

Civilian and Military Power (France)

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Summary

The responsibilities of politicians and military leaders are defined in times of war. The president commands the armed forces, the government - subject to the representatives of the nation - is in charge of conducting the war and the military operations are led by the high command, responsible to the government. In France, however, the First World War disrupted the sharing of responsibilities. The relationship between the government, the Parliament and the high command were strained until the end of 1916. From then on, the politicians and military authorities worked together, with French public opinion arbitrating in politico-military affairs. The issue of the survival of the institutions of the Republic, and the democratic system, arose between 1914 and 1918. However, while the French parliamentary system emerged unscathed from the war, the executive branch could not consolidate its power.

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Introduction

On the eve of the First World War, the border which determined the responsibilities of political leaders and servicemen in case of a conflict was defined in theory. Since 1875, the

constitutional laws of the Third Republic provided that the President of the Republic might use the armed forces: the higher command was responsible for leading military operations and political power for conducting the war. Military command was subordinated to the government, which had to submit to the representatives of the Nation.¹

This allocation of responsibilities, which had been defined in peacetime, did not prevent tensions from rising between the civilian powers (executive and legislative) and the military command once war was declared. The unexpected duration of the war, the increasing submission of the Nation to the armed forces and the war effort soon raised the question of who was actually in command. The relationships between the different governments, the Parliament and the high command were quite stormy at least up to the end of 1916. General [Joseph Joffre's \(1852-1931\)](#) replacement put an end to the period of "primacy of the *Grand Quartier Général*." Decrees could be implemented in 1917 only when the government took over the war leadership.² [Paul Painlevé \(1863-1933\)](#) first and then [Georges Clemenceau \(1841-1929\)](#), were both *Présidents du Conseil* and War Ministers. As chiefs of the government, they were leading war operations whereas as War Ministers, they had to conduct the war in the name of the government. "I am the only one in charge here" Clemenceau defiantly said in 1917.

The development of the war, public opinion, the international balance of power, the men in power and the military top brass contributed to enlivening the relations between politicians and the military throughout the war. The fear of military power opposing civilian power was real in France. With the war, the survival of the institutions of the Republic and more broadly, the democratic system were put into question.

The Declaration of War: A Shock

Entry into War

Before the war, the [French Parliament](#) theoretically controlled a large part of military affairs and power. Yet, the declaration of war was the responsibility of the President of the Republic who had ultimate authority over the armed forces (without ever commanding them). In case of war, the members of Parliament had to give to the government the assets to conduct the war. The relations between government and military command were defined as follows: the government conducted the war while the higher command conducted military operations. When war was declared on 3 August 1914, the Parliament did not grant additional power to Adolphe Messimy's (1869-1935) or [René Viviani's \(1863-1925\)](#) cabinets. The French Parliament, which was confident in the ability of the armed forces to defeat the enemy, left it to the government to lead the war with the assets that the Parliament had given to them on

4 August.³

In a few days, the mobilised soldiers joined their positions. Consequently, a large part of the population was subjected to military authority. Yet, the chief of the armed forces did not voice the popular will even though General Joffre had been appointed before the war by a democratically-elected government. Thus, as early as the first weeks, the question of parliamentary institutions was raised in an unusual situation which tended to favour executive power at the expense of legislative power and military power at the expense of civilian power.

As soon as the war broke out, the country was divided into two parts: one was the zone of the armed forces which was placed under the responsibility of the *Grand Quartier Général* (GQG), i.e, the front line, and a rear zone under the responsibility of the government. Yet, the line which defined the responsibilities of each was blurred. In the context of an all-out war, leading the operations and conducting the war ([armaments](#), [censorship](#), [propaganda](#), diplomacy, recruitment, etc.) became increasingly intertwined. As a consequence of this, strong tensions arose between military command and political power.

Strong tensions (last semester of 1914)

The difficult military situation in the first weeks and the unexpected duration of the war caused strong tensions between the military and the government. From the very beginning of the campaign, General Joffre had resolved to act on an independent basis. Moreover, when the government left Paris to take refuge in Bordeaux, the commander-in-chief believed that everything then depended on him. Later on, some ministers proved helpless in the face of the abuse of power from the military. Whereas the government could theoretically dismiss the military leader they had appointed, they could not act freely namely because of the weight of public opinion which would not have understood the calling into question of a leader who had been lionised by the press.

