



**Masters and Commanders:
How Four Titans Won the War
in the West, 1941–1945**

by Andrew Roberts

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Reviewed by

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This is *not* that Patrick O’Brian novel about British seapower. Rather, it is a superlative account of the management of World War II by the West’s two major allies. The “Masters” are President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his determined counterpart in London, Prime Minister Winston Churchill. The “Commanders” are the respective uninformed subordinates of these elected civilian leaders, General George Marshall and General Alan Brooke. Crafted by gifted British historian Andrew Roberts, the book is part biography, part strategic history, and part study of the “clash of cultures” that is civil-military relations.

In *The Making of Strategy*, Williamson Murray, Alvin Bernstein, and Macgregor Knox noted the important factors that influence the development of strategy: geography, history, the nature of the regime, ideology, economics, and the organization of government and military institutions. However, they neglected to consider one other contingent element: human personality and the interplay of strong-willed allies.

Masters and Commanders is a remedy with particular relevance today. It dissects the roles of

personality and character in the interplay of the relationships between these four fiercely strong-willed leaders. The interaction of their biases, animosities, egos, and personalities had a huge influence on the conduct of the war and the strategy that steered the efforts of American and British forces. This, then, is a history of the relationship between “the four chief strategists of the Western Allies, the quartet of power that ultimately crafted the victories that were to come.” As the principals were not timid and labored under significant stress, the story is not without emotion.

Roberts is the author of a dozen books, mostly biographies. In all his work, he has been careful with details, and *Masters and Commanders* reflects the same mastery of archival sources, including recently discovered contemporaneous notes from British officials. Robert’s brief biographical sketches are delightful. Marshall was self-effacing; Brooke was cold logic on the outside and an emotional wreck on the inside. Marshall was quietly determined to influence Allied strategy, and his remote and seemingly heartless coalition partner was equally bent on preserving his nation’s interests.

Churchill is covered in detail, warts and all. Roberts concludes that “he was a genius, and the madcap schemes he occasionally came up with were merely the tiny portion of inevitable detritus that floated in the wash of his greatness.” The author fails to capture the elusiveness of Roosevelt as well as James McGregor Burns did in *The Lion and the Fox*, which is absent from the bibliography. However, Roberts offsets this deficiency when recognizing that of the four, “the man who most influenced the course of the war was the one who openly acknowledged that he knew the least about grand strategy: Franklin Delano Roosevelt.”

No one should be surprised that Roosevelt and Churchill

were continually at odds with their leading military men, and Roberts captures that inherent civil-military cultural clash. Marshall and Brooke were fearless with their masters, whose explosive tempers and extraordinary sense of duty they matched. The situation is exacerbated by what Professor Colin Gray calls the “reciprocal ignorance” of the two spheres that lacked the perspective, background, and knowledge base to appreciate the other side.

Masters and Commanders brings out the benefits of candid, even hotly debated, dialogue. The emphasis is on the “dialogue” and its product. Roosevelt and Churchill dominated the aims but did not dictate policy, and Marshall and Brooke frequently challenged them on the aims and the restraints placed upon means. The Commanders served as a crucial bridge not only to ensure that strategy was both suitable and appropriate but also to maintain the linkages between policy and military plans.

History suggests that civil-military relations are not mechanistic or about the subordination of strategy to policy. The process is a reciprocal one in which masters and commanders interact in a disciplined and comprehensive search for viable solutions. As Eliot Cohen has properly stressed in *Supreme Command*, political and military matters are not separate and distinct spheres of responsibility. The roles overlap, as suggested by Churchill’s famous dictum, “At the summit strategy and policy are one.” Answers to questions generated by the process should be part of a continuous dialogue, “a running conversation” at the strategic level. Other scholars such as Hew Strachan have joined with Cohen, concluding that the normative model of Samuel Huntington’s *The Soldier and the State* “is proving profoundly dysfunctional to the waging of war in the twenty-first century.” This is borne out during the many confer-

ences and summits detailed by Roberts. These running conversations certainly did involve ends, ways, and means in an iterative and interactive process that impacted policy as much as strategy.

Masters and Commanders details this harmonization of ends, ways, and means. Roosevelt did not merely set policy and await his commander’s proposals for implementation, nor did Marshall and his acid-tongued colleague simply accept goals that were beyond realistic attainment with the means available. The process can be one of cooperative engagement if possible, but if necessary, *collaborative confrontation* must occur. Roberts tells the history of a series of confrontations where the synergy of the collaboration was superior to the sum of the individuals.

In his book *Modern Strategy*, Colin Gray noted that “the human dimension of strategy is so basic and obvious that it often escapes notice by scholars with a theoretical bent.” Kudos to Andrew Roberts for reminding us of this enduring but too often overlooked dimension of strategy, and for writing an intricate story of the interplay of politics, policy, and personality. When the stakes were high and tempers were flying, compromise and concerted action were the outcome at the end of the day. At times, the process was tedious, and it was almost always messy. But the result was victory. **JFQ**

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