11. Commander in Chief: FDR as Leader of the Nation’s Armed Forces

No American president, with the possible exception of Abraham Lincoln, bore a graver responsibility as commander in chief of the armed forces than Franklin D. Roosevelt. And no president was more active in meeting that responsibility.

FDR led the United States through the most destructive war the world had ever seen, a struggle in which the American way of life hung in the balance. He took a direct, decisive hand in American diplomacy and strategy in that conflict, aspects of wartime leadership that were not easily separated.

In part by cultivating firsthand relationships with his counterparts, Britain’s Winston Churchill and the Soviet Union’s Joseph Stalin, FDR drew together and carefully managed the Allied coalition that ultimately defeated the forces of fascism in Europe and militarism in Asia. FDR transformed the way the United States would execute its foreign policy and in the process gave America a much more prominent role in world affairs.

FDR was largely responsible for preparing a reluctant America to wage all-out war. Before the United States entered the conflict, he pushed for a massive buildup in American
armed forces and weapons production, and he led the fight—over the objections of his chiefs of staff—to increase American military aid to Britain in the critical summer of 1940, when it stood alone against the Nazis. Then FDR conceived and developed the generous Lend-Lease program that would make America “the great arsenal of democracy,” providing tens of billions of dollars worth of crucial war supplies to its allies.

Once the United States had entered the war, FDR was an active strategist. He selected his top commanders personally and with care, and created the institutional structures that would allow the president himself to direct wartime strategy. It was FDR who insisted that the joint Anglo-American military command body, the Combined Chiefs of Staff, be based in Washington, DC—making the American capital, and not London, the principal nerve center of the war. Determined to open a second front in the war to relieve the Russians fighting in the East, FDR was the key figure in the decision to launch an Allied invasion of North Africa in 1942.

FDR, in short, was deeply engaged in all aspects of the war. It is to a great extent thanks to his decisive and inspiring leadership that the United States, in just a few short years, went from being a largely unarmed and unprepared isolationist state—with an army that in 1939 was smaller than Portugal’s and ranked seventeenth in the world—to the most powerful nation on the planet.

At a September 1944 conference in Hawaii to plan military strategy in the Pacific, Franklin D. Roosevelt confers with, from left to right, General Douglas MacArthur, Admiral William D. Leahy, and Admiral Chester W. Nimitz. MacArthur and Nimitz each commanded a large section of the Pacific Theater and would join the next month in a major drive to retake the Philippines from the Japanese. Leahy, as chief of staff to the president, advised FDR on war strategy and liaised with the service chiefs. TOL.
The Creation of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Birth of National Security Policy

It was Franklin D. Roosevelt's strong desire to personally direct U.S. foreign and military policy as president. This required a fundamental shift in the U.S. approach to foreign policy and in what it meant to be America's commander in chief. It also meant creating a massive new national security structure to support the new approach.

FDR began building this national security apparatus in the summer of 1939, when he appointed General George C. Marshall as army chief of staff and Admiral Harold R. Stark as chief of naval operations. He then transferred the command structure in which the two men served—the Joint Army and Navy Board responsible for war planning—to the newly created Executive Offices of the President. This shift forged a direct link between the president and his military chiefs, establishing America's first true national security body. It made the members of the Joint Army and Navy Board the president's foremost and immediate strategic advisors, allowing FDR to bypass his civilian secretaries of war and navy, as well as his secretary of state, in executing military policy. FDR also ordered the several military-procurement agencies to report directly to him.

In January 1942, shortly after America joined the war, FDR reshaped the Joint Army and Navy Board into the Joint Chiefs of Staff—a unified high command to work with British military chiefs in prosecuting the war. The new body included the commander of the U.S. Army Air Forces, General Henry "Hap" Arnold; the commander of the U.S. Fleet, Admiral Ernest J. King; Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall; and, to advise the president and liaise with the three service chiefs, Admiral William D. Leahy in the newly created position of chief of staff to the president.

In 1942 FDR also created America's first true international intelligence gathering agency, the Office of Strategic Services, precursor to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). He was also the first president to create a "Map Room" or "situation room" in the White House to keep track of the progress of the war.

