker H. Bliss, a former Army War College president, saw the need for Allied unity of command.*

in his papers on the state of affairs in 1917 characterizes the attitudes which existed until true coalition was achieved:

When the news was good, the Allies pulled apart, each bent on safeguarding his own national interests. . . . Unless real coordination came, they might be in a position of never being able to follow up good news with sufficient unity for a final triumph.

What was wrong?

### THE EVOLUTION OF ALLIED COMBINED OPERATIONS

On 23 June 1919, the United States Senate acknowledged a report enumerating the total cost of the Great War to the belligerents. Battle deaths totaled an astronomical figure of 7,582,300. The young manhood of almost every state in Europe had been recklessly scythed away. The dollar costs were equally staggering, but not as grievously so as the human loss. The economic tab was rounded off at between 180 and 190 billion dollars for all parties to the conflict for direct war costs.

What type of war, one wonders, could produce such an exorbitant expenditure of human and material resources in only four years? What possible justification can be given for such a tragic waste and how could it have been reduced? The political ramifications which engendered the conflict will not be examined here, but highlights of the various events will be discussed to show how the wearying attrition and the nightmare of Central Power offensives compelled the Allies to undertake concerted action. Regrettably, their ultimate philosophy, if only adopted a year sooner, might have reduced the total casualty list by 25 per cent.

From the standpoint of combined operations maturation, the war conveniently breaks itself into three distinct phases:

• Phase I: 4 August 1914 - 6 November 1917.

Phase II: 7 November 1917 - 21 March 1918.

• Phase III: 22 March - 11 November 1918.

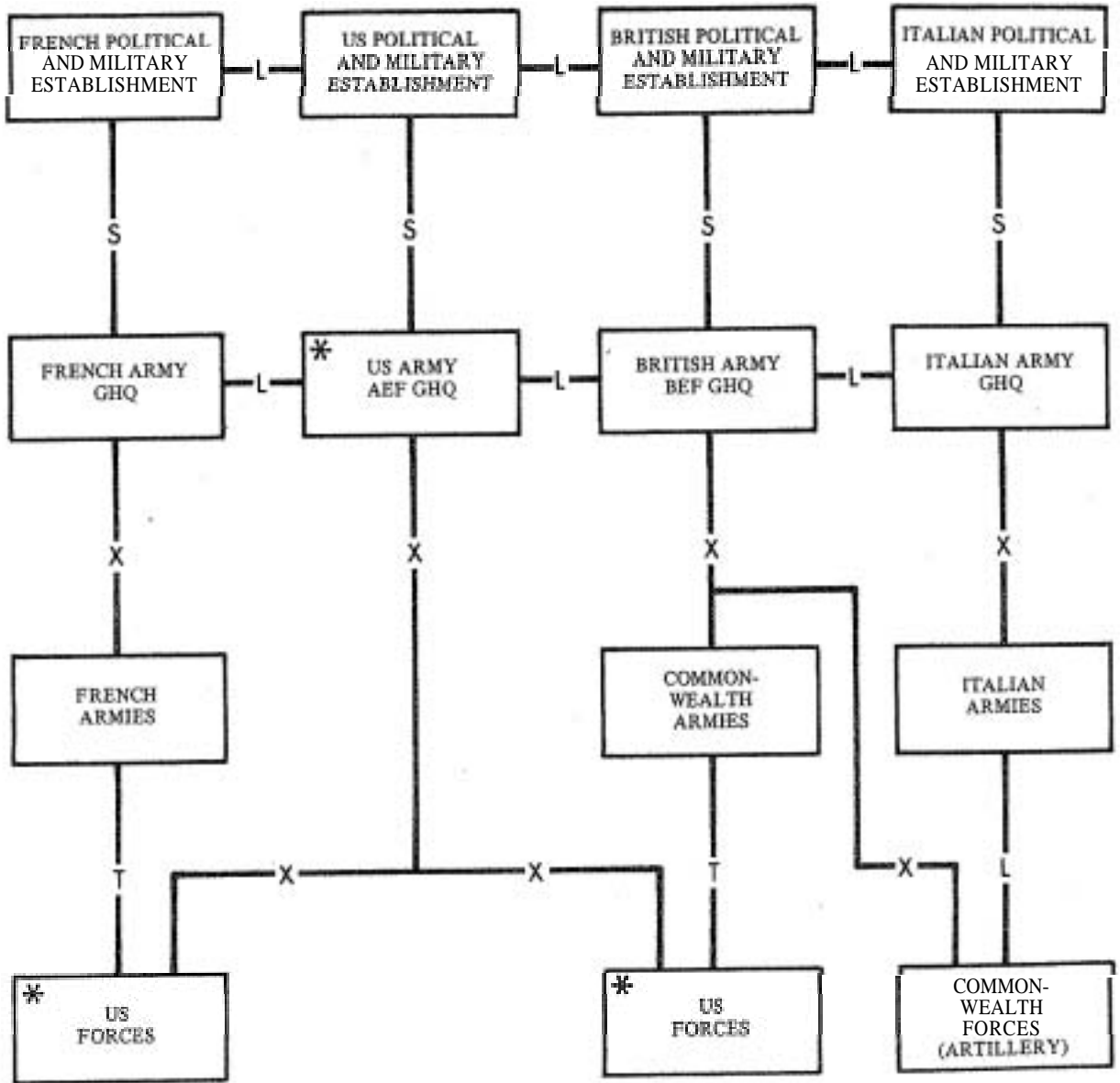
Interestingly, there was no hazy overlapping of events. At certain times, certain things happened and the Allied organization and conduct of the war reflected them. These three distinct phases mark the progress of the Allies towards a suitable strategic arrangement. Starting from a loose alliance, the Allies advanced through a stage of semi-mutual support, to a truly unified coalition which braked the German spring offensive in 1918 and resulted in an autumn victory.

