

## *From Sword to Sceptre*

**Pétain: A Biography of Marshal Philippe Pétain of Vichy**, by Richard Griffiths, *Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1972. xix + 379 pp. \$10.00.*

BIOGRAPHIES ARE WRITTEN about important people, but especially are they written about important people who are also fascinating personalities and who reveal themselves thoroughly in numerous historical sources. Theodore Roosevelt and Winston Churchill are cases in point. They are irresistible characters for the biographer; they were almost born to be written about. Far more difficult for the careful biographer is a man such as Marshal Pétain, soldier and political leader of the entire World War I—World War II era in the history of France. There are comparatively few really informative records concerning the development of his career. In personality he can hardly be called exciting or attractive. Not many legends or anecdotes can be found to make his story more interesting. He impressed some people with his vanity, others with his reserve. To almost no one did he appear imaginative or creative. Today it is probable that most of those who remember him think of him as the Frenchman who guessed wrong about the outcome of World War II. Nonetheless he deserves biographical attention, and he has got it rather creditably from the hand of Richard Griffiths. Despite all the fury and counter fury that have been stirred up on the subject of Pétain, this author approaches the matter soberly and remarks:

I do not see him as a villain; I do not see him as hero, saint or martyr; I do not even excuse him on grounds of senility. It is not the duty of historian or biographer to accuse or to justify, but to describe and to attempt to explain.

From beginning to end Griffiths tries to re-

main loyal to this sensible outlook. The result is a study that is the equal of any other in the English language, but it is openly dependent on a number of biographical works that have already appeared in French, and in style and quality it lacks the full solidity to be found in Geoffrey Warner's recent biography of Pétain's most important adviser, Pierre Laval.

Pétain had a moderate intelligence in military matters and very little intelligence at all in political matters. At the start of World War I in 1914, when he was fifty-eight years old, he was still barely known among his countrymen (Napoleon Bonaparte, by contrast, was the greatest soldier in Europe before he reached age thirty. When he was forty-five, he was approaching oblivion and exile on the island of St. Helena!). Pétain's ambition never became extraordinary. Evidence that he advanced himself at any time by plot or foul play is altogether missing. And yet at a stage in life when most men are close to retirement or far beyond it, Pétain became a great name, first in the military affairs and then in the political affairs of his country.

How could such things happen? That is the question that the biographer must face. Simply enough it is evident that Pétain's political career rested on his military career. As a hero of the battlefield he became political dynamite in the manner of Washington, Napoleon, and Hindenburg. And yet even here the explanation is not altogether satisfying, for Pétain gained no sensational triumph to compare with Yorktown, Marengo, or Tannenberg, and his role in less striking successes of World War I, even Verdun, has sometimes been regarded as overrated. Overrated or not, Pétain, in the two decades after the war, had a reputation that built on itself. As he advanced in years, people assumed that he was advancing in wisdom. He was esteemed as the proper spokesman of French military thinking. But it is dubious to go beyond the word spokesman and to treat Pétain as the founder and architect of prevailing strategic concepts that would have been vastly

different had there been no Pétain. It is dubious to suppose that without his influence France would have embraced the ideas of de Gaulle and have gone into World War II with a *blitzkrieg* force the equal of Hitler's.

Griffiths is correct in stressing the essential simplicity of Pétain's political opinions. It is no exaggeration to say that these opinions were far less developed than those of the average politically oriented college student. Pétain was not politically oriented. He was in no way fascinated by political theory and argumentation. He was probably bored by these things, and that is why it is silly to identify him with any particular ideology, least of all with Fascism. In a rather conventional way Pétain as a soldier was attracted to ideas that have always been attractive to soldiers. Order and discipline and respect were automatically a part of his way of life, in which there was little effort to encourage the critical spirit. Correspondingly, he was suspicious of innovation and fearful of disorder. So naturally he was opposed to Communism as in turn believers in Communism were bound to be opposed to men like Pétain. But the irony here is that after successful revolutions Communism has invariably sought to inculcate in its followers the very kind of docility that was always taken for granted in the world of Pétain.

