

1995

## Commanders in Chief: Presidential Leadership in Modern Wars

Cole C. Kingseed

Joseph G. Dawson III

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Kingseed, Cole C. and Dawson, Joseph G. III (1995) "Commanders in Chief: Presidential Leadership in Modern Wars," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 48 : No. 2 , Article 23.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol48/iss2/23>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

extension of the U.S. export control laws to cripple these projects. Only one pipeline was eventually built, and it was late, because of serious transmission and pumping problems. Simultaneously, Reagan's people persuaded Saudi Arabia to lower the price of crude oil and expand production, thus saturating the market and reducing the value of Soviet oil and gas exports. Consequently, this attempt by the Soviets to purchase critical modern technology was frustrated.

On the political front, the Soviets were becoming mired in the war in Afghanistan, and Poland's Solidarity movement was threatening the cohesiveness of Eastern Europe. For both symbolic and practical reasons, the Soviets needed to bring these situations under control. William Casey, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, became the peripatetic point man of the U.S. response. The Saudis agreed to supply cash and weapons to the mujahedin and the Pakistanis to give them training and logistical support. The United States undertook to supply cash, intelligence on Soviet targets in Afghanistan, and Stinger anti-air missiles. As a result, well armed mujahedin began to operate with telling effect throughout Afghanistan.

For its part, Solidarity received financial assistance and the tools of "information warfare" (in the form of public relations). Various techniques were used to funnel money into Poland. Offset presses, desktop publishing systems, photocopiers, and fax machines were smuggled into the country, with the evident cooperation of shipping companies and bordering nations. With this support, Solidarity remained alive

and became an above-ground movement, openly challenging the regime.

On the defense front, the Reagan administration embraced the Strategic Defense Initiative, which gave the Soviets serious heartburn because they could not match that technology. Their only counter would have been to build enough nuclear missiles to overwhelm the American strategic defense system; to do so, however, would have been ruinously expensive for a Soviet economy already strained by defense to the breaking point.

In retrospect, the Soviet Union was in serious decline by the 1980s, which raises an important question that the author leaves unanswered. Was Reagan's strategy the key to victory, as Schweizer asserts, or was it just international gamesmanship? Pressuring the Soviet Union on all fronts was a high-risk strategy. Had a more traditional leader than Gorbachev arrived on the scene, the Soviet reaction might have been violent. Today's practitioners of strategy and policy may think that the most important question that Schweizer leaves unanswered is: Would the game be worth the risk again?

FRANK C. MAHNCKE  
Washington, D.C.

---

Dawson, Joseph G., III, ed. *Commanders in Chief: Presidential Leadership in Modern Wars*. Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 1993. 226pp. \$12.95

The president's roles as chief spokesman for foreign policy and the commander in chief in war has long fascinated the American public. In *Commanders In*

## 154 Naval War College Review

*Chief*, editor Joseph Dawson explores the multiple dimensions of presidential leadership in modern wars. Based on an April 1990 symposium sponsored by the Military Studies Institute at Texas A&M University, the book is a collection of essays focusing on six twentieth-century chief executives, ranging from William McKinley to Richard Nixon, and their conduct of war from the turn of the century to the Vietnam War. To complete the analyses of presidential leadership, the editor has included George Bush and his role in the Persian Gulf conflict. After surveying the actions of the men who bore the principal responsibilities of wartime leadership, Dawson concludes that each president himself largely determines the extent to which he discharges his responsibility as commander in chief. Also, and not surprisingly, our wartime presidents have tended to be rather controversial, resulting in highly partisan debates over the merits and shortcomings of their respective policies.

What makes this book enlightening is the thoughtful analysis of our chief executives by a team of eminent historians. In their essays, Lewis Gould and Robert Ferrell present highly provocative revisionist interpretations of their subjects. Gould challenges the traditional view that William McKinley divorced himself from military affairs. According to Gould, McKinley was a much more active and innovative executive than conventional impressions indicate, and in many respects the first modern American commander in chief. Ferrell takes a more sobering view of Woodrow Wilson and concludes that Wilson's dogmatic hatred of war itself

led him to abrogate his military responsibilities. The role of commander in chief, states Ferrell, was utterly foreign to his being.