### PHASE I: 4 AUGUST 1914 TO 6 NOVEMBER 1917

"The outbreak of war in 1914 set in motion forces more gigantic than any war had seen. Two million Germans were on the march, the greater part against France. . . ." So wrote Liddell Hart, describing the massive beginnings of the conflict, dominated by the right wing of Kaiser Wilhelm's armies wheeling through Belgium and northern France. The Schlieffen plan, devised in 1905, was the keystone of the offensive. Unfortunately for Germany, Moltke overextended his lines of communication and committed several other tactical blunders in the initial onslaught. September saw the Battle of the Marne, which spelled the failure of the German summer offensive, followed by the German retreat to the Aisne, the attempt to turn the Allies' flank and the race to the sea, the First Battle of Ypres, and inevitably, winter. With winter came the slow, merciless descent into the stalemate of trench warfare which characterized the Western Front from that period through most of 1918. The war of mud, hand-bomb, and barbed wire had begun—with the accompanying frightful attrition. Both sides mounted a barbarous *bascule* as one tried to overbalance the other. Neither antagonist was successful.

The period was dramatized by the Great Campaigns—Neuve Chapelle and Second Ypres in 1915, Verdun and the Somme in 1916; both expensive actions. (These two encounters cost the British and French 550,000 and 400,000 men, respectively.) Nivelle's ill-fated offensive of 1917 (the Second Battle of the Aisne) resulted in a

**ALLIED COMMAND STRUCTURE, WORLD WAR I  
PHASE I  
(4 AUGUST 1914 - 6 NOVEMBER 1917)**



LEGEND

—S— STRATEGIC DIRECTION

—L— LIAISON

—T— TRAINING SUPERVISION

—X— COMMAND

\* ENTERED WAR IN 1917

Figure 1

defeat and was the cause of a short-lived mutiny among French troops. All this was followed by Haig's Third Battle of Ypres where 250,000 men were traded for five miles of useless, sodden, German-held territory. It is debatable which of the latter two engagements was more demoralizing to the Allied effort.

These two offensives were characteristic of the uncoordinated Allied effort throughout this phase of the war. General Nivelle had emerged from the Verdun defense a national hero. Appointed on 12 December 1916 as French Commander-in-Chief, he planned an offensive in the direction of Laon to effect a breakthrough. Field Marshal Haig disagreed, preferring that emphasis be placed on his own offensive in Flanders. In the absence of a Supreme Allied Commander, Nivelle appealed to Britain's Lloyd George, whose relationship with Haig was less than cordial. At Lloyd George's insistence, the British War Cabinet in secret session subordinated Haig to the French general for the offensive. Haig's opposition was bolstered by the objections of Nivelle's own staff officers and by the cabinet of Premier Ribot. In a frenzy of temperament, Nivelle threatened resignation and was reluctantly permitted to initiate his offensive, with disastrous results.

The real tragedy lay not so much in the military defeat, but in the petty differences that existed among the generals and statesmen which allowed such blunders to occur. What a congeries of tangled events are reflected in this situation of a French general who, when proposing an offensive plan, was discouraged by his chief military ally, his own advisers, and by the government to which he was responsible. Yet he appealed to the prime minister of a foreign state, who approved the plan over the head of his own field commander and, in secret, placed his countryman under a French general. Haig, not to be outdone, persisted in mounting his own offensive despite similar professional opposition and met with equally disastrous results.

In reviewing the events of 1917, it becomes obvious that those two defeats may be attributed in part to the absence of a central

directive authority on the Allied Western Front. Such an authority, i.e., a supreme headquarters having the power to reconcile strategic guidance from all the states involved, could have weighed the elements of both offensive plans, determined which was the better, and thrown the preponderance of Allied power into the one offensive which evidenced a greater probability of success. Or, a unitary headquarters could have rejected both plans and proposed a third operation elsewhere. The summer of 1917, however, was not a period of Allied harmony and no such command existed.