Taken together, these moves represent a significant consolidation of power inside the White House. They made FDR the sole coordinating link among America's various foreign-policy agencies, allowing him to merge foreign and military policies under the general rubric of national security policy—and to become much more closely involved than his predecessors in crafting and executing that policy. FDR's leadership in the war led to a permanent restructuring of America's foreign, intelligence, and military policy-making establishment, formalized in the immediate postwar years through the creation of such institutions as the National Security Council, the office of the National Security Advisor, the CIA, and the Department of Defense.
The Germany First Strategy

The Japanese assault on Pearl Harbor, the Philippines, and other American, British, and Dutch territories in Southeast Asia in December 1941 brought full-scale war to the Pacific region. It also directed the American people’s anger toward Japan. Yet there was no question that Germany posed a far greater threat to American security.

Even before America entered the war, Franklin D. Roosevelt had agreed with British prime minister Winston Churchill to a policy of defeating Germany before committing substantial military resources to fight the Japanese. This “Germany First” strategy focusing Allied might against the Nazis had become even more critical as America’s other major ally, the Soviet Union, struggled in the latter half of 1941 to beat back a German assault of unprecedented scale and ferocity.

In the months after Pearl Harbor, with American forces fully engaged in the struggle to defend the Philippines and prevent the Japanese from taking more territory, some American commanders began to question the Germany First policy. But FDR steadfastly refused any attempt to alter or weaken the strategy, and, recognizing the need to get the American people and military involved in the struggle against Germany as soon as possible, ordered the invasion of North Africa in 1942.

This operation, code-named Torch, was put in place over the objection of FDR’s own chiefs of staff. It began as planned in November 1942 under the direction of Lieutenant General Dwight D. Eisenhower, and it would sweep all Axis forces from North Africa by May 1943.

American wings over the North African desert, December 1942. Franklin D. Roosevelt had ordered the operation against Axis powers in French North Africa as a compromise. FDR was intent on keeping the United States engaged against Germany, but accepted the British insistence that the Allies were not yet prepared to attack Nazi-occupied France. LOC
Franklin D. Roosevelt and George C. Marshall

For many historians, Franklin D. Roosevelt remains the preeminent political leader of the twentieth century. The man who holds an equivalent stature in the military sphere is General George C. Marshall.

Unlike such field commanders as Dwight D. Eisenhower, Omar Bradley, or George S. Patton, who would become household names in America during the war, General Marshall was not so well known among the public. But Army Chief of Staff Marshall played a crucial role in the war—as creator of the fighting force that would lead the country to victory; as the key figure in the Anglo-American war council, the Combined Chiefs of Staff; and ultimately as FDR’s principal military advisor.

FDR appointed Marshall chief of staff in the spring of 1939 and he was sworn in on September 1, 1939—the very day Germany began the Second World War by attacking Poland. In the war’s early years, Marshall’s foremost tasks were to increase the size of the army, equip it for modern warfare, and restructure its command. Between 1939 and 1941, while the United States was still neutral, Marshall oversaw the army’s expansion from 175,000 to 1.4 million men, and by the time the war ended in 1945 to well over eight million.

A strong advocate of the Germany First strategy, Marshall pressed for an early invasion of Nazi-occupied France from across the English Channel. He was vehemently opposed to the idea of an attack on North Africa in 1942, arguing, correctly as it turned out, that this would delay the full-scale invasion of the Continent. Marshall acquiesced in the decision to invade Sicily and Italy in the summer of 1943 but was adamant about the need to attack northwest France in the spring of 1944. Although it was generally expected that he would take command of the Normandy invasion, he refused to request the position, and FDR, feeling he needed Marshall in Washington, decided to grant the post to Eisenhower.

In some respects Marshall and FDR made an odd pair. An austere man who refused to laugh at FDR’s jokes and would not let the president address him by his first name, Marshall never developed the kind of rapport with Roosevelt that other members of his inner circle did. But over time there emerged between the two men something far more profound than the breezy friendliness FDR enjoyed with many of his other advisors: trust and respect.

