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ON ALLIANCES AND COALITIONS

Fighting and Learning in the Great War: Four Lessons in Coalition Warfare

Kelly A. Grieco

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ABSTRACT: This article commemorates the centennial of the First World War by highlighting some lessons for effective coalition warfare. By building relationships, planning cooperative institutions, learning from each other, and furthering influence, US leaders and policymakers can more effectively collaborate with America's international partners.

November marked the centennial of the Allied victory in the First World War. A war of many firsts—tanks, submarines, armed aircraft, and wireless telegraphy—it was also the first truly modern coalition war. For the Allies on the Western Front, the challenge was how to join armies with different, if not conflicting, national interests, languages, equipment, cultures, and traditions. France and Great Britain, along with some twenty other nations, and later the United States, learned through trial and error to conduct effective combined operations.

The Allies absorbed at least four critical lessons in coalition warfare to defeat Germany. First, professional contacts and personal relationships forged in peacetime are critical in managing wartime relations as well as unifying purposes and actions. Second, a coalition's battlefield effectiveness critically depends on institutional machinery for political-military planning to manage intra-alliance uncertainties and fears, and in turn, generate well-integrated and cohesive combined operations. Third, coalition warfare, with allies serving as important conduits of wartime learning, promotes and facilitates military adaptation and innovation. Finally, unity of command is essential to the coalition, but the effective exercise of that command rests mainly on consultative leadership rather than formal authority.

These hard-won lessons are no less relevant today. The United States has waged all its major wars and military interventions alongside allies on the battlefield.¹ American security strategy still falls squarely within this foreign policy tradition.² Indeed, US defense strategy aims to “strengthen and evolve our alliances and partnerships into an extended network capable of deterring or decisively acting to meet the shared

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1 Scholars generally regard the War of 1812, the Mexican-American War (1846–48), and the Spanish-American War (1898) as notable exceptions to this tradition of coalition warmaking. See Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusade State: The American Encounter with the World since 1776* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 39–56.

2 Donald J. Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: White House, 2017).

challenges of our time.”³ With such an emphasis on partnering, the lessons of the past cannot be ignored; they hold some of the answers to today’s challenges.

Peacetime Relationships Pay Dividends

In the absence of institutional machinery to coordinate the Allied war effort, professional contacts and personal relationships were critical to managing international relations and unifying purposes and actions. Although few in number, professional and personal relationships forged among the Allies prior to 1914 contributed to greater coalition military effectiveness, and hence wartime success.⁴ Between 1906 and 1910, then Brigadier-General Henry Hughes Wilson, served as commandant of the Staff College at Camberley, Surrey. In 1909, Wilson arranged to visit his French counterpart at the École Supérieure de Guerre in Paris, then Brigadier-General Ferdinand Foch, to establish “intimate relations with a French soldier who, already in those days, enjoyed a certain European reputation as a military writer and thinker on the art of war.”⁵

Although Foch was at first unimpressed, he was soon won over by Wilson’s enthusiasm and openness, as well as his command of the French language. Wilson returned in January and October 1910, in February 1911, three times in 1912, on four occasions in 1913, and once in 1914.⁶ Foch paid return visits to Britain in June 1910 and December 1912. On these occasions, Wilson showed him not only the Staff College but also introduced him to senior government officials and most of Britain’s senior commanders.⁷ A close professional and personal relationship emerged from these contacts.

When conflict arose on the Western Front, these intimate ties played an important role in binding the French and British armies together. During the Race to the Sea following the Battle of Marne, Allied military relations deteriorated over differences of military strategy. The British Expeditionary Force moved further north, positioning itself on the far left of the French line, with a view towards taking independent action. Meanwhile, the relief expedition for the Siege of Antwerp ended in failure, which the British were quick to blame on a lack of French support.⁸ Amid worsening relations, Foch was appointed to coordinate

3 James “Jim” Mattis, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge* (NDS) (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2018), 8.

4 On the role of preexisting personal relationships and transnational collaboration from civilian scientists to military officers, see Aimée Fox, *Learning to Fight: Military Innovation and Change in the British Army, 1914–18* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 137–63.

5 Sir Charles E. Callwell, ed., *Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson: His Life and Diaries*, vol. 1 (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1927), 77.

6 Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *Foch in Command: The Forging of a First World War General* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 10.