### ALLIED COMMAND ORGANIZATION, PHASE I

Figure 1 represents a reasonable approximation of the command channels of the Allied Powers during Phase I. A glance at the chart shows four separate lines of authority, originating in the national political and military establishments and extending down to the armies in the field. There was no central military headquarters, no single focal point at which multilateral policies could be resolved into a combined military effort. Resolution of differences rested entirely on mutual agreement at national levels through the liaison lines which represented the diplomatic channels, and at national force headquarters levels. There was no formal international machinery for the exchange of intelligence or operations information, no planning agency, no logistics coordination. It is not surprising that there was little mutual support and a great deal of inherent suspicion when each national force was an entity within itself and had no communications except for occasional command conferences with the ally on its flank.

Most American units, though under the command of American Expeditionary Force Headquarters, were placed under British and French Armies for field training, subject to recall by Pershing. In effect, if sudden, unanticipated onslaughts by the Germans placed a French or British corps in jeopardy, that corps commander could not commit American units without consulting the AEF commander—and incurring the attendant delay.

## ENTER PERSHING: MORE COALS ON THE FIRE

Another relevant event of Phase I was America's entry into the war on 6 April 1917. Appointed Commander-in-Chief of the American Expeditionary Force, General John J. Pershing early recognized the Allies' problem. Prior to the deployment of American units to France, he made this entry in his journal:

...there was a lack of cooperation between their Armies. First one and then another would attack, each apparently without reference to the other... they would never win the war until they secured unity of action under *some* form of coordinated control.

Pershing's orders from Secretary of War Newton Baker placed the AEF commander at odds with the other principal Allied leaders. The instructions given Pershing which directed "separate and distinct" American forces were interpreted by him to mean that the US force should fight in its own sector of the front. Pershing was unyielding in his opposition to the Allied wish to use Americans as individual replacements or as small unit reinforcements.

Pétain and Haig were equally as obdurate in their demands that American units be fragmented and integrated into Allied formations. The French and British marshals even proposed that US troops be used as a vast individual replacement pool for the French and British divisions.

Thus, an impasse developed which would frustrate the achievement of Allied command unity for nearly a year. By the end of 1917, the morale of the Allies was at low ebb, manpower and munitions were critically short, and the prospect of at least another year of war seemed certain.

After three years of conflict, it would appear that rational men such as Lloyd George, Clemenceau, Pétain, and Haig would realize the folly of continuing the struggle on such a disjointed basis and would agree to resolve their differences, pool their resources, and offer an indivisible entente to the Central



US Army

The **AEF** commander in World War I, General John J. Pershing, wanted US troops to maintain their national identity as a "separate and distinct" force.

Powers. However, no such resolution was forthcoming. Ironically, the first step toward combined Allied action was occasioned by a successful enemy offensive which compelled modification of the fractured Allied method of running the war.

## PHASE II: 7 NOVEMBER 1917 TO 21 MARCH 1918

The withdrawal of Russia from the war in 1917 boded ill for the Allies. The Russian exit meant the release of more German troops for action against the Allies in France and Italy. On 24 October, von Bulow's reinforced Austro-German armies launched an offensive in the Alps which culminated in the rout of the Italian Army beyond the Tagliamento River. By 4 November, General Cadorna had further withdrawn his forces over the Piave, with tremendous losses in personnel and supplies.

Allied fortunes were at their lowest point

since 1914. Nivelle's and Haig's failures, followed by the Tyrolean breakthrough, seemed almost too much to endure. Procrastination became an intolerable luxury—further mismanaged operations could spell eventual defeat.

#### RAPALLO – 7 NOVEMBER 1917

Lloyd George, Premier Painlevé of France, and Generals Smuts, Robertson, and Foch traveled to Rapallo, Italy in the wake of the Italian disaster to consider actions to bolster the disintegrating Italian front. In early November, in addition to an immediate dispatch of French and British reinforcements from France, a proposal was made to create a Supreme War Council for future coordination of the Allied effort. Generally thought to be Lloyd George's idea, it was proposed to the conference by Painlevé and readily accepted by the representatives of all three powers in attendance. The fourth power, the United States, was to be integrated as soon as practicable.

The best general account of the nature of the Council (later to become known as the Versailles Council) was given by G. A. B. Dewar:

Now at Rapallo it was resolved to establish a council composed of the Prime Minister and a member of the government of each Great Power whose armies were fighting on that front... the general staffs and commanders of the armies of each Power charged with the conduct of military operations were to remain responsible to their respective governments. The general war plans drawn up by the military authorities were to be submitted to the new council, which would then propose, if it thought fit, any desirable changes therein. Each power was to appoint a permanent military representative to act as a technical advisor to the council... It was settled that the council should normally meet at Versailles where the permanent military representatives would be established. There was to be at least one meeting a month. . . .