At the end of December 1914, the French Parliament was convened to a special session to ratify the decrees which had been taken during its recess and vote on the necessary budget to pursue the war. At that time, it became indeed obvious that the war would be longer than expected. To cope with this, France had to overcome many economic and industrial issues (solving the exhaustion of stocks, manufacturing weapons and recruiting men). Thus, from the end of 1914, the field of activity of the GQG was extended and not only limited to leading operations, which led to a confrontation between the members of Parliament, ministers and the military command until the end of 1916.

Government and command from 1915-1917

The “all-mighty GQG”?

This period was marked by tension between the higher command and some ministers on the one hand, and ministers and the Parliament on the other hand. By giving the military authority “complete freedom of action”, [Alexandre Millerand \(1859-1943\)](#), the War Minister starkly opposed the members of Parliament. Thus, the balance of power in leading the war was tipped in favour of the higher command. Many reproached the government for giving up their rights to Joffre. As soon as they gathered in a session, the members of Parliament urged the government to recover their prerogatives but Alexandre Millerand refused this logic. Thus, Viviani, the *Président du Conseil* from June 1914, was compelled to abandon power to [Aristide Briand](#) in October 1915 who appointed General [Joseph Gallieni \(1849-1916\)](#) as War Minister. The aim of the new War Minister was to reduce General Joffre’s autonomy, thinking that it would be better to have him back in Paris as a technical adviser in the government. Facing attacks, the commander-in-chief threatened to resign. Following the [Battle of Verdun](#), Gallieni told he wanted to reorganise the higher command which had not taken into account the warnings of the members of Parliament as far as the defence of this front was concerned. Nonetheless, Gallieni was not followed and, weakened by disease, eventually resigned on 17 March 1916. Wishing to ease tensions, Aristide Briand called on General Pierre Roques (1856-1920) who was not too keen on interfering with the commander-in-chief.

An increasingly active Parliament

The unexpected duration of the War and the ensuing war weariness sparked a spirit of revolt among some members of the French Parliament particularly those who had been mobilised. The latter while subordinated to the military hierarchy also had their constitutional roles. [Emile Driant \(1855-1916\)](#), who graduated from the Saint-Cyr military Academy and was an infantry officer, left the Army in 1905 before going into politics. Despite his advanced age Driant, who had been elected as a member of the French Parliament, was mobilised in August 1914. He was, with his Bataillon de chasseurs, responsible for an area on the Verdun front at the end of 1915. He then reported his worries about this area. The government sent a warning to the higher command which so angered General Joffre that he threatened to resign. Many members of the French Parliament, above all the mobilised, came to recognize the importance of the Parliament’s mission. Driant wrote: “at the beginning of hostilities, I was not in favour of seeing the Parliament deal with war issues, but now that the Parliament and its Army committee are quite important and making big progress, I admit I was wrong.”⁴ The offensive of Verdun by the German armed forces on 21 February 1916 gave that debate a dramatic tone. On 7 March 1915, General Gallieni, the War Minister, read to the ministers a

severe note rebuking the commander in chief and the GQG.

On 22 February 1916, Lieutenant-Colonel Driant was killed in action at Bois des Caures but this did not prevent other centrist elected members from attacking the higher command through recounting their experiences on the frontline. The socialists who were in complete support of the national defence insisted on explanations from the government. The President of the Council, Aristide Briand was thus forced to make concessions and agreed upon a parliamentary debate. Yet, how could the Parliament assume its controlling role over the government without threatening the national defence or offending public opinion? As a consequence, the first “secret committees” appeared during the parliamentary session in May 1916. This procedure, which had fallen into disuse, was yet provided for in the constitution of the Third Republic. Aristide Briand did not oppose it. The talks during these sessions were kept secret. Yet, at the end of 1916, the secrets shared by hundreds of people were not secret any longer and the committees fuelled rumours among the population ruining public confidence.⁵

Meanwhile, parliamentary commissions were transformed and became real bodies of investigation and control over the government’s activities. Thus, it was within the armed forces committees in the Senate and the Chamber that enquiries, proposals and controls of the government’s activities were carried out. After much effort, the members of these committees managed to have a say in the war situation. They paid regular visits to the frontline and managed to be better informed on the evolution of operations. They also paid visits to the inner zone thus providing the secret committees with much intelligence on war production, the civilian populace, etc. [Abel Ferry \(1881-1918\)](#), who was Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, was also a reservist who fought on the frontline. He very early denounced the weaknesses of the higher command and the government which tolerated its abuses. He also believed that the GQG had absolute power like nobody in France before. Ferry, like others, became a parliamentary representative in charge of controlling the armed forces.