Roosevelt knew firsthand that Marshall would speak to him with an honesty and candor that were not always forthcoming from those tasked with advising the president of the United States. Indeed, in Marshall’s first White House meeting with FDR, the then deputy chief of staff had shocked his superiors by openly disagreeing with their commander in chief. Although Marshall’s forthrightness often led to disagreements between the two men, FDR came to rely on it.

In 1939, when the time came to pick a new army chief, FDR reached well down the chain of command in selecting Marshall. This turned out to be one of the most inspired appointments Roosevelt made in his long tenure as president, for Marshall proved to be a model soldier-statesman, widely respected for his personal integrity and selfless public service.
February 1941, the Atlantic Squadron became the Atlantic Fleet and King was promoted to admiral.

Over the next eight months, he directed an undeclared sea war with Germany in the North Atlantic—a task he executed brilliantly, overseeing the creation of a convoy system to keep Allied ships safe in the eastern Atlantic, the deployment of U.S. Marines to strategically important Iceland, and the establishment of a number of new American naval bases. King’s service in this difficult period impressed FDR, who, following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, appointed King commander in chief of the U.S. Fleet—a position that gave him “supreme command of the operating forces” of the U.S. Navy. In March 1942, FDR expanded King’s responsibilities by sending Stark to London and naming King—at last long—to the navy’s top post, CNO. As CNO, commander in chief of the U.S. Fleet, and a member of the newly created Joint Chiefs of Staff, King held unprecedented authority over all aspects of naval operations and planning for the remainder of the war.

He accepted the Germany First strategy but insisted that as many resources as possible be sent to the Pacific for the struggle against Japan. King recognized that merely standing on the defensive in the Pacific was not an acceptable option for the United States, as it would allow Japan to consolidate its holdings in the Pacific and might even result in the loss of Australia and New Zealand. King insisted therefore that the United States go on the offensive as soon as possible. In March 1942, he presented FDR with a Pacific strategy that included protecting approaches to Hawaii, ensuring that main lines of communication with Australasia remained open, and launching “step by step advances” northwest from the New Hebrides to the Solomon Islands and the Bismarck Archipelago. FDR, always regarding himself a navy man—an indentity stemming largely from his seven years as assistant secretary of the navy in the 1910s—concurred with King’s recommendations. As a result, American forces in the Pacific would soon strike out against the Japanese through the Doolittle air raids on Tokyo, the Battle of Midway, and the bloody seizure of Guadalcanal.

Though tensions between the navy and army were inevitable, King and Army Chief of Staff General Geore C. Marshall established a good working relationship during the war. King supported Marshall’s push for a cross-channel operation in 1943. But when it became clear in the spring of that year that the Allies would press on to Sicily and Italy instead, King used American acceptance of the British-led strategy as leverage in pressing for increased American naval operations in the Pacific. King’s object: to maintain the initiative and make ready for a full-scale offensive against Japan once Germany was defeated. FDR, who once referred to King as “the shrewdest of strategists,” agreed. After some debate, so too did the Combined Chiefs of Staff.

By the fall of 1943, then, American strategy in the Pacific had taken firm shape. It was based on a two-pronged assault against Japan. In the central Pacific, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz’s forces would advance from Midway through the Gilberts and on to the Mariana Islands. In the southwest Pacific, General Douglas MacArthur’s forces would continue their advance up the Solomon Islands and along the east coast of New Guinea toward the Philippines. Beginning with the devastating American attack against the Japanese fleet at the Battle of Midway in June 1942, and over the following two years, King would help engineer the defeat of Japanese sea power.

King also continued to play a decisive role in the Battle of the Atlantic, the war’s longest struggle. In the spring of 1943, he brought together all elements of antisubmarine warfare in a unit that became known as the Tenth Fleet. Although the Tenth Fleet had no ships of its own, it was instrumental in the ultimate defeat of the German submarine menace in May 1943.

King’s relationship with FDR—which was based on blunt speech and fitness for duty—strengthened over time. By the spring of 1942, King enjoyed the full confidence of the president, to the extent that Roosevelt abandoned his previous insistence on approving all senior naval appointments, leaving the task to King.