7 Brian Bond, *The Victorian Army and the Staff College, 1854–1914* (London: Routledge, 2015), 261; Keith Jeffery, *Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson: A Political Soldier* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 74; and Michael S. Neiberg, *Foch: Supreme Allied Commander in the Great War* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2003), 13.

8 Roy A. Prete, *Strategy and Command: The Anglo-French Coalition on the Western Front, 1914* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009), 128–40.

the operations of the French, British, and Belgian armies in Flanders.⁹ In this role, Foch found himself again working closely with Wilson to manage the prickly British commander in chief, Sir John French, also his superior in rank.¹⁰

With Wilson as subchief of staff at the British headquarters, a close liaison developed between the two armies, and Foch was able to gain Sir John's confidence and persuade him to hold fast.¹¹ Wilson wrote to his wife:

I am spending a good deal of time these days with Foch on the curious hill on the way between Ypres and St. Omer [that is, Foch's headquarters at Cassel]. We have got our troops so much mixed up with his that no order can be issued without the other's approval, etc. I think we are going to beat this attack with the aid the French have given us. It has been a stiff business.¹²

Importantly, the two generals were able to communicate honestly with each other, including Wilson conveying Sir John's changing state of mind. Thus, Foch was helped to find the right words with Sir John—always tactful, reassuring, and deferential—to bring the British around to his side.¹³ In the end, the Allied line was pushed back but never broke. The situation had been saved due in large measure to the decisive influence of the Foch-Wilson relationship.

Planning Institutions Enable Success

Institutional machinery for common political-military planning made a critical difference in coalition battlefield effectiveness. Before 1916, the Allies lacked such machinery, and as a result, fought together ineffectively. To the extent combined planning occurred at all, it was limited to an exchange of views among the Entente Powers. Staff talks were held between France and Britain in 1905 and intermittently after 1911 to establish logistical arrangements for the dispatch of the British to France.¹⁴ These talks never worked out what would happen once the

9 The German objective was twofold: to threaten the British through seizure of the Channel ports with operations by submarine, aircraft, and airships and to secure German lines of communications through Belgium. Otto Schwink, *Ypres 1914: An Official Account Published by Order of the German General Staff* (London: Constable and Company, 1919), 1–12; and Ian F. W. Beckett, *Ypres: The First Battle, 1914* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 15–17. On Foch's appointment and coordination of the Allied armies in Flanders, see William J. Philpott, *Anglo-French Relations and Strategy on the Western Front, 1914–1918* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 31–50; Neiberg, *Foch*, 31–44; Greenhalgh, *Foch in Command*, 43–73; and Prete, *Strategy and Command*, 119–83.

10 The British, for their part, were anxious to disengage and retreat the relative safety of Calais and Boulogne. If the British were to fall back, and thus away, from French and Belgian forces, the Allies would have been liable to defeat in detail. See George H. Cassar, *The Tragedy of Sir John French* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1985), 254.

11 In Flanders, Foch had little choice but to inspire confidence, as he had no formal authority over the Belgian and British armies. See Prete, *Strategy and Command*, 173.

12 Wilson quoted in Greenhalgh, *Foch in Command*, 68.

13 Cassar, *Tragedy*, 156; Elizabeth Greenhalgh, "Liaisons Not So Dangerous: First World War Liaison Officers and Marshal Ferdinand Foch," in *Finding Common Ground: New Directions in First World War Studies*, ed. Jennifer D. Keene and Michael S. Neiberg (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 187–208, especially 192; and Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *Victory through Coalition: Britain and France During the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 75–102.

14 For the seminal study of Franco-British prewar staff talks, see Samuel R. Williamson, *The Politics of Grand Strategy: Britain and France Prepare for War, 1904–1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969).

armies took the field of battle—specifically whether the British would join the French line or conduct independent operations in Belgium.¹⁵

With the outbreak of war, coalition political-military planning was little better. The Allies still relied on normal diplomatic channels, in addition to a few ad hoc and hasty meetings arranged between Allied commanders.¹⁶ But wartime decisions had to be taken quickly and required “direct and frequent consultations between the principal ministers concerned,” politicians and soldiers alike.¹⁷ Thus, each Allied headquarters devised its own operations, leaving liaison officers with the herculean task of combining them into a single plan. But the liaison mechanism alone was insufficient to the task.¹⁸

