

# HAIL, COLUMBIA

by Charles R. Kesler

FOR THE GENERATIONS OF AMERICANS WHO GREW UP WATCHING "Star Trek" and "Star Wars," it's almost impossible to react to the loss of the space shuttle Columbia as some of our parents and grandparents might have, shaking their heads in sorrowful exasperation: those brave young men and women had no business up there in the first place. Homer Hickam's sweet memoir, *Rocket Boys*, captures the transition vividly. If you grew up watching satellites in the night sky and humans rocketing into space, doubts don't register. Space is the final frontier.

For the Columbia astronauts, that turned out to be grimly true. But in their lives, and less impressively in our own, Captain Kirk's mantra expresses a heartfelt assumption. *Of course* space is the final frontier, which mankind, perhaps alongside Vulcans, Wookies, and other rational species, will explore and occupy. A future, however distant, without the Galactic Republic or the United Federation of Planets would be not only a disappointment but a surprise.

But why, exactly? The urge to explore space ("conquer" has fallen out of favor) is usually justified as a scientific imperative. In its cruder version, the argument is that the space program creates "spinoffs." There are many of these—not including, by the way, the products most associated with astronauts, Tang, Velcro, and Teflon, which the *Los Angeles Times* notes were all developed independently of the space effort. Although NASA's list of spinoffs is long, it's a little deflating to find on it, alongside CAT scans, such breakthroughs as smoke detectors and cordless drills.

So its advocates typically offer a second scientific argument for America's space program. This might be called the "pure theory of space exploration": forget utility, it's all for the sake of knowledge. We have to explore the universe in order to satisfy our desire, as a species, to know. There is a certain nobility to this argument, but it shoots too high and begs too many questions. As a species, after all, we're ignorant of many things. Why is it more important to probe the vastness of space rather than the ocean depths? For that matter, why astrophysics and not metaphysics? Thus the idealism of this appeal often collapses back into the materialist logic of spinoffs: the knowledge that comes from exploring space will relieve man's estate more reliably than oceanography, let alone fruitless metaphysics.

Modern science's idealism is elusive; in its own way, utopian. It can't help trying to turn the earth into a paradise...unless instead it tries to lift

man off the earth and into paradise. The latter is a revealing variation on the pure theory of space exploration. If human imperfections (e.g., greed, wars, budget cuts) frustrate science in its desire to transform the earth, then the alternative is to transform man by taking him away from the earth.

Here one encounters the romanticism of manned space-flight at its most extravagant: we as a species must soar into the heavens because we expect to discover heaven, a pure, beautiful, undefiled realm in which man himself can be regenerated. Space represents a second chance for mankind, a new world where we may start over and avoid our earthly mistakes. Though itself a product of mundane political bargaining, the international space station is a symbol of this aspiration, that through scientific cooperation men may overcome all their political and cultural divisions.

The same impulse sparks the resistance to the "militarization" of space. This pristine realm should not be forced to give up its innocence, to spoil its promise by taking sides, as it were, in the human fray. Yet man can't avoid taking the earth with him into space, because he takes his nature with him, with all the moral virtues and vices that entails.

In the happy faces of the Columbia crew before liftoff and while in orbit, we saw something that had nothing to do with spinoffs or the accumulation of knowledge: the sheer fun of the adventure. Their joy was connected, of course, to the mission's riskiness, for both as participants and observers we recognize that great and noble deeds, including deeds of exploration, make a kind of claim on the human soul. It was not the crew's racial, ethnic, and international diversity that made the ship's loss so poignant. It was the fact that this multifarious equality culminated in so many expressions of human excellence. Theirs was, in that sense, a very American story.

We need to remind ourselves that most exploring has been tied, one way or another, to empire; to the military, diplomatic, and commercial dictates of politics. This consideration, so clear in the space program's formative anxieties about Sputnik and Yuri Gagarin, has faded from mind, leaving the space program adrift. We honor the Columbia Seven best by thinking boldly about space exploration and exploitation, commercial and governmental. When he stepped off the ladder and onto the surface of the moon, Neil Armstrong declared that he had taken a giant step "for mankind," and he had. But he planted on the lunar surface an American flag.

