



The Lion and the Tiger: The Commander-in-Chief's Relationship to Political Power

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Ferdinand Foch and Georges Clemenceau have remained in the collective memory as the two inseparable pillars of the 1918 victory, brought together by exceptional events, their fierce will to win and their patriotism. M. Mathieu Messonnier explains Foch's relations with the political power; multiple and marked by a style that is his own: frank and direct. But the trust that should accompany them is not always there.

Ferdinand Foch and Georges Clemenceau have remained in the collective memory as the two inseparable pillars of the 1918 victory, brought together by exceptional events, their fierce will to win and their patriotism. Yet they were profoundly dissimilar in their backgrounds and personal convictions: one military, Catholic, raised in the Bonapartist movement, the other political, free-thinker and radical republican.

To study the relationship between the generalissimo of the Allied armies and "Father Victory", the President of the Council, is both to seek to better understand the reasons for success, but also to explore the complex relationship of the military leader with political power, since history and institutions have separated these two functions.

The aim here will be, first of all, to highlight the links forged in the parliamentary sphere by Marshal Foch, around and beyond the person of Clemenceau, then to finally, we will observe the balance between complementarity and subordination during the war and at the time of making peace.

The "Foch network" in the political world

The military and the political are not two bodies irremediably separated, with no possible mixing. Reality, today as yesterday, is infinitely more subtle, subject to infinite variations. In pre-1914 society, officers and politicians were largely recruited from identical social

backgrounds, even if the Dreyfus affair and the separation of church and state marked a break. The World War will also lead to an intermixing that will bring a whole nation into uniform. Foch's relationship with Clemenceau and, more broadly, with political authority, was not written on a blank page but in the midst of many other encounters, a veritable social network before its time. Indeed, Marshal Foch relied on his knowledge of the parliamentary world, born before and during the conflict, in the spirit of what he had wanted to create in creating his own network.¹, which at the time was in the wake of the École de guerre, where he encouraged his trainees to attend Sciences-Po and industrial circles. While it is difficult to have an exhaustive view of the situation, we can try here to get an overview through three groups: his former students or subordinates who had entered politics, members of Parliament and, finally, the members of Georges Clemenceau's family who had served under him, in each case through two prominent figures.

Among his former students and subordinates, two personalities stand out, both officers who entered politics and became ministers during the First World War. The first is General Adolphe Messimy. He was Foch's pupil at the War School. Dreyfusard, he left the army. He became a radical deputy for the Seine department (Paris), then Minister of War from 1911 to 1912 and in 1914. He played an important role, for example in the adoption of a camouflaged uniform. Like other MPs, he went to the front as a reserve officer to exercise command, without abandoning his mandate. He is the only member of the House to end the war at the rank of brigadier general. He will be elected senator after the war.

The second is Louis Loucheur. A Polytechnicien, he served under Foch in 1892 and kept in touch with him while pursuing a career in industry. Loucheur would be of invaluable support to Foch once he joined the government as Under-Secretary of State for Artillery and Munitions, in December 1916, and then as Minister of Armaments and Clemenceau's economic adviser at the Peace Conference. Elected as a Member of Parliament after the war, he played a prominent political role, holding numerous government posts in the 1920s.

Two MPs who had served on Foch's staff would influence his career through decisive interventions. The first was André Tardieu. It seems that the two men became friends as early as 1906, while Foch was garrisoned in Orléans. It was probably Tardieu, together with General Millet, who organised Foch's first meeting with Clemenceau, President of the Council, so that he could be appointed Director of the War School. There are several versions of this interview. Beyond the legend that surrounds it, it seems that Clemenceau's decision was well thought out, especially after reading Foch's writings and after having dismissed a file that had been compiled against him by his own chief of military staff, a candidate for the position! During the war, Tardieu served under Foch, then returned to the Assembly and continued his journalistic activities. He will have a significant role in Joffre's disgrace and then in Foch's return. In the spring of 1916, he published anonymously in the mainstream press two articles - uncensored - very hostile to Joffre. It is not certain that Foch had provoked these very inspired tributes from his own, non-public criticism, but it is certain that he wrote to Tardieu to congratulate him. He will, finally, be plenipotentiary at the Peace Conference, where, remaining close to Clemenceau, he will separate from Foch.

The second deputy to play a decisive role in favour of Foch during the war was Charles Meunier-Surcouf, who was his commanding officer. In the spring of 1916, he organised a

meeting with Clemenceau to enable Foch to share his ideas on the conduct of the war with the man who was still only Chairman of the Senate Army Commission. Furthermore, he circulated a note to Parliament calling for the French army to finally be given a leader. On this basis, he is the architect of a meeting between Foch and General Roques, Minister of War. Moreover, after Foch was dismissed, it was Charles Meunier-Surcouf who led Painlevé, who had become Minister of War, to meet him in Senlis, silencing rumours about his health. This meeting was essential, as it was from this meeting that Foch was to be entrusted with new responsibilities, particularly in Italy and beyond.