Most importantly, Roosevelt trusted King’s strategic vision, which was based on the critical—and correct—assumption that American industry would be able to produce enough munitions to equip offensives in both the Pacific and European theaters simultaneously. King was the first leader among the Combined Chiefs of Staff to see this. His insistence on maintaining the initiative in the Pacific while simultaneously pursuing the struggle against Germany helped shape the course of the war—and bring it to a quicker end.
As the supreme Allied commander in Europe and the supreme commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, which would invade Normandy on June 6, 1944, Dwight D. Eisenhower emerged as one of the most important military and political figures of the Second World War.

A graduate of West Point, Eisenhower commanded the U.S. tank corps training center during World War I, and, in the interwar years, held staff positions under the most accomplished and influential officers of the U.S. Army. He soon caught the eye of FDR’s army chief of staff, General George C. Marshall, who summoned Eisenhower to Washington, DC, in December 1941, only days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Marshall appointed Eisenhower deputy chief of the army’s War Plans Division, later named the Operations Division. Eisenhower would head the division at the rank of major general.

In the spring of 1942, Eisenhower drafted plans for a possible landing in France in 1942 and for a major cross-channel attack in 1943. In this capacity, he soon gained the confidence of both Marshall and FDR, and in June of that year was selected over 366 other senior officers to go to London as commanding general of the European Theater of Operations for the U.S. Army. Once there, Eisenhower quickly won the trust and respect of the British, and, following FDR’s decision to launch an invasion of North Africa in the fall of 1942, he was appointed supreme commander of the Allied forces that would carry out the invasion, code-named Operation Torch.

It was over the course of planning for Operation Torch that Eisenhower came into more frequent contact with FDR, particularly in conducting difficult preinvasion negotiations with (Nazi collaborationist) Vichy French authorities in the French territories of North Africa, as well as postinvasion negotiations between rival leaders of the Free French, Charles de Gaulle and Henri Giraud. The tact with which Eisenhower handled this delicate diplomacy among the various French factions, coupled with his clear ability to manage relationships among his Anglo-American staff during the North African campaign, marked him as a burgeoning soldier-diplomat.

Eisenhower was promoted to the rank of general in February 1943, and, following the Allied victory in North Africa in May, led Anglo-American forces in the seizure of Sicily in July and the invasion of Italy in September. As expected, the attack on Italy precipitated the overthrow of Fascist leader Benito Mussolini. In the wake of the coup, FDR turned once again to Eisenhower to handle the negotiation of Italy’s surrender.

Given Eisenhower’s obvious skills as a military leader, diplomat, and team player adept at working out differences among senior British and American officers—not to mention the respect he commanded among Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and the Combined Chiefs of Staff—FDR decided in December 1943 that Eisenhower, not Marshall, would become the supreme commander of the Allied British, Canadian, and American armies that would invade Normandy in June of 1944.

Having drafted the original plans for the invasion two years before, and having led three successful amphibious invasions in the Mediterranean, Eisenhower had a good deal of experience to recommend him for this post. As Churchill once noted, “No one knew better than he, how to stand close to a tremendous event without impairing the authority he had delegated to others.”

The attack on Normandy of June 6, 1944, was carried out by the largest invasion force in history. After seven weeks of hard fighting, the Allied forces broke out of their beachhead position and raced across France, liberating Paris in late August. In the meantime, another assault force landed on France’s Mediterranean coast and stormed up the Rhone Valley. After repulsing a fierce German counteroffensive in the Ardennes in December and January of 1944–45, Eisenhower’s armies crossed the Rhine and advanced into western Germany in March 1945.

Eisenhower’s decision to advance into Germany along a broad front, with British forces to the north and American forces to the south, elicited intense frustration from General Bernard L. Montgomery, who commanded the British forces and wanted to lead a narrow, deep thrust into Germany north of the Ardennes. Some postwar critics have charged that the slower broad-front strategy forfeited the Allies’ opportunity to reach Berlin ahead of the Soviets, whose occupation of the city would have serious political consequences after the war. But Eisenhower had been convinced that a single thrust would risk straining supply lines, exposing a vulnerable flank, and incurring high casualties; it might also have minimized the American role in capturing the Continent, which would have sat poorly with the American land force commanders and public alike.

