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Matthew Moten, *Presidents and Their Generals: An American History of Command in War*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2014. Pp. x, 443. ISBN 978-0-674-05814-9.

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Carl von Clausewitz famously wrote that “War is a mere continuation of politics by other means.” In the heat of battle, it is especially important not to blur the line between political and military objectives, but “In ... continuous negotiation[s], political leaders naturally desire such ambiguity so as to respond to political pressures, just as it is human nature for military commanders to ask for clear and precise objectives so as to argue for resources to accomplish assigned missions” (122). In democracies like the United States, policy-making is clearly vested in politicians, who are ultimately accountable to the citizens who elected them. The most talented politicians and generals are always cognizant of this delicate dynamic.

In the preface to his *Presidents and Their Generals*, retired Army lieutenant colonel Matthew Moten¹ cites a disturbing example of some Americans’ ignorance of military history. Shortly after 9/11, a successful businessman asked him why US military commanders were waiting for waffling politicians to make decisions instead of just doing something about the terrorist threat. For a military man like Moten, such an idea was horrifying, but the power of the military has always had wide appeal. In this volume, the author carefully selects cases that reveal nuances of political-military relations in the United States.

With each of the book’s three parts, proceeding in chronological order, Moten explores the relationships between various presidents, generals, and other military leaders and advisors. Depending on their interests, readers will enjoy some chapters more than others, but all of Moten’s case studies are richly detailed and based on careful research. His readers will feel themselves “on the scene” of critical, often tense negotiations. Taken collectively, the case studies identify many unlearned lessons of “command in war.”

Part I, “Setting Precedents,” concerns selected presidents from George Washington to Abraham Lincoln. As Commander in Chief of the Continental Army, Washington had to negotiate with an insecure and suspicious Continental Congress uncertain of its own policy goals in the Revolutionary War. “[His] military experience worried his contemporaries as much as it reassured them. The fear of standing armies was an Anglo-American tradition that stretched back to Cromwell’s time. Washington’s record as a military commander could easily have caused his colleagues to fear him as a potential Caesar, who once in possession of an army would use it to depose Congress and seize political control” (18). This ambivalence about Washington’s authority and the populace’s instinctive fear of a strong central government caused him severe logistical problems. Scarce supplies, uniforms, and pay hampered the Continental Army until more formal clarifications of roles and missions were forthcoming. Eventually, Washington and the Congress struck the necessary balance of military and civilian authority to carry out their respective duties to the new nation, setting important early precedents in the process.

These precedents were forcefully tested in the War of 1812: “the United States went to war ... with a weak executive, a divided Congress, an unprepared military, an incoherent strategy, an overwhelming sense of grievance, and abundant national confidence. Three years later, having gained nothing tangible, it nevertheless emerged a stronger and more united nation ready to welcome unprecedented prosperity and growth” (93). Failures of planning and execution during “Mr. Madison’s War” forced the United States to modernize and professionalize its military—politicized and part-time soldiers and officers were no longer sufficient. Early military reformers like John C. Calhoun and Winfield Scott authorized army training manuals, offices for a quartermaster, chiefs of engineering and ordnance, and the setting of standards for West Point cadets.

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Part II, “The Politics of Collaboration,” focuses on cases of political-military cooperation in the period from Abraham Lincoln to Franklin Roosevelt. Moten contrasts President Lincoln’s strained relationship with Gen. George McClellan, an apparent megalomaniac who openly defied and deceived him, with his excellent rapport with Gen. Ulysses S. Grant later in war—“the most effective political-military partnership in American history” (153).

After McClellan, Lincoln came into his own as Commander in Chief, taking full control of, and responsibility for, the policy agenda of the Civil War. He decided on the policy of emancipation separately from his military strategy, made clear the necessary outcome of the war (unconditional surrender) to his opponents in the South, and insisted that his military commanders must achieve well defined objectives. “Once he began thinking of his generals as implements, he gained a much firmer control of the army” (148).

Unlike McClellan, neither Grant nor his talented lieutenant, Gen. William T. Sherman, had done well at West Point. But Grant had seen hard fighting under Maj. Gen. Zachary Taylor in the Mexican-American War. A brilliant commander and a consummate professional, he eschewed any involvement in politics or policy-making. He and Lincoln

quickly established mutual trust that fostered a symbiosis of shared responsibility. Grant respected Lincoln’s political skills and never questioned his absolute primacy in policy. Lincoln prized Grant’s loyalty and soon appreciated that for the first time he had a general whose strategic acumen outstripped his own. The two men did not attempt to draw some artificial wall between policy and strategy where Lincoln presided in the former and Grant commanded in the latter. Almost every political decision Lincoln made had strategic consequences, just as Grant’s strategic and operational methods and their outcomes had significant political ramifications. (167)

Grant was a highly committed leader, he rarely retreated and relentlessly pursued his long-term objectives despite sometimes staggering losses. Lincoln’s explicit policy of emancipation and the free hand he allowed the general in military affairs liberated Grant to do whatever was needed to achieve his own strategic goals. “With superior numbers, aggressive command, and hard marching, he would deprive Southern armies of their foodstuffs, Southern planters of their slaves, Southern families of their security, and the Southern people of their will to continue the war. Lincoln had yet to catch up to such novel strategic thinking” (157). The trust, courage, respect, and determination of both men overcame significant political obstacles and military setbacks. Their collaboration has rarely been replicated and remains a model for leaders who must understand the lines between policy and strategy.

President Woodrow Wilson during the First World War and President Roosevelt during the Second maintained positive and trusting relationships with their generals, John J. Pershing and George C. Marshall respectively, while taking the lead in directing national policy. Moten concludes that “FDR’s masterly political schemes present a *prima facie* argument for civilian control of the military, as the governing presumption of the Constitution is that political leaders alone possess the requisite skill and accountability to the people to make such critical judgments” (202).