Far more traditional are the verdicts of Franklin Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman. Noted Roosevelt scholar Warren F. Kimball views his subject as the most dynamic wartime president since Lincoln. No chief executive, argues Kimball, so skillfully combined his roles as president and military commander as did FDR; Roosevelt operated deftly in a realm that balanced his domestic politics, wartime strategies, and postwar goals. Clayton James confers equally high marks on Truman, whom he believes relished his role as commander in chief and whose fate it was to make many critical military decisions. Indeed, James considers Truman to have been comparatively free of skullduggery and deceit, and nowhere more so than during the final four months of World War II and the first two and a half years of the conflict in Korea.

The conduct of the Vietnam War by Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon is the subject of two intriguing essays by Frank E. Vandiver and Stephen Ambrose. Both authors emphasize the diversity of challenges confronting each of these presidents and conclude that whereas Johnson was a "reluctant hawk," Nixon was a "belligerent dove." Johnson, consumed by the primacy of domestic politics, wore his commander in chief's hat with nagging discomfort, says Vandiver, while Ambrose concludes that Nixon was never free to act as he thought best since it was his fate to preside over the retraction of American power from Vietnam. By the time Nixon became

president, escalation of the war was no longer a viable political option; thus he accepted Johnson's decision not to reinforce American armed forces in Vietnam after March 1968.

The editor has compiled a superlative collection of essays that examine what columnist George Will describes as the most significant power of the commander in chief, the presidential role that has come to predominate over all others. Professor Roger A. Beaumont of Texas A&M has stated that these issues require serious scholarship and analysis is still required. In *Commanders In Chief*, he and his colleagues have taken the initial step.

COLE C. KINGSEED  
Colonel, U.S. Army

---

Zaffiri, Samuel. *Westmoreland: A Biography of General William C. Westmoreland*. New York: William Morrow, 1994. 502pp. \$25

This is the first attempt at a postwar biography of General William C. Westmoreland, who, with Lyndon Johnson and Robert McNamara, was one of the three major American figures permanently marked by the Vietnam War. It was written by Samuel Zaffiri (*Hamburger Hill, May 11-20, 1969*, 1988) in the style of popular history. It is apparently not an authorized biography.

Westmoreland is described in his early years as an extremely ambitious young man, as evidenced by his graduating in the West Point class of 1936 as first captain. His early service was in the field artillery of the brown-shoe army, and in World War II he was

in Europe with the 9th Infantry Division. Subsequent to the war, a transfer to the infantry was followed by four years in airborne duty at Fort Bragg. Increasingly, he was marked as a comer with great ambition.

Beginning with his stint as a brigadier general, commanding the 187th Regimental Combat Team in the last year of the Korean War, Westmoreland's star rose both figuratively and literally. His assignments were, in order, as secretary of the Army General Staff under Maxwell Taylor, commander of the 101st Airborne, Superintendent of West Point, and commander of the XVIII Airborne Corps. All this culminated in his assignment in January 1964 as deputy to Paul Harkins, whom he succeeded as Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COM-USMACV) the following summer. The remainder of the book, about 80 percent of it, is related to Vietnam, directly or indirectly. It is, of course, Westmoreland's connection with that war which makes him a significant military figure of the "American Century."

Early on, Zaffiri attempts to explain why Westmoreland was selected for this major command. His answer is wandering and elaborate, invoking Janowitz's writings and Westmoreland's southern accent. What nonsense. Westmoreland was selected primarily because among those being considered he was the only one recommended by Maxwell Taylor, who was influential because he was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Taylor's recommendation was largely based on Westmoreland's reputation as a trainer of troops, particularly at Fort