The first step had been taken. The Supreme War Council was not destined to be the remedy for all Allied difficulties, but now there was at least a sounding board, an effective interlock between the generals and the politicians—a framework upon which unity could be built.

The American representative on the permanent military council was General Tasker H. Bliss. In a report to the US Secretary of State in December 1917, he expressed his reservations concerning the ultimate effectiveness of the Council. Preferring complete unified control, he stated:

The military men of the Allies admit its necessity and are ready for it. They object to Mr. Lloyd George's plan of Rapallo . . . for the reason that, on last analysis, it gives political and not military control. . . .

Despite his doubts, Bliss later conceded that the council's creation had more merit than he originally supposed. In a final report to the Secretary of State, he wrote:

The great value of the Supreme War Council consisted in bringing together the political heads of the governments . . . in causing each to consider . . . problems not only in light of its own interest, but in that of others.

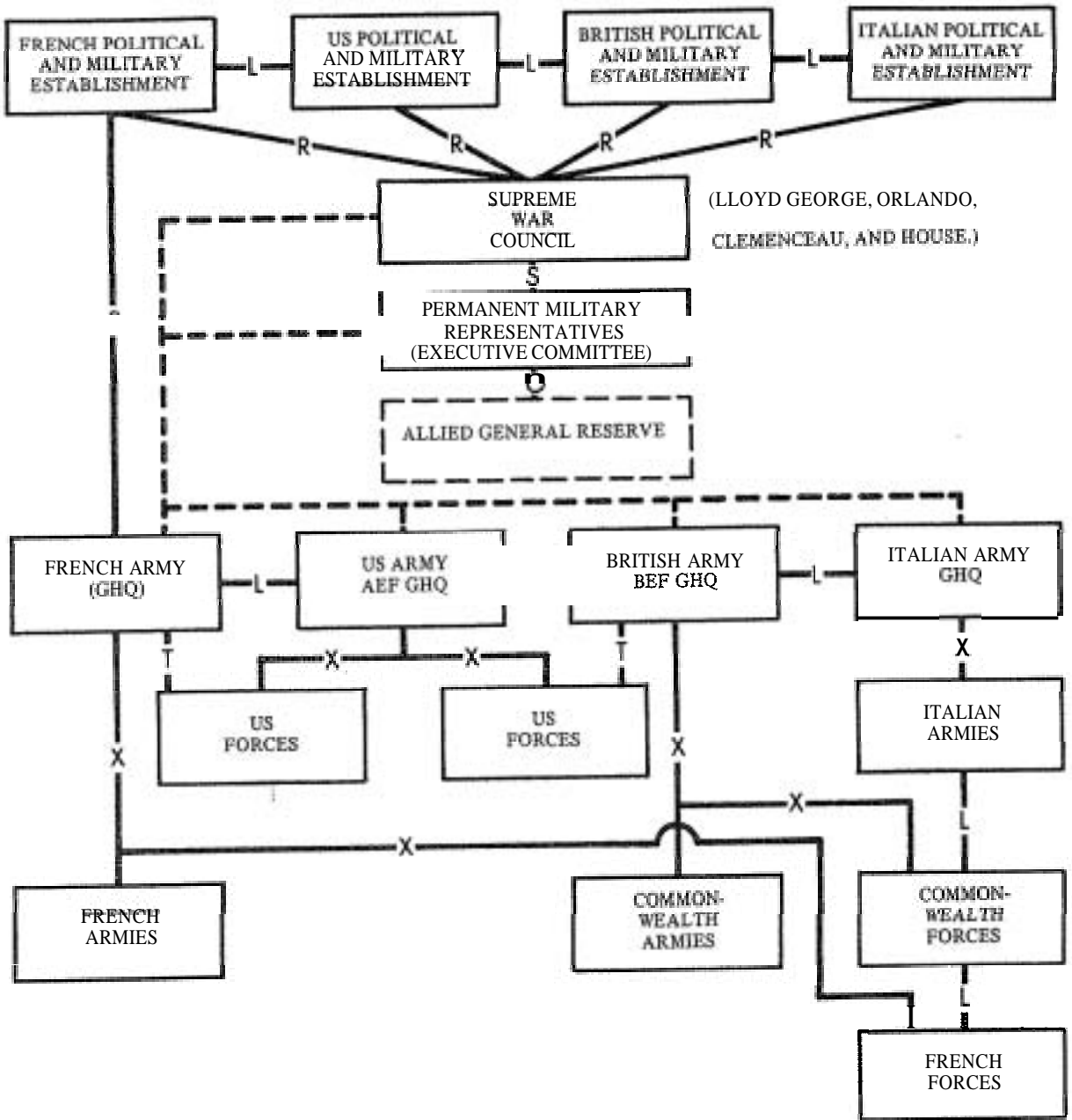
#### ALLIED COMMAND ORGANIZATION, PHASE II

Figure 2 portrays the command structure of the Allied forces during Phase II. The newly-created Supreme War Council and its board of Permanent Military Representatives have been added to the chart. The liaison lines and strategic direction lines shown in Figure 1 (from the national military and political establishments to the field commands) remain. (For simplicity, only France's strategic direction line is depicted on the diagram.)