Finally, in this cluster of relationships, two of Clemenceau's acquaintances, his brother Albert and his son Michel, also acted as intermediaries in the shadows. Both served under Foch's orders in his staff. Albert Clemenceau, in the first part of the conflict, was the architect of meetings between General Foch and his brother, following the example of Tardieu and Meunier-Surcouf. Michel Clemenceau, for his part, was briefly assigned to Foch at the beginning of 1918, even though his father was President of the Council, and kept a very close eye on the Marshal's actions .

Frankness and trust?

Foch's relations with the political authorities were therefore multiple and important. They are also marked by his own style: frank and direct. But the trust that should accompany them is not always there.

With Clemenceau, as with the other heads of state and government, Foch is very frank and direct. Before his first meeting with Clemenceau, General Millet had advised him: "Don't be a little Saint-Jean; with him you need fencing...". Foch seems never to have given up. Many examples are reported, no doubt some of them embellished afterwards, but they are well worth Churchill's exchanges with de Gaulle! Between Foch and Clemenceau, fencing will not always be with speckled foil. In the spring of 1918, shortly before the Doullens conference, when the French and British fronts were in the middle of the war, he said to Clemenceau: "It is not by having lunch that one leads battles!" Or again shortly afterwards: "Do you think you can teach me how to fight in a war?"

His relationship with the Allied leaders is not much more borrowed when it takes place in critical situations when will and morale are essential to hold on "no matter what", to get killed on the spot, and to hold on to an inch of ground before returning to the attack. This was the case with the King of the Belgians in northern France at the end of 1914; it was also the case with Orlando and the King of Italy in 1917. However, Foch should not be caricatured in general as a man who gave his four truths to the wrong people. This is obviously not the case. He has a sense of duty, of his responsibility towards history, of the urgency of situations. He also remained a teacher and, in some respects, a diplomat, aware that it was more important to convince than to impose, even if this sometimes took the form of "shelling", as in the day spent on the train with Orlando, at the end of 1917, to convince him to resist on the Piave. Clemenceau reproached him for not giving enough orders to the Allies, but Foch did not see things that way: "We talked, we discussed and, without appearing to do so, I brought them to my idea little by little. I was bringing them a solution. But I didn't impose it on them. They were happy. I was trying to convince them. Sometimes it took a little time. But we always succeeded."

This frankness could have gone hand in hand with a real trust between the Commander-in-Chief and the political power. This was regularly the case. With the foreign officials, we can cite the case of the King of Italy who, when Cadorna was replaced by Diaz, confided to Foch that he could not appoint the Duke of Aosta, because defeated he would have compromised the dynasty, victorious he would have taken the throne... In the same way, there was trust, or at least real esteem, between him and Clemenceau. Although anticlerical, Clemenceau, arriving unexpectedly at Foch's headquarters while the latter was at mass, asked not to be disturbed: "It worked out too well for him. I will wait". In a more political aspect, on 4 June 1918, when the military situation was very difficult and Foch offered him his resignation and asked if he would go to a council of war, Clemenceau defended him very vigorously in the National Assembly, putting his resignation in the balance himself!

But between the two men, mistrust remained. For Foch, Clemenceau remains a "politician" with all the pejorative aspects. The opposite is true of Clemenceau who, like others, before and after him, had him watched for various reasons: clericalism, Caesarism... In reality, this is only the symptom of a wider phenomenon. In France, as abroad, politicians regretted having, at the beginning of the conflict, left the generals "with a strap around their necks". To a large extent, they considered that this "too much" autonomy in the conduct of operations was the cause of the human losses and the poor military situation in 1916 and 1917. It was one of the reasons for the dismissal of Joffre and Nivelle and the rise of Foch. Painlevé pushed Foch to counter Nivelle, then to limit Pétain's power and his hold on the army so that he would not take the ascendancy that Joffre had. Clemenceau will do the same. Poincaré plays Foch against Clemenceau. Lloyd George himself pushes Foch to counter the influence of Haig or Wilson. Clemenceau sees an opportunity. Foch, appreciated by the British and then by the Americans, appeared capable of keeping them in the alliance and counterbalancing the loss of numerical weight of the French armies. Foch, the craftsman of victory, was therefore the instrument of other political objectives that would come to light at the time of making peace.

Through Foch, Clemenceau also wanted to wage war directly. He spends a third of his time at the front. He went to Foch's HQ almost every day, officially to relieve him of the non-military aspects of the conduct of operations. He sometimes gave orders over the commander-in-chief, especially if business was not to his liking. Highly intrusive, he actually seeks to control Foch. He also keeps an eye on relations with allies, even inviting himself to a bilateral exchange when necessary. Foch will therefore have to defend his field of competence in the face of these repeated interferences, complaining to the President of the Republic, Poincaré. Both Clemenceau and Foch were convinced that if they were unable to repel the German offensive, to hold out and then drive the enemy back, they would both be replaced by others who would make peace to the detriment of France. Because the Fatherland is in danger, their collaboration is necessary. But it sometimes takes the form of a power struggle. It will end with peace.