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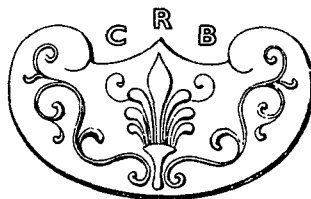
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## SOLDIERS, STATESMEN, AND VICTORY

*Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime,*  
by Eliot A. Cohen. Free Press, 288 pages, \$25

Book Review by Angelo M. Codevilla

THE GREAT WAR STATESMEN, AS ELIOT A. Cohen calls them, are great in part because they insist that war is too important a business to be left to generals. Such statesmen “ask too many questions” and issue too many orders “about tactics, particular pieces of hardware, the design of a campaign, measures of success,” and other matters allegedly best left to the generals. *Supreme Command* is an enlightening study of four political men—Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, Georges Clemenceau, and David Ben-Gurion—who succeeded in war while dominating their military subordinates, as well as a discussion of how American statesmen messed up wars in Vietnam and the Persian Gulf by behaving unlike these model commanders. It ends by drawing lessons from these positive and negative examples of civil-military relations.

Cohen’s apology, at the outset, for his “hero worship” of the book’s main characters is lost on this reviewer, who shares his admiration for them. What’s more, *Supreme Command* is full of instructive stories and easily fulfills its cover billing as “a good read.” The further the reader gets into the book, however, the more he is likely to doubt its thesis that success in war is somehow dependent on any kind of proper relations between civilian and military leadership. Rather, Cohen’s examples suggest two propositions that the book does not deal with explicitly. First, the correctness of the decisions is more important than whether the person who makes them wears a uniform or civilian garb. Second, the most important of those decisions is to identify what victory is and to pursue it through changing circumstances.

The book begins by setting up a straw man, albeit one with an impressive pedigree: the “normal theory of civil-military relations.” Elaborated

by Samuel Huntington, and endorsed by the U.S. military, this theory holds that the civilian leadership sets the goals of war, and then gets out of the military’s way as it accomplishes its task according to its professional expertise. This is the book’s intellectual framework. Cohen rightly emphasizes its congruence with Clausewitz’s notion of war as the pursuit of political ends. Cohen of course knows that wars have been botched by civilians as well as by military men and that just as some military men have proved to be more politically astute than their civilian superiors (de Gaulle comes to mind), so some civilians have been more competent militarily than their generals. Still, following Clausewitz, Cohen points out that there can be no principled distinctions between the political and military realms of judgment—only prudential ones. Given this, one wonders why Cohen focuses the book on civil-military interaction, rather than on who in particular cases is right, who is mistaken, to what extent, and why.

The chapter on Lincoln is the book’s highlight. Here was a military amateur who understood above all what the war was about, who instructed himself in the details of military technology and operations, and who then set about choosing, as well as closely supervising, military subordinates. It is clear from Cohen’s account that Lincoln might well have followed the “normal theory” if his generals had been up to their tasks, but that he involved himself to the extent he did because he was more competent than they militarily as well as politically. He understood better than his credentialed elites, for example, that the increased range of rifles as compared to musketry would expose infantry to fire over a greater portion of their charges. Above all, he understood what it would

take to win the war, and wanted to win more passionately than they.

Cohen writes that Lincoln’s greatest contribution was his understanding of what victory would consist of and of what would bring it about. This contribution was greatest not because it came from the political leader of the United States, but because it happened to be correct. Cohen correctly praises Lincoln for changing his basic objective—restoration of the Union with slavery restricted but not abolished—when the war itself demanded the change. And he praises him for *not* changing the operational goal toward which he relentlessly drove his generals from the war’s beginning to its end: the destruction of the Confederate armies. In this connection, Cohen cites approvingly Lincoln’s order to Grant, which the general then pressed upon his own subordinates: “Watch [this priority] every day and hour and force it.” Clearly, the changing and not changing, the watching and the forcing, were good because Lincoln’s “theory of victory” was right—not the other way around.

Winston Churchill meddled “incurably and unforgivably” with military professionals more accomplished than Lincoln’s. Like Lincoln, Churchill was no respecter of persons. He dealt with others by “a relentless querying of their assumptions and arguments, not just once but in successive iterations of a debate.” In one of the book’s nicest phrases, Cohen tells us that Churchill held his subordinates’ calculations “up to the standards of a massive common sense.” Though Churchill was not trained in science, he learned enough physics and chemistry and biology to understand the controversies among scientists on matters pertaining to the war effort, enough to apply his “massive common sense” and come up with the right results. To him we owe