All things considered, the two chambers played a positive and active role. Indeed, as soon as members of the French Parliament and senators gathered in sessions, they urged the government to recover their prerogatives. Yet, General Joffre remained in office. The discontent against the higher command resurfaced at the end of 1916 following the failure of the allied forces on the Somme region and the stagnation on the Balkan front.

The fall of Joffre

On 12 December 1916, Aristide Briant reshuffled his government. For the War Ministry, he

called in General [Hubert Lyautey \(1854-1934\)](#), who had been living in Morocco since 1912. Lyautey was a character, at odds with General Joffre, but unacquainted with the political and military dispute in mainland France. The military disillusion in 1916 (the controversy over the defence of Verdun, the failure in the Somme, the invasion of Romania, the stagnation on the Balkan front, etc.) triggered violent attacks in the French Parliament against the commander-in-chief. A new organisation of the higher command was planned on 13 November 1916.⁶ First, the General became the “technical adviser for conducting the war” and the command of the armed forces in the North-East was separate from that in the Balkan front. A disguised aim of this promotion was to keep General Joffre in the background. On 26 December 1916, the *Président du Conseil* announced to Joffre that he had to give up his governmental duties. General Joffre had to admit defeat and resigned on 27 December. In order to avoid a new political scandal, the victor of the Marne was promoted to field Marshal. His leaving marked the restoration of the primacy of civilian power over military authority.

All hopes therefore focused on the new commander in chief of the armed forces in the North-East: General [Georges Nivelle \(1856-1924\)](#) who became famous on the Verdun front the previous year. Under his command, the French army, with huge assets and support through diversionary operations from the British armed forces in the North, was to launch a frontal attack on the Chemin des Dames, one of the most fortified sectors of the German front. Nivelle was convinced of making a breakthrough and exploiting it. Yet, some among the political community and the higher command criticised this plan and blamed Nivelle namely for not taking the terrain into account. Paul Painlevé, the new War Minister and General [Philippe Pétain \(1856-1951\)](#) made no secret that they opposed the offensive. On 6 April 1917, political leaders and generals held an exceptional war council in Compiègne during which they expressed their misgivings about the offensive. Nivelle realised that neither the government nor some commanders trusted him. He offered his resignation, which was refused, and despite their doubts, political and military leaders agreed upon the offensive. Meanwhile, the War Minister planned to appoint a new Chief of Staff to advise him in a technical field (as this was provided for the decree on 28 October 1913). The failure of the Chemin des Dames caused General Nivelle to leave and General Pétain to take over. Painlevé, who had been War Minister since 20 March 1917, saw to it that decrees were applied. The Armed forces headquarters entered into a period of changes. On 29 April 1917, General Pétain was called to the War Ministry where he was appointed Chief of the Defence Staff. On 11 May, the remit of this position was clearly stipulated: “the Chief of the Defence Staff is subordinated to the War Minister in examining all technical aspects which deal with military operations and the control of the general services of the territory.”⁷ On 16 May, General [Ferdinand Foch \(1851-1929\)](#) took over from General Pétain, who became the commander-in-chief of the French armed forces on the north-eastern front. The armed forces

headquarters was divided into two groups: the Avant (group A) “addressing the issues on how to conduct the war” and the Intérieur (group I), responsible for the use of territory resources and the upkeep of mobilised troops.”⁸ Each group was managed by the Assistant Chief of the General Staff placed under the General Chief of Staff.

As a consequence, following the offensive of Nivelle, the political leaders recovered responsibility for the conduct and the command and control of the war from the GCQ. General Pétain nevertheless faced a new critical situation. The French military went through an outburst of mutinies as its Russian allies weakened every day while the American entry into war could only promise reinforcements in the long run.

