The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 51
Number 1 *Parameters 51(1) Spring 2021*

Article 17

Spring 3-2-2021

Coalition Warfare—Echoes from the Past

Michael Neiberg

Follow this and additional works at: https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters

Part of the Defense and Security Studies Commons, Military History Commons, Military, War, and Peace Commons, and the National Security Law Commons

Recommended Citation

Michael Neiberg, "Coalition Warfare—Echoes from the Past," *Parameters* 51, no. 1 (2021), https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol51/iss1/17

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

Coalition Warfare—Echoes from the Past

Michael Neiberg

ABSTRACT: The dilemmas posed by coalition warfare were a subject of academic interest in the inaugural issue of *Parameters* in 1971. Lieutenant Colonel James B. Agnew examined the unified command model pursued by the Allies during the First World War. Agnew's assessment of the challenges faced by French Marshal Ferdinand Foch speaks to challenges NATO faces today including questions of national sovereignty, national security goals, and developing a joint strategy.

At some point in the summer of 1918 (or so the story goes) French Marshal Ferdinand Foch remarked that since leading a coalition he had lost some of his admiration for Napoleon.[1] By that point Foch had learned how hard it was to keep the interests and needs of a diverse coalition together in the face of a single enemy. Fighting against a coalition enabled Napoleon to exploit the differences and disagreements within it. True to Napoleon's warning, Foch spent almost as much time in the final year of the First World War balancing the competing needs of the French, British, and American coalition partners as the coalition itself did fighting the Germans.[2]

In March 1918, with the German Army advancing westward, the French and British governments at long last agreed to create a single unified command under Foch's overall leadership. To Foch's mind, however, this one step forward came with two important steps back. First, the commanders of the French and British armies (General Henri-Philippe Pétain and Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, respectively) retained the right to appeal any of Foch's decisions to their own civilian governments. Second, those governments had only given Foch the authority to coordinate strategy. He could not issue direct orders. The only real power Foch possessed derived from his authority to distribute soldiers to threatened sections of the front from a unified general reserve. Foch would therefore have a great deal of responsibility, but little real authority. Neither the Americans nor the Italians, moreover, signed on to what became known as the Doullens Agreement, although in practice they generally followed the system it established.[3]

In "Coalition Warfare," a 1971 *Parameters* article, Lieutenant Colonel James B. Agnew highlighted the fundamental problem Foch faced.[4] Although the various members of a coalition share a common foe and

1. The remark is first attributed to General Albert Sarrail then later to Foch. See Jean-Jules-Henri Mordacq, *Le Ministère Clemenceau: Journal d'un Témoin*, vol. 1 (Paris: Plon, 1931), 240.

2. See Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *Foch in Command: The Forging of a First World War General* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), chap. 16.

3. Greenhalgh, *Foch in Command*, chap. 12.

4. James B. Agnew, "Coalition Warfare," *Parameters* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1971): 50–64.

Dr. Michael Neiberg, chair of War Studies at the US Army War College, is the author of *Dance of the Furies: Europe and the Outbreak of World War I* (2013).

many common strategic aims, they often differ in how they wish to pursue those aims or even how much of their nation's human capital and treasure they are prepared to devote to a common effort.

In the First World War case under study here, the coalition experienced two additional complications. First, the French held the lion's share of the power by virtue of having by far the largest Allied army on the Western Front. They were therefore unlikely to yield on questions of strategy, especially as the war was being fought to liberate their own soil. Second, although the Americans were slow to arrive, their growing presence threatened to unbalance the war termination aims of the coalition. Should the war continue into 1919, the United States and its mercurial president, Woodrow Wilson, would surely want a greater voice in Allied strategy and operations than the French and British were willing to tolerate.

For the Allies, the Americans presented a special problem. Under any circumstances, as Agnew argued, adding more countries to an alliance complicates the strategic algebra, requiring members to accommodate additional and often divergent interests and strategic cultures.[5] In the American case, however, the problem was even more complex, and not only because of the enormous economic, military, and industrial power the Americans could bring to bear. Wilson and the United States possessed a different vision of what the war entailed.