The liaison missions attached to each headquarters “might arrange details,” British liaison officer Edward Spears observed, “but they could not break down the water-tight compartment in which each staff worked, nor had they the authority to determine whether any fundamental divergence of conception, any charge of heart or mind, had occurred in the commanders.”¹⁹ Instead, the best the Allies could manage in the words of British Prime Minister David Lloyd George was a poor “tailoring operation,” in which “different plans were stitched together” to obscure rather than resolve differences.²⁰

The resulting military performance was accordingly abysmal. In August 1914, the Allies often fought at cross-purposes, routinely left each other in the lurch, and only slowly responded to German advances. During the Battle of Charleroi-Mons, for example, the operational objectives of the French and British armies were at odds—the British Expeditionary Force marched forward to take to the offensive, the adjacent French army halted its advance and shifted to the defensive, and the British were left marching forward in an exposed position.²¹ Instead of meeting the enemy together, the French and British fought a series of uncoordinated actions and beat a hasty retreat. Indeed, the French retired without so much as a word of warning to their British ally, forcing the British to leave in haste, which opened a nine-mile gap between the two armies.²²

To his credit, the French commander in chief, General Joseph-Jacques-Césaire Joffre, devised a new scheme to counterattack. Unfortunately, much valuable time and territory was lost in trying to

15 Beyond the concentration zone, the French had no fixed plans for the action of the British Expeditionary Force in the field. More generally, historian Robert Doughty argues that Plan XVII, which included a secret annex that anticipated any British intervention to take position left of the battle line, was little more than “a concentration plan with operational alternatives.” Robert A Doughty, “French Strategy in 1914: Joffre’s Own,” *Journal of Military History* 67, no. 2 (April 2003): 427–54; and Robert A Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 17–57.

16 Jehuda Lothar Wallach, *Uneasy Coalition: The Entente Experience in World War I* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), 76; Philpott, *Anglo-French Relations*, 23–24, 93–95; Greenhalgh, *Victory through Coalition*, 36–40; and Prete, *Strategy and Command*, 52, 70–71.

17 Sir Maurice Hankey, “Diplomacy by Conference,” *Round Table XI* (1920–21), 287–311.

18 See Greenhalgh, *Victory through Coalition*, 75.

19 Sir Edward Spears, *Liaison, 1914: A Narrative of the Great Retreat* (London: W. Heinemann, 1930), 119–20.

20 David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs of David Lloyd George* (London: Nicholson & Watson, 1934), 2407.

21 John Terraine, *Mons, The Retreat to Victory* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2002), 49–51.

22 Adrian Gilbert, *Challenge of Battle: The British Army’s Baptism of Fire in the First World War* (Oxford, UK: Osprey, 2014), 157.

gain his ally's cooperation.²³ As Spears observed, "General Joffre must have felt himself helpless, unable to adjust to differences he could only guess at, fettered by not being able to issue orders to the British soldier."²⁴ Instead, the decision-making process came to a standstill, and the Allies were unable to respond quickly and effectively to the German invasion. The result was the loss of the richest industrial region of France for the next four years.²⁵

The coalition managed to avoid complete disaster at the Marne, but even then, the Allies fought poorly together. On the eve of battle, the British retired to the south as the French prepared to move forward. These disjointed movements placed the British Expeditionary Force some fifteen miles from its intended starting line and too far behind the French to play its assigned role in the campaign—the spearhead of the attack.²⁶ Instead of a single plan of operations, two plans had emerged for a counterattack against the German right flank, each of which asked the British to occupy a different position.²⁷ And no institutional mechanism existed to forge the opposing schemes into a single plan. Instead, the British exploited the confusion, turning their role in the counteroffensive into a supporting one.²⁸ Though Joffre was in a position to encircle and destroy the entire German First Army, he could do little to bring the requisite coalition battlefield cooperation about in time.²⁹ The tragedy of the Marne was that it fell short of the victory it might have been, owing to the absence of allied institutions.