Clemenceau: “I Wage War”

1917 was marked by a multi-shaped crisis. The crisis was first and foremost a military one. The hopes raised by the offensive on the Chemin des Dames and the disappointment that followed due to the military failure contributed to shake public opinion. The home front was not spared and French public opinion was aware of the troubles on the front, despite media censorship. Some soldiers gave accounts to their relatives of what had happened to them on the battlefield, others spread unrest in the railway stations (soldiers on leave). In addition to this, a social crisis broke out. Until the end of 1916, trade unions were not very active and social movements not numerous. Yet, at the very beginning of the year 1917, male and female civil workers (mobilised workers excluded) went on strike, particularly in the suburbs of Paris. Initially unrest concerned trade unions essentially and the movement was soon contained. At the beginning of May 1917, huge gatherings and strikes spread across other branches of the industry even taking in the defence sector. Once demands were satisfied, strikes were stopped. War weariness gained ground in the country and triggered some unrest. The morale of the population and troops was very low. While General Pétain managed to find appropriate solutions for the soldiers, the situation in the rear worsened. The high cost of living, the pacifist and internationalist ideas which were gaining ground, the mistrust between the homefront and the front caused a deep moral crisis. The revolutionary risk was at that time low but many French people were longing for peace. Finally, the year 1917 was marked by governmental unrest as four governments followed one another: Briand, [Alexandre Ribot \(1842-1923\)](#), from March until September 1917, Painlevé, from September until November, and Clemenceau from November 1917.⁹

How do I wage war?

When Clemenceau came to power as the leader of a center-right government, the decree of October 1913 had applied since December 1916. But Clemenceau aimed at waging the war

until victory was won: "I wage war", he would say during the debates about defeatism in front of the chambers on 8 March 1918. He was quite familiar with French political life but had no great military experience.¹⁰ He had never led soldiers under enemy fire and had never led a war¹¹. Moreover, before the First World War, officers in the armed forces were suspicious of this anticlerical, left-wing supporter of Dreyfus who, while *Président du Conseil* and Minister of War, called in the soldiers to maintain law and order, much to the officers' displeasure.¹² But as soon as the war began, Clemenceau put a lot of effort into military issues. The founder of *L'homme libre* (*The Free Man*) (May 1913), which became "*L'homme enchaîné*" (*The Man in Chains*) on 7 October 1914, did not hesitate to denounce the mediocrity of some general officers and political leaders. He published an increasing number of articles on military issues and dealt in particular with the primacy of civilian power over military command. Then, in the Senate, he presided over the powerful committee of the armed forces. Thanks to his numerous speeches, he gained authority. When, following the demise of Painlevé's government, the situation of France in war seemed jeopardised, Poincaré called Clemenceau into office.

The new *Président du Conseil* also took over the War Ministry on 16 November 1917. He settled at the Hôtel de Brienne, the residence of the War Minister. He then had the assets to lead the war and knew the military issues well. Besides, the decrees allocating the responsibilities of the command and the government applied. He could also rely on a strong majority while abiding by the rules of parliamentary life¹³. Thus, as Prime Minister and War Minister, he took on the vital interests of the country, set the political objectives of the war and the strategic tendencies, represented France in allied conferences, distributed the means of action and put them at the commander-in-chief's disposal. While keeping the portfolio of the War Ministry, Clemenceau established himself as the real person responsible for conducting the war. "I'm the only one in charge here" he was reported to say to General Pétain in 1918, a sentence that spoke volumes about the meaning of his mission¹⁴.

Clemenceau gathered a team of loyal servants around him¹⁵, among whom were some devoted officers: General [Jean Jules Henri Mordacq \(1868-1943\)](#), the Chief of Clemenceau's military cabinet at the War Ministry as well as Lieutenant-Colonel [Francois Battesti \(1890-1977\)](#) and Lieutenant-Colonel [Jean Baptiste André Gabeaud \(1867-1934\)](#). With [Georges Mandel \(1885-1944\)](#), the chief of the civil cabinet, Mordacq reorganised the ministry, provided intelligence, advised and backed up the Minister on all the war events, thus appearing as Clemenceau's real adviser. Loyal, experienced, gifted and clever, knowing the war and the frontline, Mordacq shared his military knowledge with Clemenceau and liaised with the higher command¹⁶.