Wilson had belatedly brought his nation into the war, and even then he had done so as an "associated power," not as a formal member of the alliance. He had steadfastly refused to sign the 1915 Treaty of London that created the legal basis for the Allied coalition, and he had insisted American soldiers would not be amalgamated into Allied units. They would fight as an independent American Army on a dedicated part of the Western Front or they might not fight at all.[6] General John Pershing even went to France with a General Organization Report to this effect in his pocket, although in practice Pershing made some temporary exceptions in order to meet the emergency of spring 1918.[7] Wilson also spoke of an ambiguous "peace without victory" that left his French and British partners, who had been fighting a total war for four years, confounded.[8]

Perhaps more concerning, Wilson's great statement of American strategy, "The Fourteen Points," seemed aimed at denying the Allies the very goals for which they were fighting. The points included a call for "freedom of the seas," "a reduction of armaments," an end to empires, and unfettered global trade. The Germans rejoiced, seeing in Wilson's vision a way to gain much of what they wanted from the war even if

---

5. Agnew, "Coalition Warfare," 53.

6. Geoffrey Wawro, *Sons of Freedom: The Forgotten American Soldiers Who Defeated Germany in World War I* (New York: Basic Books, 2018), 52.

7. Edward M. Coffman, *The War to End All Wars: The American Military Experience in World War I* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1968), 168–74.

8. Woodrow Wilson, "Address of the President of the United States to the Senate" (speech, before the United States Senate, January 22, 1917), http://www-personal.umd.umich.edu/~ppennock/doc-Wilsonpeace.htm.

they lost on the battlefield. A peace on Wilson's terms, they knew, would leave them in a strong geopolitical position.[9] Allied strategists were appalled by Wilson's vision of a postwar world, with Haig writing in his diary on October 21 that "feeling was strong against the president. He does not seem to realise our requirements."[10] French Premier Georges Clemenceau famously quipped, "God Almighty has only ten [points]!"[11]

Nor had the history of coalition operations from 1914 to 1918 given the British and French much cause for optimism. Agnew reviewed some of this history, parts of which have become the focus of intensive scholarly discussion in the years since. Historians continue to debate the British dilemma in 1914 over how to use their small professional army. Secretary of State for War Lord Horatio Herbert Kitchener argued a smaller power like Britain had little choice but to hew to the strategic vision of its larger partner. As he later remarked, Britain had to make war as it must not as it would like. That decision made it all too easy for British leaders in the war's opening weeks to blame the French for their setbacks.[12]

As the British Army on the Western Front grew (though it was never as large as the French Army), the British naturally sought a larger voice in overall strategy. The French, maybe just as naturally, resisted. Intense disagreements over strategy for the Battle of the Somme in 1916 led to considerable bitter feelings, especially in British circles.[13]

A 1917 scheme by French generals and the British Prime Minister David Lloyd George to subordinate Haig to overall French direction led to one of the war's most serious civil-military relations scandals. Haig and many other British generals considered resigning before taking any orders from a foreign general.[14] The crisis led to much mutual recrimination after the French failed disastrously on the Chemin des Dames, forcing the British to launch a hurried attack around Arras in order to rescue the French from an offensive Haig and his colleagues had opposed from the beginning.[15] In the Middle East, meanwhile, the position was reversed. There the British had the preponderance of strength and therefore called most of the shots, often to France's chagrin.[16]

Agnew was concerned with the various wiring diagrams and command arrangements the Allies developed to solve this problem. One solution they developed involved creating a committee of senior

---

9. Holger H. Herwig, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914–1918* (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1997), 426.

10. Gary Sheffield and John Bourne, eds., *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters, 1914–1918* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), 477.

11. William Ralph Inge, *The End of an Age and Other Essays* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 139.

12. George H. Cassar, *Kitchener's War: British Strategy from 1914 to 1916* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2004), 219.

13. See, for example, Elizabeth Greenhalgh, "Flames over the Somme: A Retort to William Philpott," *War in History* 10, no. 3 (2003): 335–42.

14. Sheffield and Bourne, *Douglas Haig*, 270–72.

15. Sheffield and Bourne, *Douglas Haig*, 276–77.

16. See David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Henry Holt, 1989), part six.

politicians with high-ranking military officials acting as their technical advisers. The Supreme War Council (SWC), created at Rapallo, Italy, in November 1917, met at Versailles throughout 1918. Leaning on the recollections of the American representative to the SWC, General Tasker H. Bliss, Agnew saw some promise in the scheme, although just as contemporaries did, he recognized the near impossibility of genuine combined command being exercised through a committee led by politicians and depending on compromise and consensus.