In the face of mounting casualties, however, Allied leaders finally began building the institutional machinery for common political-military planning. The first such effort was a hastily organized summit of senior political and military leaders convened at Calais and Chantilly in July and December 1915. These summits marked the first concerted effort to forge a common strategy—a combined Franco-British offensive at the Somme.³⁰ The planning process entailed numerous written exchanges, telephone contacts, and frequent visits between the French and British commands.³¹ Whereas the Allies previously drew up separate plans before attempting to coordinate them through slow diplomatic channels, they initiated this plan together and continued their close collaboration until the eve of battle.³²

23 Joseph Joffre, *Mémoires du maréchal Joffre, 1910–1917* (Paris: Plon, 1932), 300.

24 Spears, *Liaison*, 230.

25 The occupied northern regions of France included three quarters of the French coast and four-fifths of French iron and steel. See Robert O. Paxton and Julie Hessler, *Europe in the Twentieth Century* (Cengage Learning, 2011), 87, 230.

26 Holger H Herwig, *The Marne, 1914: The Opening of World War I and the Battle that Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2009), 254.

27 Sewell Tappan Tyng, *The Campaign of the Marne, 1914* (New York: Longmans, 1935), 211–22.

28 Prete, *Strategy and Command*, 115–22.

29 Herwig, *Marne*, 254, 291.

30 At the same time, a series of proposals made the rounds for the creation of sort of permanent allied council to coordinate political and military strategy. For the time being, however, such proposals came to naught. See Wallach, *Uneasy Coalition*, 75–81.

31 Peter Simkins, "For Better or for Worse: Sir Henry Rawlinson and His Allies in 1916 and 1918," in *Leadership in Conflict, 1914–1918*, ed. Matthew Hughes and Matthew Seligmann (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 2000), 15.

32 For the effect of Verdun on the planning process, see Elizabeth Greenhalgh, "Why the British Were on the Somme in 1916," *War in History* 6, no. 2 (April 1999): 147–73; William Philpott, "Why the British Were Really on the Somme: A Reply to Elizabeth Greenhalgh," *War in History* 9, no. 4 (October 2002): 446–71; and Elizabeth Greenhalgh, "Flames over the Somme: A Retort to William Philpott," *War in History* 10, no. 3 (July 2003): 335–42.

Critically, the establishment of coalition institutions for military planning led to observable improvements in battlefield effectiveness. Lost in the drama of the Somme is the emerging Allied capacity to fight as a cohesive combined force. On the basic idea of the operation, a combined Franco-British attack along a broad front, there was a fundamental convergence between the two Allies that resulted directly from their frequent contact and staff meetings.³³ Importantly, the movements of the two armies were closely coordinated: French artillery kept up a steady barrage south of the river to prevent the Germans from enfilading British units to the north.³⁴ Franco-British battlefield performance had improved, and for reasons directly attributable to adopting coalition planning machinery.

Coalitions Facilitate Learning, Innovation, and Adaptation

As the combatants adapted to the challenges of modern warfare, they learned from each other. In 1914, the British officer corps did not believe it had much to learn from the French, but this sentiment dissipated in 1916 with the heavy losses suffered during the First Battle of the Somme.³⁵ Thereafter, the British made a sincere effort to study French techniques. British officers visited French formations over the winter of 1916–17 to observe and to report on French methods for organizing defenses, coordinating artillery and infantry efforts, and training troops.³⁶ They gave particular attention to “new” French tactics rooted in a more decentralized, elastic doctrine that allowed platoon commanders greater latitude to attack in small, dispersed teams.³⁷ Many of these French tactical developments were codified into two key manuals—*Instructions for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Action* and *The Normal Formation for the Attack*—which guided British infantry training and tactics until the end of the war.³⁸

Collaborative learning occurred at all levels of and across all sectors of the Allied front. Much of this learning was horizontal and localized, often occurring at the junction of French and British formations. By observing the operational and tactical methods of their allies, commanders were forced to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of their own practices.³⁹ A visit to the French Fifth Army by the chief of staff of the British XV Corps in February 1917 identified many

33 Martin Gilbert, *The Somme: Heroism and Horror in the First World War* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006), 49.

34 William Philpott, *Three Armies on the Somme: The First Battle of the Twentieth Century* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 171–72.

35 Greenhalgh, *Victory through Coalition*, 61–63.

36 Chris Kempshall, *British, French and American Relations on the Western Front, 1914–1918* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2018), 8, 130.