The line of representation extends from each national establishment to the Supreme War Council, composed of Lloyd George, Clemenceau, Orlando, and Colonel House



**ALLIED COMMAND STRUCTURE, WORLD WAR I  
PHASE II  
(7 NOVEMBER 1917 - 21 MARCH 1918)**



- |       |                                       |
|-------|---------------------------------------|
| — R — | REPRESENTATION (OF NATIONAL STRATEGY) |
| — S — | STRATEGIC DIRECTION                   |
| — L — | LIAISON                               |
| — T — | TRAINING SUPERVISION                  |
| — X — | COMMAND                               |
| — O — | OPERATIONAL CONTROL                   |
| — C — | COORDINATION                          |

Figure 2



US Army

In 1918, Marshal Henri Petain of France, shown here on his 1931 visit to the Army War College, did not subscribe to the idea of giving US troops a separate sector on the Allied front.

(later replaced by General Bliss). The exchange between the Council and its Permanent Military Representatives represents a staff-command relationship in which requests for information were passed downward and recommendations sent upward.

The entire output of the Council is represented by a dotted line of coordination, which was the limit of its authority. The block representing the Allied General Reserve is broken, since its creation was not effected during this phase. It can be seen that American forces were still subordinate to the Allies for training, although command remained with Pershing. The introduction of French and British divisions in Italy following Caporetto are also shown.

The fundamental weakness in the entire command structure is reflected in the strategic direction line. Even though a council to coordinate the overall effort had been created, the final decision on how forces would be employed still rested with the national government of each Allied power.

One of the first major tasks assumed by the pennant military representatives was the creation of an Allied General Reserve force. Based upon the shared premise of Haig and Petain that the American Army would be of little value in taking over a portion of the front in 1918, the Supreme War Council decided to create a pool of Allied divisions to be moved where needed in the event of major German offensives. The permanent representatives assumed the title of "Executive Committee," for which the following prerogatives and guidelines were established:

- Authority to consult with the separate commanders-in-chief to:
  - Determine the strength of each national contribution.
  - Select locations for stationing of the reserve.
  - Arrange transport for troops ordered concentrated in any sector.
  - Issue orders and hand over troops to the commanders-in-chief concerned for use in operations. (The reserve would then come under the operational control of designated commanders for the duration of a particular operation.)
- Right of appeal by any military representative to the Supreme War Council, when differences of opinion were irreconcilable.
- Veto authority over any proposed movement of the Allied General Reserve.

Foch was appointed President of the Executive Committee. Another step had been taken which, if implemented, would provide a substantial force capable of influencing the action in any sector. Ideally, the reserve should have been placed under a single commander rather than a committee, but at that stage of developments its *de facto* creation, regardless of command relationships, was a significant achievement.

By 6 February 1918, the Executive Committee published a note which designated the national contributions to the General Reserve as follows:

British Divisions – 10

French Divisions – 13

Italian Divisions – 7

On 2 March, Haig and Petain initiated a joint move which positioned another roadblock in the path of Allied command unity. General Henry Rawlinson, then British Representative on the Executive Committee, reported this new development in a letter to Lloyd George:

In his letter of 2nd March, the Field Marshal Commander-in-chief (Haig) states that he is unable to comply with the request contained in the joint note of the Executive War Board.

Under the circumstances of the joint note, the Executive finds itself unable to continue its work and therefore unable to organize the Inter-Allied General Reserve as the Supreme War Council... had instructed it to do . . . .

Haig and Petain had joined causes. They had conveniently arranged to shift (on a reciprocal basis) divisions within their respective fronts to cope with any contingency that one or the other might encounter. Both refused to yield up any forces to a general pool.

The inefficacy of this arrangement, effectively killing the General Reserve concept for the time, was to prove disastrous to Haig several weeks later, and nearly enveloped the Allied effort in chaos.

Throughout Phase II, American troops poured into France. Pershing remained firm in his stand for the creation of an American Army to man a portion of the front. He turned a deaf ear to all Allied entreaties that his troops be used as fillers for French and British units or that they be constituted as part of a reserve. He cabled Secretary of War Baker on 8 January after receiving a French request that American divisions be fragmented among French and British units:

Have expressed a willingness to aid in any way in an emergency but do not think good reason exists for us to break up our divisions and scatter regiments for service among the French and British. . . .