We know a great deal more about the SWC today than Agnew knew 50 years ago. Historian Elizabeth Greenhalgh largely dismissed the council as a "talking shop" of political subcommittees that, in the end, mostly failed to do its primary job of coordinating strategy.[17] Whereas another historian Meighen McCrae has recently provided a more sympathetic treatment. Working with the records of the Supreme War Council itself and moving away from the civil-military controversies the SWC often symbolized, she finds much to admire. Although bureaucratic and ill-suited to making rapid decisions, she argues, the Supreme War Council did provide a critical forum for thinking through the complexities of coalition operations on diverse and distant fronts as well as the potential operational impacts of new technologies like the tank and the airplane. This council may have been the only way for the great powers to think through the myriad problems of fighting a global war while pursuing sometimes conflicting strategies and war aims.[18]

The Supreme War Council was a political and strategic body, not a military one. Senior military officials attended the sessions, but their contributions were normally limited to providing technical expertise. All major decisions rested in the hands of the politicians. To win the war on the battlefield, the two sides worked through a variety of coalition models, several of which Agnew considered. The models are important not only for what they say about the First World War, but how they have influenced coalition operations since. Agnew saw them as discrete phases during the course of the war, but because they overlapped, we might better see them as iterative models rather than sequential ones.

Agnew spent much of his article discussing the most famous model, the one that, in the end, won the war. This model was inaugurated in March 1918 in the town hall of Doullens, France, near the suddenly mobile Western Front. Today a stained glass window in the room marks this meeting of the leaders of the French and British governments.[19] Ferdinand Foch, who had been arguing for a unified command for months, came to Doullens with a plan to do just that.

More importantly, Foch was the only senior official at the meeting who projected not just a confidence but a certainty that the terrifying

---

17. Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *Victory through Coalition: Britain and France during the First World War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 179.

18. Meighen McCrae, *Coalition Strategy and the End of the First World War: The Supreme War Council and War Planning, 1917–1918* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1–15.

19. Michael S. Neiberg, *Foch: Supreme Allied Commander in the Great War* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 2005), 62–65.

German gains were only temporary. While his colleague Pétain talked about evacuating Paris, Foch saw that the Allies would be able to stop the Germans well before they reached the capital if they created a genuine coalition with one man (himself) in charge.[20] When Clemenceau congratulated Foch on finally getting the unified command he had always sought, Foch sardonically thanked Clemenceau for the gift. " 'It's a fine present you've made me,' Foch said to the prime minister. 'You give me a lost battle and tell me to win it.' "[21]

If these are the exact words Foch used then he may have been more prescient than he knew. The French and British governments did indeed want Foch to win a battle but not necessarily a war. They wanted him to stop the German offensive and then chase the invaders back across the Rhine River, but they did not want him making strategic decisions. As Foch built a coalition and started winning battles, the politicians grew nervous about some of the decisions he would soon have to make. Deciding when to end the war, whether Allied troops would cross the Rhine River, and who would surrender on behalf of the German people were ultimately political decisions George, Clemenceau, and Wilson wanted to make themselves.[22]

This model, minus some of the acrimony, largely shaped the one the Western allies used to fight and win the Second World War. General Dwight D. Eisenhower stepped into the role Foch had played in 1918. Eisenhower's headquarters were much larger and more international than Foch's had been, but Eisenhower shared the same basic approach of leaving command authority within the national structures as often as possible. The combined chiefs of staff and the various high-level conferences during the war acted much as the SWC had. This model satisfied the need for national sovereignty and was consistent with western understandings of civilian control of the military.[23]

Although some readers of this journal in Agnew's time and our own might be surprised by the comparison, in a sense, the French in 1944–45 behaved as the Americans did in 1918. In this model, a nation follows the general strategic guidance of its larger coalition partner, but jealously guards as much of its own sovereignty as possible. In this case the roles flipped. In the First World War, the United States needed French weapons, communications technology, training, staff work, and much more. Thus although Pershing and Wilson had repeatedly expressed their unwillingness to follow French strategic guidance, in fact they had little choice but to do so when it came to Foch's most important decisions. Pershing and Bliss had little voice in most of those

20. Neiberg, *Foch,* 63.

21. Quoted in B. H. Liddell Hart, *Foch: The Man of Orleans* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1932), 278.