37 The Canadian General Sir Arthur Currie served as a knowledge conduit, observing French formations at Verdun and propagating such information between French, British, and Canadian formations. See Mark Osborne Humphries, “‘Old Wine in New Bottles’: A Comparison of British and Canadian Preparations for the Battle of Arras,” in *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment*, ed. Geoffrey Hayes, Andrew Iarocci, and Mike Bechthold (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007), 65–86; and Fox, *Learning to Fight*, 148–50.

38 British Expeditionary Force (BEF), *Instructions for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Action*, Stationary Service Pamphlet (SS) 143 (London, General Headquarters, February 1917); and BEF, *The Normal Formation for the Attack*, SS144 (London: General Headquarters, February 1917). See also, Simon Robbins, *British Generalship on the Western Front 1914–1918: Defeat into Victory* (London: Routledge, 2005), 95.

39 Fox, *Learning to Fight*, 151–52.

similarities between French and British methods. But it also revealed the need for additional improvements to British fire and maneuver.⁴⁰

Although some efforts were made after 1916 to translate and distribute French tactical manuals, most of the lessons passed informally between French and British soldiers, and spread to the newly arriving American units through personal contacts or formal instruction. The British and the French established missions in the United States to train their new ally in trench warfare and continued their tutelage at training camps in France. These interactions exposed American units to the latest French and British army tactics—even if senior officers such as General John J. Pershing resisted the new combat methods, limited the effective transfer of knowledge, and thus contributed to thousands of needless US casualties.⁴¹

In a war in which success ultimately depended on learning and adapting doctrine faster than the enemy, fighting alongside allies conferred significant advantages. American soldiers would most certainly have fared better if their leaders had exploited this advantage to its full potential. Fortunately, a number of division and lower-level commanders were more open to these lessons from Allies and learned to fight like the French and British.⁴² Intra-alliance learning was thus a critical, albeit often overlooked factor in understanding how and why the Allies eventually defeated Germany in the First World War.

Persuasive Leadership Builds Influence

Of all the lessons learned in the war, unity of command was the most important. Independent command was tried for the first three years of the war, to disastrous results. From the start, the British remained an autonomous force, acting in collaboration with, but not under the control of, the larger French army. The orders given to the British commander in chief were unequivocal on this point: “I wish you distinctly to understand that your command is an entirely independent one, and that you will in no case come in any sense under the order of any Allied General.”⁴³

These parallel command arrangements weakened coalition effectiveness on the battlefield. Each ally pursued its own national interests, and cooperation during battles depended entirely on continuing goodwill, particularly the willingness of British and French

40 Fox, *Learning to Fight*, 152.

41 Kempshall, *Relations on the Western Front*, 8, 159–89. See also Kenneth E. Hamburger, *Learning Lessons in the American Expeditionary Forces*, Publication 24-1 (Washington, DC: United States Army Center for Military History, 1997); Jeffrey LaMonica, *American Tactical Advancement in World War I: The New Lessons of Combined Arms and Open Warfare* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2017), 59–76; and Mark Ethan Grotelueschen, *The AEF Way of War: The American Army and Combat in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 39–58.

42 LaMonica, *American Tactical Advancement*, 61; and Grotelueschen, *AEF Way*, 200–310.

43 “Instructions to Sir John French from Lord Kitchener,” August 1914, in *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1914: Mons, the Retreat to the Seine, the Marne and the Aisne, August–October 1914*, comp. James Edward Edmonds (London: Macmillan, 1933), 499. When Sir Douglas Haig assumed command from Sir John at the end of 1915, he received almost identical orders to those of his predecessor, reaffirming the independence of British command. “Instructions for General Sir D. Haig, G.C.B., K.C.I.E., K.C.V.O. Commanding the Expeditionary Force in France,” December 28, 1916, in *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1916*, comp. James E. Edmonds (London: Macmillan, 1932), Appendix 5.

commanders to conform to the other's plan.⁴⁴ The limitations of these command arrangements brought the Allies close to defeat in the spring of 1918. When the first German spring offensive threatened to separate the French and British armies and to roll up each in turn, both allies placed national interests above all else. The French withdrew south to cover Paris while the British moved north to guard the ports along the English Channel.⁴⁵ Lloyd George diagnosed the problem: "Each general was interested mainly in his own front."⁴⁶ Absent Allied mechanisms for unity of command to order both the French and British to keep in touch, coalition battlefield cohesion was lost.