To achieve his aims, he took over the administration of the War Ministry and in particular the armed forces headquarters. General Mordacq, following a meeting with Clemenceau, wrote: “we then talked about the War Ministry. There is a need for restoring the non-existent authority of the minister as it was broken up between the directors and the headquarters,”¹⁷ adding that “there, everybody commanded except the minister; more than ever the officers were the masters. One had to start reforming everything (...).¹⁸” Nevertheless, Clemenceau streamlined the organisation of the armed forces headquarters and the remit of its minister. The general chief of staff liaised with the War Ministry and met with the commander in chief of the armed forces on a daily basis. General Mordacq then wrote: “thus, the general headquarters had to run smoothly, as it had been set up in peacetime (...).¹⁹” This streamlined organisation between the armed forces headquarters and the War Ministry finally settled relations between the commander in chief and the government, as provided in the 1913 decree. This organisation was maintained until the end of 1919.

“The country will know that it is defended”

From November 1917 until November 1918, Clemenceau devoted himself exclusively to the war issues. Only in May did he turn away from these issues to sort out the problem of strikes as social movements shook the country. He quelled protest violently and allowed the movement run out of steam. A number of leaders were arrested and mobilised workers on strike were sent back to the front. The working class was split and some workers rejected the idea of a revolutionary movement which could lead to the defeat of France. Indeed, since the coming to power of Clemenceau, many French people, despite their sacrifices, were still driven by a strong national feeling. French public opinion did not see how it was possible to win the war but was not eager to give in either. To paraphrase [Jean-Jacques Becker](#), there was a kind of patriotic resignation and the French continued the war because there was no other solution and the revolutionary temptation concerned only few people. “Internal enemies” had to be held and fought against and Clemenceau applied himself to this. He fought against the ones who he thought were a danger to the cohesion of the national community ([Joseph Caillaux \(1863-1944\)](#) and [Louis Malvy \(1875-1949\)](#) for instance.) He pursued the ones whom he called the “defeatists” and refused to negotiate with Austria-Hungary.²⁰ He pointed out the main adversary: Germany. The aim was to defeat its armed forces and destroy [Wilhelm II, German Emperor's \(1859-1941\)](#) regime by all means.

Clemenceau fostered the manufacturing of equipment (mainly [artillery](#), [tanks](#) and [aircraft](#)), saw to it that troops were supplied, imposed discipline within the higher command and among soldiers, streamlined the headquarters and supplied the armed forces with the necessary assets to continue the war. Results did not take long to be noticed since the

manufacturing of equipment increased dramatically and the military could count, even if it was not enough, on additional military personnel (the shirker hunt). In allied conferences, Clemenceau's influence did not stop growing so that it aroused [David Lloyd George's \(1863-1945\)](#) fear that Clemenceau might take over the management of the war.²¹ During these conferences, he spoke on behalf of France and did not hesitate to defend his responsibilities firmly: during a meeting of the Supreme War Council in London on 4 March 1918 and while Foch attempted to speak about the military strength and the setting-up of a general reserve, Clemenceau exclaimed "shut your mouth! I'm the one who represents France here."²² Yet, when the single command was discussed, Clemenceau imposed General Foch at the strategic command. Thus, on 14 May, Foch officially became the "commander in chief of the allied armed forces in France," thus allowing to achieve unity of command.