Cedant arma togæ, concedat laurea linguæ

The war has blurred the respective fields of responsibility of the political and the military and, therefore, the bond of subordination. When everything becomes military, what is left for politics? Where does the authority of the commander-in-chief end? Can it be confined to operations, when operations dictate all aspects of national life? The question is all the

more sensitive as Foch will gradually develop an extensive vision of his competences. The politicians in power, Clemenceau in the first place, will seek to confine his influence.

In the minds of both the Commander-in-Chief and the President of the Council, there was a complementarity between their functions: in Foch, military operations, in Clemenceau, the rear, the war effort and politics. The subordination of the military to politics persists; the last word goes to the Government. But before the last word, discussions are possible, even with a struggle for influence.

During the conflict, it happened several times that relations were sufficiently tense for Painlevé and Clemenceau to remind Foch, in private and sometimes in front of the allies, that he was expected to obey or to keep quiet. This is the case when Foch tries to escape the role that Painlevé wants him to play in the investigation against Nivelle after the failure of the Chemin des Dames. It is also the case, in the war committee, when Clemenceau can declare before Foch and Pétain: "I alone am responsible here", or when, before the British, he prevents Foch from defending his idea of a general reserve and from expressing a point of view diverging from his own, imposing silence on him.

If Clemenceau must consent to Foch's manoeuvring for the signing of the armistice, because the temporary cessation of fighting remains in the military domain, peace is a matter for the Government. For him, without question, the work of the military is over, now it is time for politics and diplomacy. In this, he is supported by Lloyd George and Wilson. Marshal Foch considers his participation in the Peace Conference to be a matter of course. This is not the case. He will not be a member of the French delegation. Clemenceau kept him aside, arguing that he could not be part of the French plenipotentiaries since his duties made him dependent on the allies. Foch would like to obtain lasting guarantees, especially control of the left bank of the Rhine; Clemenceau considered the proposal unrealistic and a cause of rupture with the allies, whom he wished to keep at France's side. An open conflict ensued between the two men. The marshal will launch a real campaign against the president of the Council.

In this political struggle, no doubt because he had not really wanted to acquire the codes of the Illrd Republic, Foch left with a handicap. He approached the President of the Senate and the President of the National Assembly. He sought Poincaré's intervention, invoking the constitutional laws that gave him the power to negotiate treaties or to convene the Council of Ministers, but unaware that since 1877, these prerogatives were the sole responsibility of the President of the Council, Clemenceau! He asked and obtained, against all custom, to speak before the Council of Ministers. For Clemenceau, it could only be a statement without debate or deliberation, since Foch was not a member of the Council. Otherwise, he threatens to resign. After his speech, Foch must leave at Clemenceau's request, who can then take over. Despite his repeated requests, Clemenceau refuses to communicate the clauses of the treaty, which, according to him, is the sole responsibility of the Government. He only learned of them from his British counterpart. Foch also had recourse to the foreign press, the French press remaining subject to censorship. He attracted the wrath of the allies in addition to that of Clemenceau. He was forced to resign, referring the blame for the disputed remarks to his staff and journalists. Finally, he obtained the right to speak before the allied heads of state at the Peace Conference, where he developed a position contrary to that of his government. He is not listened to. It is a failure.

If Foch cannot be dismissed because of his popularity and his military aura, which imposes it on both the Allies and the Germans, making him still indispensable, the two men become irreconcilable. The rivalry becomes more intense. Foch refused to be present at the signing of the treaty at Versailles so as not to serve as a guarantee for the President of the Council. Domestic politics aggravated the situation. Clemenceau thinks that Foch could be his rival in the upcoming presidential election. Many people are working on it and want the Marshal to become a deputy or senator in order to run. Foch refuses to do so, but he will have Clemenceau defeated, inciting parliamentarians who ask his opinion not to vote for him. Clemenceau, for his part, refused to attend the marshal's funeral.

What lessons?

Are there any lessons to be drawn from this historical experience for today's officers?
Three perhaps:

- **the relations Foch forged in the parliamentary world were indispensable to him to make his ideas on the conduct of the war prevail. Some of these relationships had been forged before the conflict. He had himself theorised them by creating CHEM and advocating the opening up of the future military elite to society;**
- **Beyond his personal style, his frankness manifested above all his willingness to exercise the fullness of his military attributions as Government Counsel and then Commander in Chief. Handled in a timely manner, it remains an essential expectation, the political leader being able to exercise his prerogatives only with full knowledge of the facts;**
- **as was the case later in June, but unlike de Gaulle, Foch found himself finally confined to the role of Cassandra, for lack of having mastered the rules of the Third Republic or having agreed to become a ^{politician}. For, as Cicero stressed, if weapons give way to the toga - cedant arma togae - it is not only because of political principle, it is also because, concedat laurea linguae, perhaps more than weapons, ideas shape the world that men would like to shape.**

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