He was even more adamant at a conference with Haig, Petain, Foch, and Robertson on 18 January when he stated in response to a suggestion by Robertson that American forces should constitute a reserve:

. . . I also took occasion to emphasize the point that we expected as a matter of course that the American Army would have its own front as an independent force and would not be used merely as a reserve to be sent here and there . . . .

And so it went. Despite the creation of an organization to resolve differences, the Allied leaders continued to operate after their own fashion, vacillating from plan to plan. In late March 1918, the Germans helped them make up their minds.

### PHASE III: 22 MARCH TO 11 NOVEMBER 1918

In March of 1918, the anticipated German Spring Offensive, preceded by heavy artillery and gas bombardment, surged across "no-man's land" and slammed full force into the British lines north of the Oise and St. Quentin. Gough's Fifth Army was almost annihilated and the adjacent French and British forces were split apart. The desperation of those critical days was revealed in two cryptic extracts from the diary of a chronicler at British GHQ:

March 22. The fighting today has gone badly for us. . . . It is very serious. We have practically no reserves. . . . By the 26th the French reinforcements should begin to arrive . . . .

And another entry, three days later:

March 25. The situation is very serious both in the battle and behind it. The right of the Third Army and the whole of the Fifth Army have been driven back right through their defensive areas, and the Germans are still pressing on.

*Apparently the French reinforcements will not arrive until the end of the month—another five days. Worse than that, Petain met D. H. [Douglas Haig]*

last night at Drury and told him that if the German attack were pressed on the right, he had ordered the local French Commander to withdraw southwest and cover Paris. . . . D. H. has telegraphed home asking that a Generalissimo for the whole Western Front be appointed at once as the only possible means of having Petain overruled.

This last journal entry underlines the inappropriateness of Haig's and Petain's agreement relative to the constitution and employment of reserve forces. Despite the sincere character of this mutual understanding, its terms were of no avail at the time of reckoning.

Petain may have been completely justified in withholding his troops, but the greatest intentions in the world did not help Haig in his hour of need. The interesting paradox here is that the man who had vetoed the Allied General Reserve plan now appealed to his own government for "unity of command."

#### DOULLENS (MARCH 26) AND BEAUAIS (APRIL 3)

The generals and statesmen of France and Great Britain met in the town hall at Doullens to determine how best to save the British Army, now falling back on Amiens and the channel ports. To his credit, Haig advanced the recommendation that "Foch should co-ordinate the action of all the Allied Armies on the Western Front" (italics are Haig's). At last, someone would be in charge—perhaps not a commander vested with all requisite authority, but at least someone akin to a central coordinator. The conduct of military operations by committee was terminated.

Why was Foch chosen to be the Allied generalissimo, rather than Haig or Petain? Foch was a compromise choice. There was by then little affinity between Haig and Petain and it is doubtful if either would have accepted the other as generalissimo. Liddell Hart summarizes the compromise:

Foch's position indicated him as the natural, almost inevitable, man to

reconcile their differing points of view and coordinate their efforts . . . .

No one perhaps could so well have guided a difficult team of soldiers or have made a better reconciliation of conflicting national interests in times of anxiety and stress.

Foch quickly assumed his mantle of responsibility and set about the formidable task of restoring the front. He pieced together the remnants of the British Fifth Army and saw to the dispatch of French divisions into the British sector. By 29 March, order was emerging from chaos and the German attack had been slowed to a manageable pace.

General Pershing was impressed by the seriousness of the situation. On 28 March, he drove to the French headquarters at Clermont and delivered his "All I have" speech to Foch. In short, he placed the entire American force then in France at the Marshal's disposal for the duration of the emergency. The final barrier to unified operations had fallen.

The role of Foch as coordinator rather than as a commander was soon recognized to be less than ideal. At Beauvais, on 3 April, Premier Clemenceau proposed to modify the Doullens agreement to entrust to Foch the strategic direction of all Allied armies. Each commander-in-chief was to have the right of appeal to his government, if in his opinion his forces were endangered by reason of any order received from Foch. This development abolished the previously established Executive Committee for the Allied General Reserve. On 14 May 1918, Foch was designated Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Armies in France.

The Beauvais conference, attended by the French, British, and American strategists, resolved the future role of the US Army. Pershing, during the conference, rose to his feet and stated that all future references to the Allied command would apply to the American Army. This modification was adopted and Pershing was then officially conceded his much desired American Army and American zone. Nevertheless, he did not retract his own concession to Foch of 28 March. Some American units served for the



*US Army*

Soldiers of the 307th US Infantry near the Argonne Forest on 26 September 1918.  
Two French officers can be seen in the upper left portion of the photograph.

remainder of the war with their French and British counterparts, although the bulk of the US forces operated in the American sector. The second command transition was accomplished.