The higher command was indeed subordinated to the War Ministry as shown in this exchange which was briefly reported by Abel Ferry. On the evening of 4 January 1918, Foch, who was then military adviser of the War Minister, and Abel Ferry, before leaving for Italy, gathered at the *Président du Conseil* and War Minister's office, Abel Ferry wrote "Clemenceau repeated his orders to Foch."²³ Shortly after, Foch, with Abel Ferry, was tasked to go to [Italy](#) in order to deal with the arrival of 100,000 Italian workers in France. Abel Ferry made sure he wrote down that "Foch made difficulties about leaving" and that he "was dragged by Clemenceau. His self-esteem suffered from going there after a minor deputy who had criticised him."²⁴ Clemenceau did not hesitate to remind the generals of their subordination. As soon as he came into power, he tried to bring in young blood by favouring physical vigour and intellectual skills. He made sure that the French armed forces had the best command and renewed it on a regular basis via the commander-in-chief. Clemenceau transcended political differences: he did not hesitate to give his confidence to generals whom he believed to be competent and dismissed those who were not, trusting competent leaders even if they were not republicans. Finally, the generals who tried to play a political or diplomatic role were ruthlessly excluded: this was in particular the case for the generals who were sent on missions to Russia. Asserting political power over the command was not achieved without arousing the opposition of some generals who were hostile to such a primacy of civilian power. On 30 August 1918, general [Edmond Buat \(1868-1923\)](#) wrote in his diary: "here comes Clemenceau who makes it his business to change the division commanders, beheads this one or wants that one to be dismissed, in addition to some lessons given to the commander in chief. This is really bad politics."²⁵ In return, when the higher command had to be defended in front of the members of parliament, Clemenceau assumed his responsibilities. He defended Foch on the day that followed the offensive of Chemin des Dames on 29 May 1918. On 4 June, Clemenceau backed the higher command during a tumultuous session in

parliament. Thanks to his authority, Clemenceau put an end to the divisions among general officers. He set out to restrict them to military questions but did not hesitate to use them in the political field when necessary.

Beyond the bone of contention between Pétain, Foch and Clemenceau, the *Président du Conseil* and War Minister imposed his authority so that the two generals agreed with each other. He did not want the German higher command to benefit from the differences within the French higher command. Despite disagreements, Clemenceau maintained Pétain in office and encouraged Foch to take over the allied command. General Jean Delmas pointed out that Clemenceau “kept the reins firmly despite all opposition.”²⁶ Why was it so? Clemenceau got closer to Pétain during the war thanks to general Mordacq. He believed Pétain was too pessimistic but did not find anybody to replace him although Pétain was popular among the troops. Finally, in 1917, the actions in la Malmaison, the relief of Verdun and the French involvement in the third battle of Ypres were successful, thus giving a taste of victory to the soldiers. Gradually, Clemenceau thought that Pétain was a flexible person, a skilled tactician who treated the troops tactfully and took a great interest in modern weapons. At the end of the war, the relationships between the two men became looser. According to Clemenceau, Pétain was then “heartless, idealess, more an administrator than a chief. He also lacked stomach, imagination and had no spirit.”²⁷

On the contrary, Clemenceau had known Foch for a long time as the political leader appointed the officer at the head of the *Ecole Supérieure de Guerre* (the Joint Service Defence College) in 1908. Le Tigre liked Foch’s composure, dynamic character, voluntarism, and great knowledge of military issues.²⁸ In March 1918, Clemenceau encouraged him to take a position within the allied command and Foch the strategist was given the strategic management of war. As the supreme commander of the French armed forces, Pétain could moderate Foch, namely when it came to handling the military personnel, and Foch could make Pétain more dynamic thanks to his will and energy. Relationships between Foch and Clemenceau became tense the day after the second [Battle of Marne](#). Clemenceau being successful, Foch showed he was more and more jealous of his independence and Clemenceau was jealous of Foch’s authority. Clemenceau complained about Foch openly: “I’m not happy with him”, he said to [Raymond Poincaré \(1860-1934\)](#) on 4 October 1918. “He doesn’t command. I’m not dealing with what he has to command, but at least he has to command; if not, my governmental responsibility will be at stake and then I’ll intervene.”²⁹ In 1919, the peace conference drove the two men irrevocably apart. Foch tried to intervene in settling peace by suggesting the dismantling of Germany. Although Clemenceau was in favour of this proposal, he soon realized that the British and the Americans would refuse this hypothesis and sought to get some guarantees from the allies against Germany. Foch and

Clemenceau then became adversaries.

Clemenceau: a popular soldier

On the other hand, did he interfere in matters pertaining to the responsibilities of military command? Theoretically, the *Président du Conseil* as well as the War Ministry were not to get involved in command and control of troops or conduct of operations. Clemenceau had always insisted that he would not interfere with those issues. However, the [total war](#) he intended to wage as well as his strong character caused him to get involved within what was supposed to strictly pertain to the military. In his opinion, the actions of all those working for the nation, particularly the military in wartime, had to be controlled. He famously proclaimed: "War? This is something which is too serious for the military to manage."

