

In Bed with an Elephant

Personal Observations on Coalition Operations in the Contemporary Operating Environment

General Sir Nick Parker, British Army

“...to develop a closer relationship between individual English and Americans, and a better understanding between the military forces of the United States and the United Kingdom, in order to contribute in large measure to the preservation of world peace.”

The objective of the Kermit Roosevelt Lecture as expressed by Mrs. Kermit Roosevelt in a letter to General George C. Marshall in June 1944.

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PHOTO: Elephant on the border of the Serengeti and Ngorongoro Conservation Area, Tanzania. (*nickandmel2006*)

HAVING JUST RETURNED from Kabul, it is particularly pertinent to be involved in an initiative which was set up 66 years ago. Mrs. Roosevelt was writing as the Second World War drew to its climax, at a time when exploiting the relationship between the United States and Britain would have been supported by the vast majority of people in both our countries. Since then we have “won” the Cold War, experiencing a transformation into an interconnected world where borders mean little, alliances ebb and flow, the relative strength and influence of countries have changed, and there is only one world superpower.

Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau said in 1969 that sharing a land mass with a richer and more powerful neighbour was like sleeping with an elephant. “No matter how even-tempered and friendly the beast, one is affected by every twitch and grunt.” Although this remark was made from an economic and social perspective, it is an entirely appropriate metaphor to describe the relationship that coalition partners have had with the United States over the past decade in security operations. How do we ensure that contemporary coalition operations are as effective as possible, particularly when one partner dominates so conspicuously in terms of mass or physical investment?

A “Special Relationship”?

Since World War II, Anglo-American relations have often been characterised as “special.” The shared cultural and historical inheritance of the two countries is seen by some as underpinning their close diplomatic and military co-operation. The term *special relationship* was first used by Winston Churchill during his Iron Curtain speech of March 1946. His reason was to guarantee a firm stance against the rise of Stalin’s Soviet Union. It is not surprising that for the length of the Cold War, the common enemy; cultural and historical similarities; diplomatic consultation; and intelligence, defence, and nuclear co-operation meant that there was a particular closeness in Anglo-American relations.



Kermit Roosevelt, 1926.

But some judge this to be a spurious mantra, to many it is irrelevant, and to some it is one-sided. The U.S. ambassador to Britain from 1991 to 1994, the anglophile Raymond Seitz, tried to remove the term from diplomatic dialogue all together. This is instructive since, at times of mutual crisis, there is a sense of common purpose, but when this is not so—in Seitz’s case after the Cold War had ended and there were differences of interpretation of the Balkans conflict—the relationship can sometimes appear anything but special. However, current polling in the United States shows 36 percent of people consider the United Kingdom to be their most valuable ally, 29 percent identify Canada, 12 percent Japan, 10 percent Israel, and 5 percent Germany. Mrs. Kermit Roosevelt was clearly expressing a widely held sentiment in 1944 which has, to a degree, retained its currency until today. This is important, not because we have some special contract between us—we do not—but because there are channels of communication, understanding, mutual analysis, and shared problem solving that will continue to benefit us both if they are exploited.

In the case of the United Kingdom and the United States, there is one obvious difference which I must highlight, and that is size, as the map shows (Figure 1). And then here are some statistics that elaborate this further (Figure 2).



Figure 1



Figure 2

U.S. officers do not bat an eyelid at shifting huge amounts of stuff in very short order. Consider the 30,000 troop uplift in Afghanistan, announced by President Obama at West Point on 1 December 2009. There were forces flowing into theatre within days, very challenging ground lines of communication were reinforced and made considerably more robust, and 31 FOBs [forward operating bases] were either built or expanded, often in remote locations. The task was completed within eight months—an extraordinary achievement that was almost taken for granted by those of us conducting operations. The United States is big, it takes scale in its stride, and its thought processes are attuned in a way that those from smaller nations are not.

So what about the United Kingdom? A smaller country should be more agile in its thought processes, it should be able to make more out of less, and it should communicate more effectively up and down its (more streamlined) structures. The level of strategic understanding in small nations is probably more extensive, they have a more outward looking culture, can exercise leverage through their tactical efforts, but have little credibility at the operational

level—they have neither the size nor capacity to “go it alone” on anything other than limited operations. Of course, there is more to this than size. The United States wields considerable power and influence across the globe: my point is that we should foster a common understanding that makes coalitions resilient—all partners must feel that they have a special relationship with each other, which exploits their strengths.

The History of Coalitions²

Seventy years ago, the British diplomat and politician Harold Nicolson wrote that “the basis of any Alliance, or Coalition, is an agreement between two or more sovereign states to subordinate their separate interests to a single purpose.”³ The usual reason for creation of a coalition is the recognition that the pooling of resources can bring formidable concentrations of power that would not be available to individual states, whether it be the coalition of Balkan Christian leaders that fought (and lost) the Battle of Kosovo against the invading Ottoman Turks in 1389, or the formidable coalition that was formed to oppose the expansionism of Louis

XIV's France in the late 17th and early 18th centuries—England, the Netherlands, Prussia, Denmark, Austria, and a host of other states.