Promoted to five-star general in December 1944, Eisenhower succeeded his mentor, General Marshall, as chief of staff after the war. He retired in 1948 but was called back into service as the commander of NATO Forces between 1950 and 1952, and he would go on to become the thirty-fourth president of the United States in 1953.
Franklin D. Roosevelt and Henry “Hap” Arnold

Taught by the Wright brothers to fly, Henry “Hap” Arnold has been called the father of the modern U.S. Air Force. A 1907 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, Arnold joined the Air Section of the U.S. Army in 1911; at the time, no independent air force existed.

During World War I, Arnold served in Washington, DC, as head of flight training. The haphazard aviation programs he saw in the war inspired his tireless advocacy for building American airpower during the interwar years. In 1936 Arnold became assistant chief of the Army Air Corps, in charge of procurement and supply; in September 1938, FDR appointed him chief of the Army Air Corps, at the rank of major general.

Arnold’s rise to the top post in the Army Air Corps coincided with FDR’s growing conviction that the next major war would be an air war. Moreover, by the fall of 1938, FDR had become alarmed by numerous reports from the American ambassador in Berlin that German air power posed a growing threat. Appalled when, in September 1938, British prime minister Neville Chamberlain agreed at Munich to let Adolf Hitler take parts of Czechoslovakia, and likewise disgusted by the Nazi riot against German Jews, Kristallnacht, that followed in November, FDR insisted that what America and its Allies needed to bring Hitler to heel was thousands of new warplanes. Additional ground forces and “a new barracks at some post in Wyoming,” he noted dryly, “would not scare Hitler one goddamned bit.”

Arnold was thrilled by the president’s stance, which, he would insist, had given the Army Air Corps a new foundation. Backed by the president, Arnold joined the effort to convince Congress to appropriate the funds needed to expand the Air Corps. But as war broke out, and the need to expand American readiness intensified, so too did the tensions between FDR and Arnold over the issue of allocating planes to American forces versus selling American aircraft to the British and French to bolster their ability to resist Hitler.

In October 1940, Arnold took on additional responsibility as deputy chief of staff to Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall, and in June 1941, as the threat of war increased and the Air Corps took on a more independent character, the corps was reconstituted as the U.S. Army Air Forces (USAAF) with its own air staff—and with Arnold as its head. Although the USAAF was considered one of the army’s three coequal commands, it had in fact now achieved equal status with the army and the navy. In recognition of this fact, FDR appointed Arnold to the newly created Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Anglo-American Combined Chiefs of Staff in January 1942.

Arnold’s greatest contribution was in giving FDR the air force he wanted, which in itself was a remarkable achievement. In just seven years, under Arnold’s direction, America’s air forces expanded from a mere twenty thousand men and a few hundred old aircraft, to a force composed of 243 combat groups, 2.5 million men, and sixty-three thousand planes—the most powerful air force the world had ever seen.
Franklin D. Roosevelt and Chester W. Nimitz

A 1905 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, Chester W. Nimitz spent most of his early career in submarines. He was instrumental in getting the navy to equip the U.S. submarine fleet with engines that burned diesel fuel, as opposed to the far more dangerous gasoline. Nimitz was chief of staff to the commander of the U.S. Atlantic submarine flotilla during World War I, and, following the war, he oversaw construction of the submarine base at Pearl Harbor. He rose steadily through the ranks. Nimitz had a reputation as an easygoing and affable man; he was also a person of strong will and persistence.

By 1938 Nimitz had achieved the rank of rear admiral, and in the following year he was appointed chief of the Bureau of Navigation, the navy department responsible for assigning and promoting top naval officers. Given Franklin D. Roosevelt’s strong interest in the navy, this brought Nimitz into close contact with the president, and the two developed a strong bond.

FDR’s esteem for Nimitz led the president to offer him command of the Pacific Fleet in early 1941, but Nimitz, not wanting to jump over the heads of so many senior officers, declined. After the disastrous Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, however, FDR, using his power as commander in chief, ordered Nimitz to take the position, which he did on December 31, 1941, soon taking up headquarters in Hawaii.