Unlike his predecessors, he performed numerous tours around HQs, sometimes at commanders' requests, as was the case after the first German offensive in March 1918. When the military situation improved just after the second battle of the Marne, those tours were increasingly disliked. Lieutenant Colonel [Charles Bugnet \(1884-1955\)](#) reported Foch as saying: "I can't get him off my back! He knows nothing about it, and nevertheless he would like to decide about everything." He was also interested in military operations and in the tasks of general officers, but he did not seem to realize the tactical changes in the French Army, at least until August 1918. For instance, he once gave his opinion to Pétain about the organization of the frontline. Thus, as of the middle of 1918, two opposite conceptions appeared. On the one hand, the conception advocated by Pétain: a defense battle in depth, which consisted of a retiring maneuver along terrain which had been prepared beforehand, and then in launching counter-offensive operations. On the other hand, Foch's idea demanded that troops should hold their ground before destroying the enemy through offense.

Initially Clemenceau was against the defense in depth advocated by Pétain, but after his visits to the front he changed his views. He fully realized how inefficient and lethal it was to insist on defending the front lines which were pounded by artillery. On several occasions he wanted to speak his mind, but to no avail. As regards operations, Field Marshal Foch planned secretly with General [Maxime Weygand \(1867-1965\)](#), and Clemenceau disliked the "mysteries" which characterized the commander in chief's projects. The *Président du Conseil* and War Minister voiced his disagreement with Foch about the French-American project of an offensive in Lorraine, but this was actually launched (Saint-Mihiel operation). On the other hand, his differences with Foch concerning an Italian offensive against the Austro-Hungarians resulted in canceling that offensive. The purposes of the politician were no longer in keeping with those of the soldier.

Clemenceau was popular among soldiers. He devoted ninety days out of 360 to touring the frontlines from 16 November 1917 to 11 November 1918.³⁰ He went among troops, stirred them with speeches, aroused their admiration (Clemenceau was seventy-seven at that time), and was particularly considerate. At the same time this enabled Clemenceau to fully realise the real situation, and to act accordingly. Thus he tried to improve the living conditions of soldiers, changed his mind on issues of solid second and third echelons, and came round to the defence-in-depth concept. In spite – or because – of his inflexibility, he was popular in France until the end of the war. After reading the Armistice agreement in front of the members of the French Parliament, he was cheered for a long time, and the members of parliament passed a bill establishing that he had “earned the recognition of his countrymen”. His former enemies praised his achievements. Thus, the day after a ceremony in Charleville on 7 November 1918, during which General [Adolphe Guillaumat \(1863-1940\)](#) listened to Cardinal [Louis-Henri-Joseph Luçon's \(1842-1930\)](#) address, Guillaumat wrote to his wife: “I forgot to tell you that yesterday’s orator praised Clemenceau, and asked to pray for him as well as for Joffre and Foch. This was only fair, because victory was achieved thanks to him. He achieved it because he alone really wanted it”³¹.

In the period following the armistice, Clemenceau was regarded as the Saviour, “The father of victory”, the most distinguished Frenchman, and the Father of Victory. His name was associated with those of Joffre and Foch in victory, and he was also a war leader, who read the armistice agreement before the Members of the French Parliament on 11 November 1918. In the minds of French people of the 20th century, Clemenceau was a war leader.

Conclusion

The declaration of war in August 1914 upset the task organization prevailing at the time between civilian power and military authorities. During the first two years of the war, the government gave up the management of war operations to the military for various reasons, but no exceptional figure or war leader stood out among politicians. Moreover, with few exceptions, Third French Republic politicians were not well versed in military issues. This was paradoxical in a republic which regarded armed forces as “one of the greatest things in the world.”³²

Moreover, the instability of governments (five *Présidents du Conseil* / Prime Ministers in four years, as well as two major cabinet reshuffles) weakened the executive power and gave free rein to military brass. French public opinion arbitrated the relations between politicians and the military. The parliamentary structures were not questioned. The French parliamentary political system came out safely after the war, and committees retained the power they had

acquired during the war to the detriment of the executive; the latter did not consolidate its leverage during or after the war.