At the moment of supreme crisis in March 1918, the Allies finally adopted some semblance of a unified command, charging Foch with "the coordination of the military operations of the Allied armies on the western front."⁴⁷ Eight days later, the Allies increased his power to include "strategic direction of military operations" and conferred upon him the "all powers necessary to secure [its] effective realization."⁴⁸ In this new role, Foch appreciated better than anyone else that his power to command derived more from persuasion than any formal authority to issue orders.⁴⁹ He likened his command to that of the "leader of an orchestra," explaining, "Here are the English basses, here the American baritones, and there the French tenors. When I raise my baton, every man must play or else he must not come to my concert."⁵⁰

He exercised his command with a leadership style centered on personal diplomacy, tact, and energetic exhortation. He exuded command presence, consulting in person with commanders to shore up resistance across the front. "He gives the impression of being frank, loyal, and clear-sighted," observed a captain on the French general staff, "If I had to choose a motto for the general I think this would suit him as well as another: 'Clear vision.'"⁵¹ In dealing with Allies, Foch sought to influence, if not to command, and used his infectious energy and determination to convince Allied commanders to carry through his vision.

When the Germans launched a second spring offensive in Flanders, Foch provided energy and strategic direction to the Allied defense.⁵² Acting through influence rather than coercion, he used his energy and

44 Prete, *Strategy and Command*, 94–97.

45 Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, 434–37; and David Stevenson, *With Our Backs to the Wall: Victory and Defeat in 1918* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 56.

46 Maurice Hankey, *Diplomacy by Conference: Studies in Public Affairs, 1920–1946* (London: Putnam, 1946), 21.

47 For a translation of the Doullens agreement signed March 26, 1918, see *United States Army in the World War, 1917–1919: Policy-Forming Documents of the American Expeditionary Forces*, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1989), 254. On the American perspective on the evolution to allied unity of command, see Tasker H. Bliss, "The Evolution of the Unified Command," *Foreign Affairs* 1, no. 2 (1922): 1–30. See also Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, 461; and Greenhalgh, *Victory through Coalition*, 198.

48 For the minutes of the Beauvais Conference on April 3, 1918, see *Policy-forming Documents*, 277.

49 Raymond Recouly, *Le mémorial de Foch: mes entretiens avec le maréchal* (Paris: Les Editions de France, 1929), 18–19.

50 Ferdinand Foch, *The Memoirs of Marshal Foch*, trans. Colonel T. Bentley Mott (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1931), xvi.

51 Recouly, *Le mémorial de Foch*, 16.

52 See David T. Zabecki, *The German 1918 Offensives: A Case Study in the Operational Level of War* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 174–205; Peter Hart, *1918: A Very British Victory* (London: Phoenix, 2008), 222–28; and Stevenson, *With Our Backs*, 68–78.

confidence to fuse the allied armies together and hold the line. In his words, he “pursued” the British in the north and French in the south, to ensure both armies “held, sustained, [and] maintained.”⁵³ He was open to persuasion, responding to Sir Douglas Haig’s calls for additional reserves, yet never losing sight of his responsibility to consider the Allied position on the Western Front as a whole.⁵⁴ Weighing the dangers of a possible third German offensive, he held back some reserves from Flanders, sending to the north only what was absolutely necessary to maintain the integrity of the line. The head of the British Mission with the French Army was duly impressed, confessing, “Thank goodness we have got a central authority to fight the battle as a whole.”⁵⁵

When the time came to pass to the offensive, Foch gave new vigor and direction to the combined attacks that continued until the Armistice was in effect. Even the enemy recognized Foch’s contribution as critical to Allied success in 1918: “The Entente has to thank General Foch for successfully subordinating the divergent interests of the allies to a higher, unified purpose.”⁵⁶ If leaders are those who are able to inspire others to achieve a common goal, then Foch was the coalition military leader par excellence.

