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# NATO's Supreme Allied Commanders on Parade

GENERAL SIR JOHN HACKETT

A Review Essay on: **Generals in International Politics: NATO's Supreme Allied Commander, Europe**. Edited by Robert S. Jordan. 229 pages. The University Press of Kentucky, 1987.

**A**lmost by definition, a NATO Supreme Allied Commander cannot be anything but a remarkable man. His power is great but not unlimited, and his responsibilities enormous but closely defined. He must command respect as a military operator, but know where and how to find professional advice—and when, where, and how best to use it. More important than capability as a field commander, practiced in warfare on the battlefield, is a capacity to ensure the cooperation, willing or otherwise, of allies when there is no war but only the compelling danger that, if only by miscalculation or mischance, a totally destructive third World War just might break out. Such a war has to be prevented, and that is SACEUR's overriding aim. The absence of a major war in Europe for more than forty years of deep hostility between two major power blocs, most dangerously armed, throws much light on the military personalities who, on the NATO side, have played the major part, up front, in guiding the destiny of the Atlantic Alliance.

This book was assembled by Robert S. Jordan, with distinguished contributions by Stephen Ambrose and Morris Honick (on Eisenhower), George Pelletier (Ridgway), Jordan himself (Gruenther and Norstad), Lawrence Kaplan and Kathleen Kellner (Lemnitzer), Lewis Sorley (Goodpaster), and Honick (Haig). Additionally, there is a Foreword by General Bernard Rogers, who retired as SACEUR last summer, and an Introduction by General Andrew Goodpaster.

As a study of seven outstanding and very different men who held the post of Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, in NATO up to 1979, the

book furnishes a valuable (and not overlong) aid to our understanding of an office unique in its nature and its effect on world politics. The commanders treated were different men meeting widely different demands in the performance of the same mission—to contribute to the deterrence of all forms of aggression in the area of Allied Command Europe and to do what could be done to preserve or restore the territorial integrity and the security of member states if deterrence failed.

Eisenhower was the first SACEUR, the outstanding symbol after World War II of military cooperation in the Western World, second only to Churchill. When NATO came into being in 1949, the five-power Brussels Treaty Organization had already in part prepared the way for the setting up of an allied command in Europe, which was now enormously strengthened by the commitment to it of US forces. Eisenhower had to develop an awareness of alliance among 12 sovereign states whose military forces were reluctant to accept any but national obligations. He had also, with the assistance of outstanding military staff officers and immensely capable civilian advisers of several nationalities, to build up a military command structure in the Atlantic Alliance where none had existed before. He had to sell NATO to Americans and bring confidence to Europeans. His success in these two aims and the inclusion in the Alliance of West Germany, whose soldiers had so recently been our enemies, was due more than anything to the deep conviction and blazing sincerity of a man who was perhaps more politician than soldier, but who as a person inspired admiration and affection everywhere.

Ike's successor, Matt Ridgway, was a soldier's soldier. He came fresh from outstanding success as a field commander in Korea, but was less experienced in the largely political maneuvers that now awaited him than General Al Gruenther, Eisenhower's Chief of Staff, whose appointment to succeed Ike would have been well received. Gruenther stayed on as Chief of Staff during the 14 months of Ridgway's term of office, a tenure largely characterized by immense efforts on Ridgway's part to collect on the promises understood to have been made by member states to his predecessor. If the appointment of a fighting general frightened some, his departure left Allied Command Europe much more of a tangible military entity than it had been before.

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General Sir John Hackett, GCB, CBE, ended his distinguished military career as commander-in-chief of the British Army of the Rhine and commander of NATO's Northern Army Group. He was thrice wounded in World War II and decorated for gallantry an equal number of times, most conspicuously as commander of a parachute brigade at Arnhem. He is now associated with Kings College, London, where he is a visiting professor in the classics. Among his works are *The Profession of Arms* and the international best-seller *The Third World War*.

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He was now succeeded by General Gruenther, who, with his gift for establishing easy, personal relationships and his long experience in the working of high allied command, proved of the greatest value in the continuing process of establishing the SACEUR, whoever he might be, as a notable figure on the European stage and a force to be reckoned with.