The Clemenceau episode seems to be a parenthesis. To the very end he defended the primacy of political power over military higher command. As a statesman, he was able to manage and control the State's organization. He showed that waging war was not a matter of decrees, but that it basically depended on men. Thus, the Clemenceau ministry also evidenced a change in the area of institutions. A figure with a strong character at the head of the State made it possible to strengthen the executive power. However this was but temporary, and the retirement of the "providential figure" inhibited the elite. Last, the First World War, with the nation wholly mobilized into the war effort, compelled political power and military authorities to adopt a common approach to war.

Michaël Bourlet, Ecoles militaires de Saint-Cyr Coëtquidan

Notes

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3. See Bock, Fabienne: Un parlementarisme de guerre. 1914-1919, Paris, 2002. [↑](#)
4. Reported by Barral, Pouvoir civil et commandement militaire, p. 121. [↑](#)
5. Porte, Rémy: Comité secret, Dictionnaire de la Grande Guerre, 1914-1918 supervised by Rémy Porte and François Cochet, Paris, p. 257. [↑](#)

6. Bourget, Jean-Marie: *Gouvernement et commandement. Les leçons de la guerre mondiale*, Paris, 1930, p. 150. ↑
7. Ibid., p. 73. ↑
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9. Bourlet, Michaël: "Clemenceau et la conduite de la guerre", in: Wormser, Marcel (ed.): *Clemenceau et la Grande Guerre, actes du colloque tenu au Sénat à Paris les 20 et 21 novembre 2009*, Paris, 2010, p. 256; Porte, Rémy / Cochet, François (eds.): *Ferdinand Foch (1851-1929): apprenez à penser*, Paris, 2010. ↑
10. He was appointed mayor of the popular 18^e arrondissement (Montmartre, Clignancourt, Chapelle Saint-Denis) the day after the Battle of Sedan on 5 September 1870. Clemenceau witnessed the French military defeat in 1870 and the siege of Paris by the Prussians. On 4 September, he wore a kepi of the Garde nationale on his head. See Winock, Michel: *Clemenceau*, Paris, 2007, p. 406. ↑
11. Determined to resist the Prussians, Clemenceau prepared for war by organizing the elections of the officers of the 154th Bataillon and Blanqui commanding the 169th Bataillon of the Garde nationale. He also allowed the supply of equipment to the national guards. See Brodziak, Sylvie: *Montmartre, Georges Clemenceau, Correspondance (1858-1929)*, annotated version by Sylvie Brodziak and Jeanneney, Jean-Noël, Paris, 2008, p. 1029. ↑
12. On 19 June 1907, the cavalymen of the 10^e Régiment de cuirassiers in Lyon charged the winegrowers in Narbonne. During these events, six people were killed while a part of the 17th Régiment d'infanterie in Agde mutinied. Deroubaix, Christophe and Le Puil, Gérard: *Les vendanges de la colère: Midi viticole, 1907-2007*, Vauvert, 2007, p. 128. ↑
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14. Reported by Lieutenant Colonel Charles Bugnet, *ibid.* ↑
15. Veterans such as lawyer Léon Abrami (1879-1939), Sous-Secrétaire d'État à la Guerre in charge of human military personnel and pensions, Jacques Louis Dumesnil (1882-1952), Sous-Secrétaire d'État à l'aéronautique, and Justin Godart (1871-1956) Sous-Secrétaire pour le service de santé militaire as well as others such as Jules Jeanneney (1864-1957), Sous-Secrétaire d'État à la présidence du Conseil et du ministre de la Guerre or Edouard Ignace (1862-1924), Sous-Secrétaire d'État à la Justice militaire. ↑
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21. Clemenceau had great respect for Lloyd George while British Prime Minister Lloyd George always considered that only Clemenceau could lead the war in France by respecting his country's interests; Watson, David: David Lloyd George, Georges Clemenceau, Correspondance (1858-1929), annotated version by Sylvie Brodziak and Jean-Noël Jeanneney, Paris, 2008, p. 1019. ↑
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