Conclusion

One hundred years later, the First World War can help us prepare more effectively for strategic competition and future wars. The *2018 National Defense Strategy* underscores the continued relevance of America’s global alliances and partnerships and makes “strengthen[ing] alliances and attract[ing] new partners” a core pillar of its strategic approach. It declares “mutually beneficial alliances and partnerships are crucial to our strategy, providing a durable asymmetric advantage that no competitor or rival can match.”⁵⁷ To render these security relationships more capable, the strategy vows to “uphold a foundation of mutual respect, responsibility, priorities, and accountability,” “expand regional consultative mechanisms and collaborative planning,” and “deepen interoperability.”⁵⁸

If the First World War tells us anything, it is that coalitions with preexisting networks of professional contacts, institutional mechanisms for common planning, methods for intra-allied learning, and consultative command cultures have the advantage in battle. Just as prewar professional contacts between the French and British enhanced Allied military effectiveness, today’s intra-allied professional relationships contribute to more effective combined operations. Critically, these working relationships foster cultural interoperability, or what the British term “interoperability of the mind.”⁵⁹ Thus, while the current national defense strategy is right to focus on deepening interoperability

53 Foch quoted in Greenhalgh, *Foch in Command*, 319.

54 Greenhalgh, *Victory through Coalition*, 206; and Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, 433–34.

55 Sir (George) Sidney Clive, diary entry, April 18, 1918, quoted in Greenhalgh, *Victory through Coalition*, 212.

56 Quoted in David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs of David Lloyd George*, vol. 2 (London: Odhams Press, 1938), 1836.

57 Mattis, NDS, 8.

58 Mattis, NDS, 9.

59 Steven Paget, “‘Interoperability of the Mind’ Professional Military Education and the Development of Interoperability,” *RUSI Journal* 161, no. 4 (September 2016): 42–50.

with US allies, the Pentagon must place greater emphasis on the human dimension. If professional military education is a “strategic asset to build trust and interoperability . . . with allied and partner forces,” so too are combined multinational exercises, officer liaison and exchange programs, and training programs that develop a common vocabulary, a common way of thinking about combined operations.

As the Allied experience indicates, the United States will be more likely to achieve its strategic objectives in the future by coordinating action within formal, highly institutionalized alliances as opposed to ad hoc coalitions of the willing. Some have questioned the value of America’s longstanding treaty allies, and even labeled the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), with its complex, and sometimes ponderous, decision-making processes “obsolete.”⁶⁰ But the extensive routines and procedures of formal alliances make it easier to meld national military capabilities and troop contributions into an effective combined military force. NATO’s military structures, however imperfect, are still the best way to enhance American military power when acting in concert with others, particularly when facing a peer or near-peer competitor. Indeed, the United States urgently needs to establish a more deeply institutionalized alliance structure in the Indo-Pacific region, or expect to put military effectiveness at risk.

Like the Allied militaries, today’s US military has as much to learn as to teach. While the United States is right to demand its allies and partners shoulder a larger share of the defense burden, it should not lose sight of the many less tangible benefits of US alliances and coalitions, specifically opportunities for intra-allied learning. There is also reason for optimism on this score, as Secretary of Defense James Mattis has promised, the Pentagon “will do more than just listen to other nations’ ideas. We will be willing to be persuaded by them.”⁶¹ The United States can and should benefit from the ideas of its strategic partners.

Finally, just as unity of command was the essential element of victory in 1918, this guiding principle is still critical to success today. Yet it is so difficult to achieve in practice. Ad hoc command arrangements hampered US and allied efforts during operations in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Libya.⁶² Difficulties with command are inherent to coalition wars; governments abhor any perceived surrender of sovereignty. These political dynamics complicate the task of a coalition commander. As Foch learned, the exercise of coalition command depends on a set of leadership skills that are more consultative than directive.⁶³ The United States is not going to fight the next war alone; ergo, it should learn from the lessons of its past partnerships.

60 Molly O’Toole, “Is Nato Still Relevant? Trump’s Not the Only One Asking,” *Foreign Policy*, April 1, 2016.

61 “Remarks by Secretary James Mattis on the National Defense Strategy,” Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Washington, DC, January 19, 2018.

62 Ian Hope, *Unity of Command in Afghanistan: A Forsaken Principle of War*, Student Papers (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2008); and Florence Gaub, *The North Atlantic Treaty Organization and Libya: Reviewing Operation Unified Protector*, Letort Papers (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2013).

63 Mark J. Thornhill, *Coalition Warfare: The Leadership Challenges* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: School of Advanced Military Studies, 2011).