Part III, “The Perils of Partisanship,” offers pointed object studies of unsuccessful relations between political and military leaders, from the presidency of Harry S. Truman to that of George W. Bush. Naturally, much space is dedicated to the extraordinary actions of Gen. Douglas MacArthur in Korea. A lauded public hero after his command in the Pacific Theater of World War II, MacArthur repeatedly took unauthorized steps that escalated the Korean War, potentially provoking the Chinese and undercutting President Truman’s policy leadership. By bombing the Yalu River Bridge, in particular, he far overreached his authority and risked intensifying the war with the Chinese (had bombers entered their airspace). While Truman was trying to assess the possibility of peace with the Chinese, MacArthur, in his own statements, was threatening them. This situation confused international observers, publicly undermined Truman, and made MacArthur’s removal inevitable. During weeks of Congressional hearings, both civilian and military officials carefully made the case for his removal.

Each of the principals in this drama deserves a share of the blame. MacArthur obviously knew better. Many times in correspondence with the JCS [Joint Chiefs of Staff] or in his Senate testimony, he acknowledged that

certain matters were beyond “the competence of a theater commander.” While he usually invoked such limitation on his authority when doing so shielded him from making unpleasant decisions or accepting responsibility for failure, his use of such phrases is proof that he knew his boundaries and that foreign policy and global strategy were not his province. Yet he issued policy communiqués with abandon. (264)

Unfortunately, relationships between political leaders and generals only worsened in the increasingly fraught security environment of the Cold War.

After years of conflict with President Eisenhower, a fellow general who had come to dismiss their counsel, most senior military leaders had welcomed the Kennedy administration in 1961 with enthusiasm. High hopes, however, were soon dashed by miscommunication, policy disputes, and an overbearing secretary of defense, Robert McNamara. Kennedy came to mistrust the Joint Chiefs early in his term, and by the time of his assassination three years later, he scarcely bothered to solicit their views. (271)

His problems with the military, especially during the Bay of Pigs humiliation, made JFK extremely distrustful of the military establishment. He did work well, however, with Maxwell Taylor, a politically savvy former general and World War II hero who remained close to the Kennedys but alienated from the active military. Taylor’s politically expedient “flexible response” theory, coupled with ambiguous policy objectives, sowed the seeds of disaster in Vietnam.

After Kennedy’s assassination, President Lyndon Johnson reaffirmed JFK’s policy in Vietnam and committed the nation to winning the, as yet, undeclared war. “Johnson lamented the limitations of all of his options, but revealed that withdrawal excited his greatest fears: ‘Well, they’d impeach a president though [sic] that would run out, wouldn’t they?’ Johnson admitted, ‘I just haven’t got the nerve to do it [escalate in Vietnam], and I don’t see any other way out of it.’ ... Johnson might have found answers to such soul searching if he had possessed the self-assurance to take his military advisers into his confidence” (300; bracketed inclusions are Moten’s). The dearth of precise policy goals combined with a cowed military establishment made the path out of Vietnam both difficult and painful.

Gen. Colin Powell, who was twice wounded during two tours of duty in Vietnam, sought to replace purely quantitative assessments of success and failure by refocusing on mission and purpose. Powell distrusted the civilian leaders who had created the problems in Vietnam and saw his role as to more actively advocate for a well defined mission and to ensure public support for military actions. To this end, he frequently injected himself into policy and planning debates and often spoke publicly to the media. Implementing the Powell Doctrine in the 1990–91 Gulf War, President George H.W. Bush adopted a laissez-faire attitude toward military strategy and let Powell and Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf act in a way that limited US casualties but did not further the nation’s broader strategic interests in the long run.

The last case study in the book is not of a president and his general, but rather of the layered interactions between President George W. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and his deputy Paul Wolfowitz that led directly to the disastrous failure in Iraq. “The strategy Rumsfeld and [Gen. Tommy] Franks forged overpromised and under-delivered, and the upshot was a rapid and apparently successful initial invasion that was, in fact, merely a prelude to eight bloody years of indecisive war. The events of 2003 serve as an object lesson in folly, when the principal actors on both sides of the political-military nexus failed to understand the making of strategy. Their failures largely stemmed from Rumsfeld’s assumptions” (342). Those assumptions—that deploying limited ground forces equipped with much high-tech weaponry could topple the Iraqi government and ensure the quick departure of US forces—led military planners into ever more precarious circumstances.

Unlike Lincoln and FDR, Bush did not assert his role as the political leader ultimately responsible for policy decisions. By appointing Powell as Secretary of State and Rumsfeld as Secretary of Defense, he put the military men in one camp, and neocon ideologues in another—“From the very beginning, the Bush administration was less a ‘team of rivals’ than a pair of rival teams” (345). When Gen. Eric Shinseki pointed out to Bush that, in his professional opinion, it would require several hundred thousand soldiers to successfully carry out the invasion of Iraq and manage its aftermath, Bush barely reacted. But Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, and Cheney publicly attacked him and defended their position that fewer troops were needed. Moten places

much of the blame for the failure in Iraq squarely on Donald Rumsfeld, who ought to have known better to begin with and then refused to take responsibility for his failures.

The author has a facility for making his readers feel they are *right there*, learning from past leaders, as when he quotes Lincoln's glowing description of Grant to a White House visitor: "He's the quietest little fellow you ever saw The only evidence you have that he's in a place is that he makes things git! Wherever he is, things move!" (159). In such quotations, Matthew Moten brings his subjects to life and makes the key lessons of their successes and failures relevant for today's leaders and, more broadly, an informed citizenry.