Almost inevitably Griffiths raises a question that is bound to disturb any biographer of Pétain. To what extent and in what company and for what political purpose did Pétain seek to gain political power in the year 1940 and beforehand? Eager for an answer, Griffiths runs after evidence far and wide—perhaps too far and too wide. He has to rely on the word of a Drew Pearson-style French journalist, the reports of an Italian press attaché stationed in Paris, and the correspondence which Pétain had with a woman who was one of his American acquaintances. Obviously a case built on sources of this kind is going to be fragile. Furthermore, Griffiths does not pretend that his sources, even if acceptable, will

produce the conclusion that Pétain worked hard to advance himself politically or even that he had strong political ambitions. At most, it can be said that Pétain, now already in his 80's, was pleasantly aware of his political potential and was perhaps willing in some circumstances to take advantage of it. If the Marshal was shrewd in nothing else, he was shrewd in not leaving much trace of any political calculations or maneuvers in which he may have been involved.

When during the war itself Pétain finally entered the cabinet, he apparently did so at the urging of French political leaders who in a moment of national crisis wanted to associate themselves with the prestige of a great name. There had been no need for him to carry on a big personal campaign in order to approach the center of the political stage. On the contrary, he would have had to campaign hard to avoid it. Shortly after taking office, when the French army had suffered irreparable defeats in May and June 1940, he became the open advocate of an armistice with Germany. He wanted the political leadership which had taken France into the war to take her out of it. He had no feeling that the adoption of his policy required that he himself become the head of the government. Unlike Lenin in Russia in 1917 he did not believe that a *coup d'état* was necessary to get the nation on the correct course. If indeed Pétain finally did become premier, it was because his chief opponent, Premier Reynaud, grew faint of heart and resigned his office. Once in power Pétain did not force upon the French people what he alone desired. He simply gave them what they desperately craved—the armistice with Germany. Whether or not ultimately he turned out as a good or bad leader of the French, he could claim, as few other modern leaders could claim, to be the representative of the popular will.

Griffiths quite fairly throws back many of the accusations that have been hurled at Pétain, but there is at least one possible accusation that Griffiths does not seem to rec-

ognize and that seems to have stood the test of time. Pétain was determined to suffer with his people and never to become a detested *émigré*. As he pictured this gesture, he was nobly presenting himself as a gift to the nation. Beyond doubt his spirit of sacrifice here was sincere, but unfortunately it was the all-important thing to Pétain. Apparently it was more important, for example, than dealing effectively with Hitler's Germany. If Pétain had been a little more flexible in his attitude and if right from the time of the armistice negotiations and afterwards he had really threatened a flight to North Africa unless certain conditions for France were met, the Germans might have been more conciliatory. Pétain's regime, after all, had a definite value for them. As things were, however, Pétain's political bargaining power was gravely cut by his moral determination to go on with his personal sacrifice no matter what. The Germans recognized the situation for what it was and acted accordingly to the benefit of themselves and to the injury of France.

Reviewed by BRENTON H. SMITH

## *The Search for Sovereignty*

### **Foreign Affairs and the Constitution,**

by Louis Henkin, *Mineola, N. Y.: The Foundation Press, Inc., 1972. xi + 553 pp. \$11.50.*

"THE CONGRESS," said the Congress in a formal resolution of 1964, "approves and supports the determination of the President, as commander-in-chief, to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression. . . ." The reason was, said the Congress, that "the United States regards as vital to its national interest and to world peace the maintenance of

international peace and security in Southeast Asia." It follows, said the Congress, that "consonant with the Constitution of the United States and the Charter of the United Nations and in accordance with its obligations under the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty, the United States is, therefore, prepared, as the President determines, to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to assist any member or protocol state of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom. . . ."

The congressional thinking behind this Tonkin Bay resolution had been formulated over a period of many years and nowhere more felicitously than in an essay published by Senator Pleniclarus in 1961. "[F]or the existing requirements of American foreign policy, we have hobbled the President by too niggardly a grant of power." The suggestive title of the essay was "American Foreign Policy in the 20th Century under an 18th Century Constitution"; and the Senator started similar views, shortly after his support of the Tonkin Bay resolution, in a second essay entitled "Foreign Policy—Old Myths and New Realities."

Of course it was the same Senator Pleniclarus in his other, later and opposite aspect as Senator Fulbright, who in 1971 led Congress in repealing the Tonkin Bay resolution—at the very time it was appropriating new monies to continue the war and voting down resolutions to end it. In a genial explication in 1967 of his and Congress' semi-schizoid performance on Vietnam, Senator Pleniclarus-Fulbright said the true intent of the Tonkin Bay resolution had been to authorize the "use of armed force" by the President, but not his use of armed forces in any energetic way:

Figuratively speaking, we did not deal with the resolution in terms of what it said and in terms of the power it would vest in the Presidency; we dealt with it in terms of how we thought it would be used by the man who occupied the Presidency.