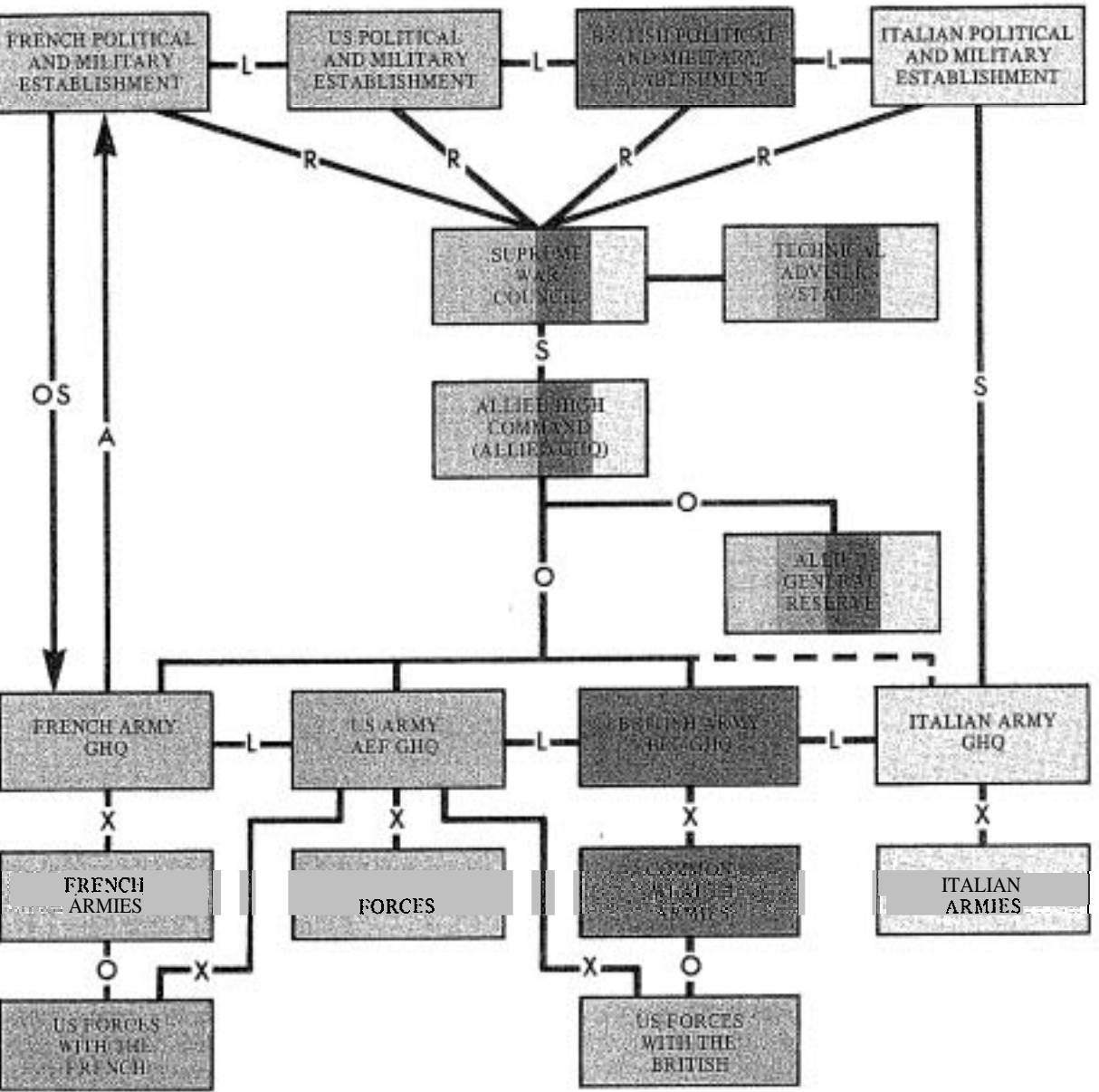
### **ALLIED COMMAND ORGANIZATION, PHASE III**

Figure 3 depicts the final stage of development of the combined command as modified in the spring of 1918. This was the structure within which final victory was achieved.

The Allied High Command (Foch's

headquarters) was formed and provided strategic direction for the several national components. The separate commanders-in-chief retained command over all national elements; however, the combat operations of a few American units were controlled by either the French or British headquarters. The Supreme War Council still existed, providing strategic direction to Foch, who reviewed the plans of the separate armies under his direction. Liaison at the national and field army level was maintained as in previous phases. Running from the French Political and Military Establishment (omitted

**ALLIED COMMAND STRUCTURE, WORLD WAR I  
PHASE III  
(22 MARCH 1918 - 11 NOVEMBER 1918)**



- LEGEND**
- S** STRATEGIC DIRECTION
  - L** LIAISON
  - R** REPRESENTATION (OF NATIONAL STRATEGY)
  - X** COMMAND
  - O** OPERATIONAL CONTROL
  - COORDINATION
  - A** APPEAL
  - OS** OVERRIDING STRATEGIC DIRECTION

