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Georges Clemenceau and the Frustrations  
of Unified Command, 1917-1919

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One of the most controversial issues that marked inter-Allied relations during the First World War was the question of unified command. With the failure of the Allies to win dramatic successes in 1916-1917 against the Central Powers with their superior resources, many Allied leaders began to understand the need for increased coordination and efficiency under some type of unified command. Yet the creation of this solution was thwarted by conflicting self-interests and institutional jealousies until the German spring offensives of 1918, when the prospect of defeat finally forced the Allies to select General Ferdinand Foch as Generalissimo. Even though the Allies went on to win the war, Foch's command was plagued by controversies over strategic priorities, conflicts over resources, and personal rivalries. Many British and American leaders believed that unified command was a vehicle for French domination of the Alliance, while the French believed that "Anglo-Saxon" obstructionism deprived unified command of its full value. In his post-war memoirs, French premier Georges Clemenceau expressed disappointment with the actual accomplishments of unified command, but he also allowed that its history would have to be written by those who had not lived through it.<sup>1</sup>

This paper will take up this challenge by studying Clemenceau's own role in the creation, implementation and operation of unified command. Although this topic has received extensive

treatment academic literature,<sup>2</sup> this paper shall attempt to cast new light on the “Tiger’s” relationship with the Inter-Allied Parliamentary Committee, the Supreme War Council (SWC), and in particular the SWC’s Permanent Military Representatives (PMRs).<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I will argue that Clemenceau often acted at cross-purposes. His leadership and force of personality played a key role in the establishment of unified command and the defeat of Germany. He was also a forceful spokesman for inter-Allied cooperation. Before the war, he was one of the leading French champions of cooperation with Britain, while on the eve of the Paris Peace conference, he proposed the continuation of the wartime Alliance of France, Britain, the United States and (out of politeness), Italy.<sup>4</sup>

Yet while Clemenceau was a sincere advocate of inter-Allied unity, he never demonstrated a consistent attitude toward any inter-Allied organization. He constantly opposed the Inter-Allied Parliamentary Committee and the SWC for many reasons: his ingrained distrust of big organizations; his partisan differences with French political rivals; his opposition to any schemes that threatened to divert troops away from the western front, and his support for the Haig-Pétain mutiny against the SWC in February-March 1918. While his motives and tactics varied, the overall result was consistent – Clemenceau constantly undermined the inter-Allied agency with the most potential to coordinate inter-Allied military policy. His overall behavior resembled the roughhouse game of parliamentary politics that characterized the French Third Republic. When Clemenceau attempted to revive the PMRs in the late fall of 1919, his proposal lacked credibility in the eyes of the other Allies. It was a case of too little, too late. To be sure, many other factors contributed to the breakdown of inter-Allied relations in 1919, but to these must be added Clemenceau’s own failure to pursue a more positive policy toward the alliance’s most ambitious attempt to create a standing inter-Allied military organization. Clemenceau’s post-war goal of maintaining France’s military alliance was thus in part discredited by his own actions.

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<sup>1</sup>. Georges Clemenceau, *Grandeur and Misery of Victory* (New York; Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1930), pp. 44-45, 83-84.

<sup>2</sup> . Some of the studies that examine unified command include: P.M.H. Bell, *France and Britain 1900-1940* (London; Longman, 1996), pp. 23-131; Jehuda L. Wallach. *Uneasy Coalition: the Entente Experience in World War I* (Westport, Conn.; Greenwood Press, 1993); Seth P. Tillman. *Anglo-American Relations at the Peace Conference of 1919* (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 1961); David F. Trask, *Captains and Cabinets: Anglo-American Naval Relations, 1917-1918* (Columbia, Mo.; University of Missouri Press, 1972; *idem*, *The AEF and Coalition Warmaking, 1917-1918* (Lawrence, Kansas; University Press of Kansas, 1993). David Woodward. *Trial by Friendship* (Lexington, Ky.; University of Kentucky Press, 1993); G. R. Conyne, *Woodrow Wilson. British Perspectives, 1912-21* (London: Macmillan, in association with King's College, 1992); William Philpott, *Anglo-French Relations and Strategy on the Western Front* (New York and London; St. Martin's Press and Macmillan, 1996); *idem*, "The Strategic Ideas of Sir John French," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 12 (4), December 1989, pp. 458-78; *idem*, "Squaring the Circle: The Higher Co-ordination of the Entente in Winter of 1915-16," *English Historical Review*, 114 (458), September 1999, pp. 875-98; *idem*, "Haig and Britain's European Allies," in *Haig: A Reappraisal 70 Years On*. Edited by Brian Bond and Nigel Cave. Great Britain; Leo Cooper, 1999, pp. 128-44; Martin Horn, "External Finance in Anglo-French Relations in the First World War, 1914-1917," *International History Review*, 17, February 1995, pp. 51-75; Yves Henry Nouailhat, *France et Etats-Unis: août 1914-avril 1917* (Paris; Publications de la Sorbonne, 1979); Pierre Renouvin, *L'armistice de Rethondes, 11 novembre 1918* (Paris; Gallimard, 1979). Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command. Soldiers, Statesmen and leadership in Wartime* (New York; Free Press, 2002). For a brief note on the historiography of Anglo-French relations, see: Roy A. Prete, "Dossier: L'alliance franco-britannique pendant la Grande Guerre," *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, 180, Octobre 1995, pp. 3-5. These issues are also addressed in the recently released collection: *Clemenceau et le monde Anglo-Saxon. Acte du colloque international*. Edited by Sylvie Brodziak and Michel Drouin (Paris; Geste, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> . My paper will draw in part upon my dissertation, which was the first study on Clemenceau to use French, British and American archival sources. See: Robert K. Hanks, "Culture Versus Diplomacy: Georges Clemenceau and Anglo-American Relations During the First World War". University of Toronto, Ph. D., 2002. The best previous studies of Clemenceau's wartime leadership were by: David Robin Watson, *Georges Clemenceau. A Political Biography*. (New York; David McKay Company, 1974); Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *Clemenceau*. Paris; Fayard, 1988.

<sup>4</sup> . Robert K. Hanks, "Clemenceau and England: A Partisan Relationship," *The Historical Journal* (Cambridge), 45, 1 (2002), pp. 53-77. See also: "French policy of Alliances," *The Times* (London), 31 December 1918, p. 8.

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