22. Greenhalgh, *Foch in Command*, chap. 17.

23. Niall Barr, *Eisenhower's Armies: The American-British Alliance during World War II* (New York: Pegasus, 2015), chap. 13.

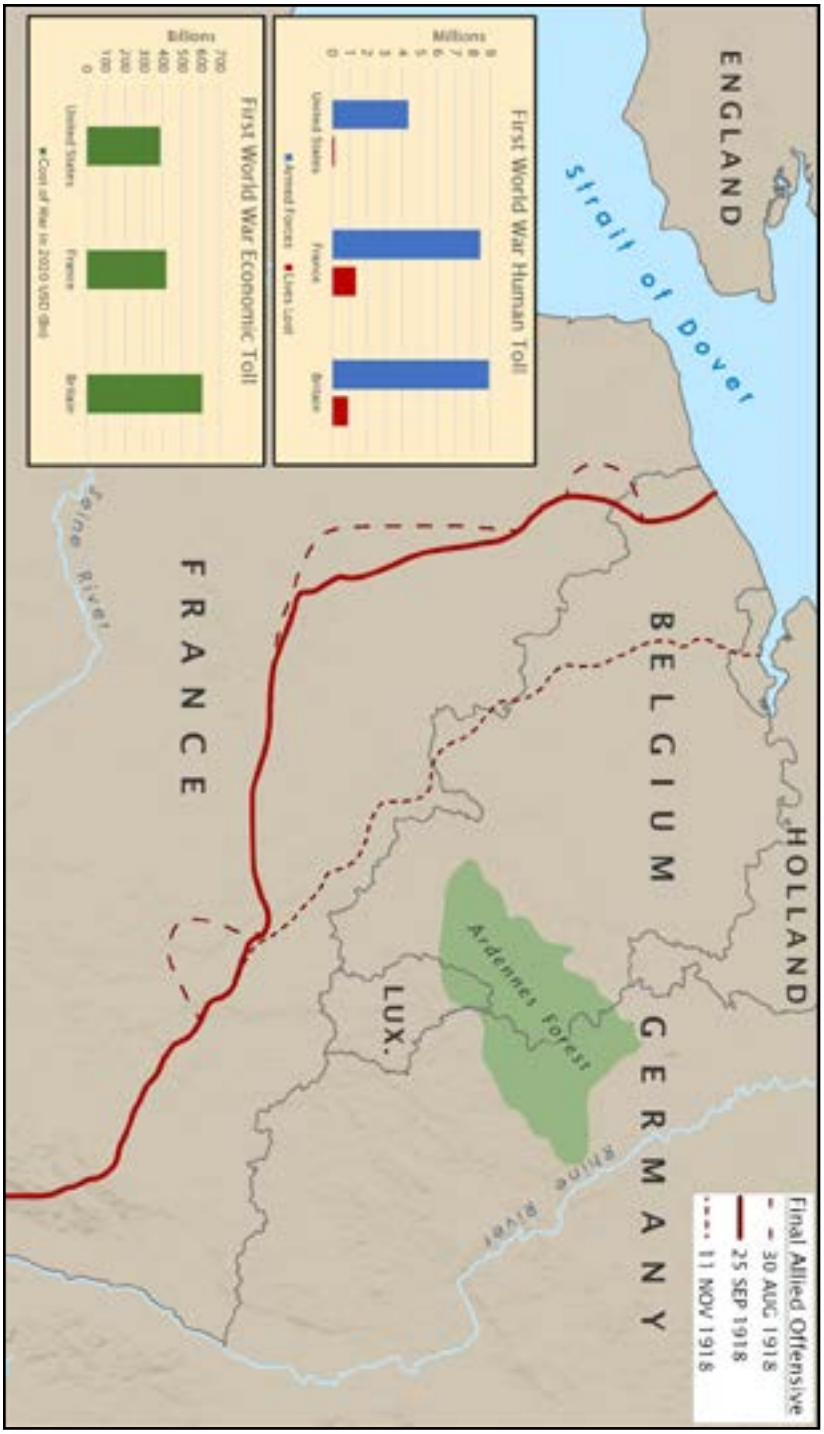

Figure 1. Economic and human costs of the First World War
Source of data: "Killed, Wounded, and Missing," in "World War I," Britannica online, https://www.britannica.com/eventWorld-War-I/Killed-wounded-and-missing; and "Financial Cost of the First World War," Spartacus Educational, (amounts calculated in 2020 USD), https://spartacus-educational.com/FWWcosts.htm.
(Map by Pete McPhail)

decisions.[24] The United States was not even represented at the French-led armistice negotiations at Compiègne in November.