FDR’s decision to once again reach down the ranks and handpick his own choice for senior command proved auspicious. Nimitz quickly lifted the Pacific Fleet’s morale from an all-time low by aggressively rebuilding it and planning offensive operations—a critical development in light of the task that lay ahead. Like navy chief Admiral Ernest J. King, Nimitz believed it crucial that the U.S. Navy take the fight to the Japanese without delay. Nimitz also concluded that the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor had not been as devastating as it might have been. U.S. aircraft carriers had been spared; the dry docks and fuel depots remained intact; and the eight battleships that the Japanese had sunk or damaged were not lost at sea but lay in the shallow waters of Pearl Harbor, so five of the eight could be salvaged to fight another day.

In March 1942, Nimitz became operational commander of the Pacific Ocean Area, a vast expanse of the Pacific theater including most of the ocean and its islands. In this job Nimitz planned, executed, and picked the commanders for the Battles of Midway and Guadalcanal in June and August of 1942, the two critical engagements that halted the Japanese advance and turned the tide in the Far East.

In 1943 forces under Nimitz’s command drove the Japanese from the Aleutian Islands and collaborated with General Douglas MacArthur’s Southwest Pacific Area forces in reconquering the Solomons and Eastern New Guinea. Nimitz also launched the drive across the central Pacific through the Gilbert and Mariana Islands, while simultaneously carrying out a devastating attack on Japanese merchant shipping with the American submarine fleet.

In 1944 Nimitz’s forces joined with MacArthur’s in retaking the Philippines, which (in the battles of the Philippine Sea and of Leyte Gulf) virtually eliminated the Japanese fleet. In the war’s last year, Nimitz rose to the five-star rank of fleet admiral, and from his headquarters in Guam he directed the invasions of Iwo Jima and Okinawa, as well as the bombing of Japan that precipitated the Japanese surrender.

The war in the Pacific was for the most part a naval war, and the American victory there—achieved in just four years with a fleet that had barely existed in 1941—is to no small extent attributable to the skill of Nimitz.
Franklin D. Roosevelt and Douglas MacArthur

The son of an army officer, Douglas MacArthur graduated in 1903 from West Point with the highest marks ever awarded, and he would go on to become one of the longest-serving generals in the history of the U.S. Army.

After distinguished service in World War I as a brigadier general, he served two tours of duty in the Philippines, and he returned to Washington in 1930 to become army chief of staff under President Herbert Hoover.

Given MacArthur’s role in clearing the “Bonus Army” from Washington in 1932—forces under his command shocked the nation by violently removing thousands of World War I veterans demanding early payment of their service pensions—it was widely assumed that FDR would replace MacArthur as army chief of staff after his inauguration in 1933. But after firmly establishing his own authority—MacArthur soon realized the new president “would be no nominal Commander-in-Chief”—FDR decided to keep MacArthur in the chief of staff position.

One of MacArthur’s first accomplishments under FDR’s administration was to efficiently handle the establishment of work camps for the Civilian Conservation Corps, a popular jobs program of the New Deal. Then, in 1935, FDR sent MacArthur to the U.S.-controlled Philippines as military advisor, accompanied by a young major named Dwight D. Eisenhower. In 1937, after being appointed a field marshal in the Philippine Army, MacArthur planned to retire from the U.S. forces, but FDR recalled him to active duty in July 1941 at the rank of lieutenant general.

Setbacks in the Philippines
MacArthur has come under considerable criticism for his failure, later that year, to put the Philippines on defensive posture in the hours after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. Despite warnings that a Japanese assault might be imminent—and word that the Japanese had in fact attacked Pearl Harbor that morning—MacArthur did not take actions to prevent the enemy from winging over the Philippines to lay waste to a key base of American air operations in the Pacific, Clark Field, destroying nearly all its airplanes on the ground.