The arrival of General Lauris Norstad, an Air Force general, as SACEUR in succession to Gruenther had the important effect of emphasizing the reliance of NATO on American air power while at the same time ushering in a period of concern over the strengths of European land forces, particularly those of Britain, and over the difficulty of relating national loyalties to NATO obligations. There was already beginning to emerge, in addition, some disquiet in France over French membership in NATO. Norstad's years in NATO caused Mountbatten to say that "this young airman," looked on with initial misgiving, had done a nearly impossible task with exemplary skill.

No one had known NATO better than the next SACEUR, General Lyman Lemnitzer, who succeeded Norstad in January 1963. His was a tenure which saw final recognition that Soviet nuclear development had destroyed the credibility of massive retaliation, and which also saw De Gaulle's not-unexpected removal of France from NATO with the consequent eviction of SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe) from French territory. Soviet nuclear advances led, among other results, to the policy of flexible response, the replanning of nuclear action in Europe, and the formation of an Allied Command Europe Mobile Force. Eviction from France caused a mammoth upheaval involving the establishment of a new SHAPE near Brussels, the relocation of other major headquarters complexes, and the movement of 100,000 US and other NATO personnel, together with 1700 families, into fresh accommodations, with over a million tons of stores.

De Gaulle's formidable deadline of 1 April 1967 for the closure of SHAPE in France, announced barely a year previously, was met by the opening of a new Supreme Headquarters in Belgium, not yet finished but fully operational, on the day before the deadline fell. Much of the credit for this remarkable achievement must go to Lemnitzer. General de Gaulle, with matchless French logic, had withdrawn from the organization whose purpose was to prevent war, while affirming adherence to the treaty binding France to fight if war should break out. He had added the further refinement that two French divisions would remain in Germany (through bilateral arrangement with the Federal Republic) poised to take an instant share in NATO's response to any aggression from the Warsaw Pact, though they would no longer be under NATO command. Lemnitzer's service through these difficult times had been longer, on his departure on 1 July 1969, than any before him. It had also perhaps been politically, at home no less than abroad, the most difficult.

Andrew Goodpaster, next to come in, was pretty well ideal for the job. Service in NATO under Eisenhower and Gruenther and a continuing close relationship with Ike stood him in good stead with Europeans. He was recognized as the honest broker, and his Study of Alliance Defense Problems in the 70s (AD-70), a realistic review of East-West relations set out in the light of what Marxists call the "correlation of forces," was seen as a step forward in relating detente to deterrence and both to European defense. His endorsement of negotiations on Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions, which frightened some, was typical of Goodpaster's long foresight. So, too, was his realistic approach to the contingent integration of a French military effort into European defense, and his maintenance of a close relationship with the French liaison staff in SHAPE. Quiet, consistent, firm, conciliatory, and sound, Andy Goodpaster made a critically important contribution to NATO solidarity and to peace in Europe in a time of considerable turbulence in the Atlantic Alliance.

The accession of Alexander Haig, the youngest ever, to Supreme Allied Command in Europe in December 1974 was against an unpromising background. Haig, though he had a respectable record of senior staff,



**SACEUR Alexander Haig with Dutch conscript on maneuvers, 1976.**

administrative, and advisory posts, was not a field commander like Ridgway, nor a well-tryed NATO military diplomat like Lemnitzer. He had gone into the White House as Chief of Staff in the rank of colonel and was taken out a few years later (some said rather hastily, pointing to Goodpaster's premature retirement to make way for him) as a four-star general, when the Watergate pot was bubbling over, in order to be put into a safe haven in Allied Command Europe.

Anyone who expected (or perhaps even hoped for) a lame-duck presence in the office of SACEUR was to be greatly, even brutally, disappointed. In the East-West arena, the reconciliation, in Kissinger's words, of "the reality of competition with the imperative of coexistence" offered a challenge to the strong and restless mind that Haig was able to apply to all his problems. The imposition of a tight control upon the NATO machine, now a matter of urgency, required instant and firm attention. Haig knew what he was after—in his own words "unity, self-confidence, and solidarity"—and he applied high capacity and a powerful personality to its pursuit. He saw that the Soviet military capability had now become global, but that first priority was still being given by the USSR to NATO's Central Region. Here, strong conventional forces were by no means a complete substitute for nuclear, but they were a prerequisite to their usefulness in deterrence. Haig's forward thinking in the context of the deterrent triad (strategic nuclear, theater nuclear, and conventional forces) was imaginative and constructive, like his willing acceptance of a German Deputy SACEUR to add to the British Deputy already in place. Haig was the first SACEUR who was not of the NATO "founding fathers," though of all Eisenhower's successors he and Norstad, neither as visible (in Jordan's words) in his own country as in Europe, came closest to Ike in instant recognition.