Similarly, when the United States recognized Charles de Gaulle's Free France in 1944, it was the French, now the junior partner, who relied on their senior partner. Now the weapons, uniforms, and fuel were American. Consequently, even though de Gaulle had a starkly different postwar vision than that of his American partners, he had little choice but to do (mostly) as the Americans wanted.[25] Just as the Americans had had no representative at Compiègne, the French had no representative at the conferences at Yalta and Potsdam in 1945.

The Germans, whom Agnew did not consider, chose a different model. Beginning as early as their great victories at Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes in 1914, the Germans believed they would have to rescue their Austro-Hungarian ally from its own incompetence. Even before the war, General Erich Ludendorff had described Austria-Hungary as an albatross hung around his neck.[26] Germany's discovery in 1913 that the Austrian head of counterintelligence, Colonel Alfred Redl, had been selling critical military secrets to Russia further underscored the German perception of the Habsburgs as, in the famous quip, always one army, one year, and one idea behind. Austria-Hungary's string of defeats early in the war did nothing to change that assessment.[27]

As a result, the Germans began increasingly to take direct control over the strategic direction of their Austro-Hungarian allies. Starting with the massive Gorlice-Tarnów Offensive in the spring of 1915, German officers even assumed direct command of Austro-Hungarian units. Thereafter, Germany dominated the strategy of the Central Powers.[28] Thus after the war, the Allies largely treated Austria better than they did Germany. After all, they reasoned, despite Austria being largely responsible for the outbreak of the war, most of the critical decisions thereafter were German. As to the Germans, they solved this problem for the next war by aggressively pursuing *Anschluss*, or union with Austria, in large part so they would have the dominant voice in strategy from the start.[29]

In Agnew's time these same debates influenced the coalition effort of NATO. Although theoretically an alliance of political equals, in terms of military power the United States dominated the alliance. After France left the integrated NATO command structure in 1966, only the United States and United Kingdom had nuclear weapons. The Americans, moreover, brought a disproportionate amount of the

24. See Mark E. Grotelueschen, *The AEF Way of War: The American Army and Combat in World War I* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

25. Julian Jackson, *De Gaulle* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018), chap. 13.

26. Herwig, *First World War*, 96.

27. John R. Schindler, "Redl—Spy of the Century?" *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 18, no. 3 (2005), 483–507.

28. See Herwig, *First World War*, 141–45.

29. Margaret MacMillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2007), chap. 19.

money, the weapons, and the senior military leaders. So too did they drive NATO strategy.

The problem for NATO commanders, therefore, remained the same one Foch had faced in 1918. How could a military coalition properly pursue the various and diverse political interests of its member states without becoming so divided that it lost the ability to fight as a single, unified force? France's departure from the integrated command structure proved NATO had not yet solved the problem. Perhaps NATO was fortunate its adversary, the Warsaw Pact, suffered from many of the same dilemmas. Still it faced occasional political problems, such as the uprising in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968, just three years before Agnew wrote his article.[30]

We can thus read Agnew's article in two ways. In one sense, he was trying to understand the problem of coalition operations by looking backward more than 50 years in order to assess the First World War model that led to Allied victory in 1918. Much as the Germans of 1918 did, the two Cold War coalitions looked for ways to exploit the divisions in the enemy's coalition. In another sense, however, Agnew was trying to solve a major problem in his own day: how to keep one's own coalition intact while simultaneously putting as much pressure as possible on the enemy's coalition. In doing so he reinforced the power of Winston Churchill's observation that the only thing worse than fighting with allies is fighting without them.[31]

30. Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War: A World History* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 201–6, 374–75.

31. David Reynolds, *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 324.