Figure 3

from United States and British channels to avoid cluttering the diagram) is the line which represents the channel of appeal. The addition of this line reflects the reservation of the Beauvais agreement granting the right of appeal of any of Foch's decisions to higher national authority. While the field commander-in-chief retained operational control of his forces, under the strategic direction of the Allied High Command, final authority to execute remained with the several national governments. Conceivably, this authority could extend even to the withdrawal of forces from the war, but such a critical situation never arose. It would be unlikely that any nation would yield complete authority for its forces to a foreign commander. Thus, the arrangement depicted on the chart probably represents the best possible structure considering the circumstances existing in the late days of World War I. Had the war continued into 1919 or later, additional refinements might have been in order. It is unfortunate that the Allied High Command was not created earlier in the war.

Italy never accepted Foch as a Supreme Commander, but considered him a "coordinator" who had no actual command influence over the Italian Army. The Italian national government continued to exercise direct supervision of its field forces and bypassed the Supreme Command. This difference in viewpoint held by the Italians highlights the difficulty of reaching unanimous agreement among cobelligerents as their number is increased. Fortunately, Italy's strategic role at that time was not of the consequence generally attributed to the other three major Allied powers.

### THE FINISH

In all, Germany conducted five offensives before her Armies were stopped west of the Oise on 13 June 1918. From June until the Armistice, the Allied offensives highlighted the waning months of the war. These successful Allied campaigns are a tribute to the combined efforts of the French and British, joined now by the Belgians and

bolstered by the ceaseless tide of fresh American troops. Raymond Recouly, concluding his biography of Foch, describes the events of the summer and autumn of 1918:

The high command of the Allies . . . had never been in better form. The battle just fought and won (Marne Offensive) had brought out like a searchlight the splendid qualities of our staff and had confirmed the wisdom of unity of command; under the orders of Foch, French, British, Americans and Italians all had their share in this great victory, the final turning point of the war . . .

### UNITY OF COMMAND IN RETROSPECT

Unity of command was not a panacea for the Allies—not an infallible prescription that guaranteed the total collapse of the Central Powers. Other factors had their influence in the German defeat. The infusion of American troops and materiel sparked renewal of a flagging effort in the somber winter of 1917-18. The German submarine blockade failed due to British domination of the sea lanes, and the great German Spring Offensive of 1918 was halted because of German miscalculation and the display of Allied solidarity.

However, history affirms the fact that the Allies did not realize great success in France until they adopted a framework of unanimity and centralization of operations. The array of powerful armies, each bound to the others by the covenants of Rapallo, Beauvais, and Doullens, were too formidable for the enemy to defeat in detail. Allied unity had created an overwhelming preponderance of massed strength which the flagging German Armies could not check in the summer of 1918.

Historians are prone to contemplate what "might have happened if circumstances had been different." Various views have been advanced on how and when the war would have ended if, for instance, the Supreme War Council or the Allied General Reserve had been created earlier or later. The tendency in this case is to reflect on one incident, a notable Allied success, which if exploited

“might” have ended the war a year earlier with a saving of countless lives.

The British tank breakthrough in the vicinity of Cambrai in November 1917 is an example of an “unexploited exploitable.” Byng’s Third Army, spearheaded by 400 tanks, cracked the “Hindenburg Switch” near the southern flank of the Third Army’s sector. Driving to within several kilometers of Cambrai, British armor ruptured the line to a depth of four and one-half miles in a matter of hours. The line was only restored by the Germans after several days of heavy fighting and depletion of local reserves. *If* an Allied General Reserve had existed at that time and *if* an Allied Force of ten divisions had been poured into the gap, impetus alone could have carried the attack to Coblenz. Speculation? Perhaps. But surprise in warfare, when exploited with combat power, has achieved advantages that care and deliberation have never delivered. The absence of an employable reserve makes further consideration academic.

In the final analysis, the terminal success of

the Allied Supreme Command can best be attributed to the personalities involved. Foch and Haig, whose Armies did the lion’s share of the work, cooperated. Pershing became increasingly amenable. All possessed the professional stature to bury their differences to achieve a goal in the common interest. The military, however, does not merit all of the plaudits because of its internal cooperation. The politicians also rose above their national interests and supported the idea of unification. Holding the policy reins, with post-war aims never out of mind, the civilian leaders nevertheless yielded tactical management of the war to the professional soldiers.

Civilian and soldier, together, established a grand precedent—one which would be acknowledged by a different generation of soldiers and statesmen in a different war. The axioms and postulates of coalition warfare so painfully garnered in the Great War would underlie Allied cooperation in World War II and contribute substantially to its successful outcome.

*Nothing is more important in war than unity in command.*

— Napoleon Bonaparte  
1769-1821