History has still to define and locate Bernard Rogers, who took over from Haig in 1979 (the book terminates with Haig, so that Rogers' eight-year tenure is not covered). The verdict may well be that Rogers is the best we have had.

**T**hrough some eight years of service to NATO in Europe, I served under six of these SACEURs, as staff brigadier, armored brigade and armored divisional commander, and lastly as the commander of an army group. I can claim, therefore, some understanding of the NATO scene.

In any NATO command, there are NATO officers and national officers, though very few officers in NATO appointments are exclusively one or the other and most are both. The question of priorities can, however, arise and deserves close and sympathetic attention when it does. For example, a German officer in the headquarters of one of my own NATO commands, employed on nuclear planning, was deeply and understandably upset to find his own hometown in one of his target areas. I have completely

forgotten his name and everything else about him, except that I had him moved out at once to other work.

A distinction between national and NATO structures and responsibilities can, however, with care and discretion, be sometimes made with advantage. Wearing the hats of Commander in Chief British Army of the Rhine, commanding all British troops stationed in the Federal Republic, and also that of Commander Northern Army Group in NATO, with operational command over a German, a Dutch, and a Belgian corps, as well as a splendid Canadian brigade group, I was deeply concerned in the late 1960s over the rate at which Warsaw Pact capabilities were overtaking our own. While in London for a conference, I was having lunch with Denis Healey (probably the best Secretary of State for Defence Britain has had since World War II) in the Cavalry Club and voiced my disquiet. I had a mind, I said, to write a letter to *The Times*, to be republished in *Le Soir* in Brussels, *Le Matin* in Paris, *Die Welt* in Germany, and the Dutch national paper I cannot with any confidence pronounce, pointing out that we all had to do a good deal better or face a dangerous future. "I am sure you will show me," said Healey, addressing me by the nursery name by which I am known to many friends, "what you write before you put it in." He was reminding me, of course, that I was a British general and as such could not write to the press without official clearance. If he cleared what I wrote it would be seen as a statement of national policy, and we both knew that policy statements were not made in that way. But I was also a NATO general. "Why should I show it to you?" I said. "I don't work for you." "Yes, you do," he replied, "at least some of the time." "I shall write this," I replied, "in some of the rest of the time." And so I did. I wrote my letter to *The Times* from Headquarters, Northern Army Group, and cleared it through CINCENT and SACEUR, who rather liked it I think, and it was then published. It was long, trenchant, and provocative, and attracted wide notice. The row in London that followed was a real treat. Questions were asked in Parliament, and Healey's colleague, the Foreign Secretary in the British government of the day, urged my instant dismissal. A princely member of the ruling house of Liechtenstein, an old friend of mine from Oxford days with whom I was then skiing in St. Moritz, said that if I was fired I could come and command the several men making up the armed forces and police of Liechtenstein.

It did not come to that. The Secretary of State for Defence contented himself with sending me a letter of reproof so rough that I was sure he had drafted it himself. No senior civil servant or staff officer would have drafted as rough a letter as that for a senior minister to sign. That was twenty years ago. We are still friends today.

The flippant point here is that you cannot face the music if you do not know the score. The more serious one is that national structures, channels, and interests have to be very closely studied in the NATO context and related to the purpose of the Alliance in the closest harmony. If you are

to succeed here it is absolutely imperative to know what you are doing. The NATO commander who, as SACEUR, has done this most successfully, and withstood in doing it probably more pressure than any other, is in my own view, as I have already suggested, without any doubt General Rogers, the recent termination of whose tenure of command was received in Allied Command Europe with profound regret. I wish to pay here a heartfelt tribute to Bernie Rogers, which will find a deep echo everywhere in the Alliance he has served so well.

NATO has had no parallel in history. The continued existence for so many years of a military command in Europe, in peacetime, embodying forces of sovereign nation-states all deeply conscious of their own national interest, would have been impossible without truly outstanding men in charge of it. Robert Jordan's book throws a clear light on the nature of these very different men, and the very different problems they have so successfully handled. □