Following this disaster, MacArthur’s months-long struggle to defend the Philippines against a Japanese invasion force (from a fallback position on the Bataan peninsula and the nearby island of Corregidor) captured the imagination of the U.S. public. But in March 1942, while the battle still raged, FDR ordered him to make a perilous escape by sea to Australia, where he made his famous remark about the Philippines, “I shall return.” A man of considerable ego, MacArthur frequently sought out publicity, and when
communications specialists at the Office of
War Information told him they liked his pithy phrase but would prefer it read, “We shall
turn,” MacArthur refused to change it.

**Island-hopping**
FDR and the Joint Chiefs of Staff divided the
vast Pacific region into two main theaters
of war: the Southwest Pacific Area, under
the command of General MacArthur, and
the Pacific Ocean Area, under the command
of Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, who also
commanded the Pacific Fleet.

After the fall of the Philippines, the
immediate concern of both MacArthur and
Nimitz was to halt the Japanese advance,
particularly toward Australia. Nimitz’s forces
accomplished this at the Battle of the Coral
Sea in May 1942, followed by the decisive
victory at Midway in June. MacArthur then
began his long advance up the North Coast
of New Guinea, while forces under Nimitz
commenced the battle for Guadalcanal.

Although initially reluctant to embrace
the idea, MacArthur later became famous
for his so-called leapfrogging or island-
hopping technique, in which American
forces bypassed heavily fortified Japanese
positions in favor of attacks on strategically
important but less-well-defended positions
or islands. MacArthur used this tactic to
great effect in Operation Cartwheel, in
which American forces isolated a major
Japanese naval and air base at Rabaul on the
eastern tip of New Britain (off the coast of
New Guinea), leaving the forces there to “die
on the vine.”

In keeping with his promise to “return,”
MacArthur’s forces joined with those of
Admiral Nimitz in launching a major drive
to retake the Philippines in October 1944.
Landing first at Leyte Gulf, and two months
later on the island of Luzon, these forces
finally took the Philippine capital of Manila
in February 1945, after a month of intense
urban combat that left the former Pearl of
the Orient in ruins.

MacArthur was promoted to the new
five-star rank of general of the army in
December 1944 and in April 1945 took
command of all U.S. Army forces in the
Pacific. On September 2, 1945, MacArthur
accepted the Japanese surrender, joined
by Admiral Nimitz and representatives from
China, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union,
Australia, Canada, France, the Netherlands,
and New Zealand.

**A tale of two large personalities**
Although FDR and MacArthur maintained
a good working relationship, there was
tension between the two men, stemming
in part from MacArthur’s ambivalence
about FDR and the New Deal—and FDR’s
underlying mistrust of MacArthur’s hardcore
conservatism, latent political ambition, and
love of the limelight. MacArthur also strongly
disagreed with the Germany First policy and
frequently clashed with the Joint Chiefs of
Staff over Pacific policy.

With his folksy corncob pipe, sunglasses,
and hat, he was enormously popular with the
public, but as more than one historian has
noted, the “MacArthur myth” would never
have flourished without FDR’s facilitation.
It was Roosevelt who kept MacArthur on as
chief of staff; sent him to the Philippines
as military advisor in the ’30s; brought
him back into active service as the ranking
general in the Far East in 1941; ordered him
out of Bataan to command the Southwest
Pacific Area; and finally concurred with his
desire to retake the Philippines in the fall of
1944 over the alternatives suggested by the
Joint Chiefs of Staff.

There is no question that MacArthur was
a vain and complex man. His self-promotion
sometimes made colleagues wary of his
motives. But he also possessed the ability to
lead with imagination and boldness, qualities
that FDR was not only quick to recognize,
but perhaps willing to exploit for his own
political and military purposes. As FDR once
remarked to a friend in 1932, it was important
to “tame” fellows like MacArthur and “make
them useful,” if for no other reason than to
prevent their charisma and tendency toward
dogmatism from propelling them onto the
political stage.

In the end, one of MacArthur’s greatest
contributions to the struggle against the
Japanese came not in the war but, ironically,
with the peace. As the supreme commander
in charge of the postwar occupation, he
implemented a variety of social, economic,
and political reforms that would help make
Japan one of America’s strongest allies.