The mutual interests that bring together coalition partners do not need to be a direct threat. The single most important reason why the United States gained independence in 1783 was that France and Spain joined the rebelling colonists in an anti-British coalition, taking advantage of British pre-occupation in North America to strike at a rival at a time of weakness.

In the three great wars of the 20th century—World War I, World War II, and the Cold War—coalitions won, and in all the Anglo-American relationship was pivotal. We, rightly, look back at the relationship of 1941 to 1945 as both cohesive and successful, but there were plenty of examples of the British trying to manipulate—and vice versa. Shared culture and values smoothed the path; they did not eliminate such stresses.

For the United States, coalition operations in World War II were further complicated because it was fighting a two-hemisphere war, and the U.S. Navy, especially in the formidable person of Admiral Ernest J. King, the Chief of Naval Operations, was more interested in the Pacific. This led to some infighting between the U.S. services, which allowed the British, especially given the negotiating skill of the British Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Sir Alan Brooke, to win some key arguments—for instance, the decision to launch a second front in 1942 not in France, but in North Africa. Ultimately, U.S. experience in negotiations combined with a preponderance of troops, ships, and aircraft ensured that they won most of the arguments from 1943 onwards.

Just as people of a certain age remember where they were when they heard JFK had been assassinated, younger generations remember the same about 9/11. It was a turning point in more ways than one, not least because the United States activated Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty; since then, the United States and the United Kingdom have been involved

in coalition operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. The sense of a new threat—radical Islam—which succeeded those of the 20th century, brought our countries and others together, unified in a common purpose. There have been tensions and stresses, but the common military heritage of the two countries and our recent experience in operating together has set us up well.

But we should not assume that all will continue to be well. History points to the way that coalitions evolve. Power can shift within a coalition over time, as states wax or wane. Common interests can begin to shift at the political level. We know that war is an extension of politics by other means, and as political dynamics change, so will the objectives of the coalition. A coalition is dynamic, not static; and just like a car that does not get regular maintenance, it can become less efficient and eventually stop working altogether.

Today, both of our countries recognise that coalitions are here to stay. The recent U.K. Strategic Defence and Security review concluded that “*alliances and partnerships will remain a fundamental part of our approach to defence and security.*” In the United States, the policy is defined in a number of areas. I understand that a new document, “Building Partnership Capacity,” is out in draft at TRADOC, and that the president recently stated that “Our military will continue strengthening its capacity to partner with foreign counterparts, train and assist security forces, and pursue military-to-military ties with a broad range of governments.” The Army Plan stipulates that crucial to the Army’s success in the future operational environment are “balanced land forces prepared to engage to help other nations build capacity and to assure friends and allies.” Our respective reasons for this imperative to work with others will be subtly different, but the result is the same—a mutual desire to cooperate. There will also be some nations that are able to bring capabilities to the fight which we are not well placed to provide on our own. This will range from regional knowl-

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edge—illustrated by the Turks in ISAF [International Security Assistance Force] or the Gulf States in the 1991 liberation of Kuwait—to the force-generation capabilities that may be unique, such as the gendarmerie police capability of Italy, France, and some of the South American states. So we need to develop groupings that are as broadly based as possible and bring a tapestry of capabilities together.

A Strategic Perspective

I have not always seen enough evidence that our nations sufficiently understand that, by making coalition operations an element of national policy, we have to concede some national aspirations for wider collective objectives, and that there have to be mechanisms in place which will allow us to “operationalize” our multinational plans. History has already emphasised the need for common understanding. But there are real frictions here. Each nation that contributes to a coalition will have invested some political strategic equity in the venture no matter what the scale of their tactical investment. This means that events and politics at the national strategic level will have a disproportionate and unexpected impact on the ground and vice versa.

For example, the Spanish investment in Iraq from August 2003 amounted to around 1,300 troops. It was neither a battle-winning nor a battle-losing figure, but it was the sixth-largest troop contributor at the time and was strategically important. A reasonably close-fought election in Spain in early 2004 was immediately preceded by the March terrorist attack in Madrid, which killed 201 and injured over 1,000 citizens. This influenced the outcome: the party that came into power had placed withdrawal from Iraq as a central element of their manifesto, and their troops withdrew within two months, irrespective of the tactical impact. In this case, the fallout was manageable, if highly undesirable, but it shows how easy it can be to disturb a coalition.

There are plenty of other examples: the unexpected Dutch withdrawal from operations in Afghanistan in February 2010, the impact in Germany of the Kunduz airstrike in September 2009, and maybe—from a British perspective—the events that led to the Iraqi operations in Basra in March 2008.

Clausewitz may well have been right in the context of coalitions when he stated, “that it is to politics that we must always return.”

Although this strategic examination must consider international complexity, there is also an intra-national dynamic, the parallel requirements of a multi-agency, cross-government, “comprehensive” approach. The contemporary operating environment accomplishes decisive effect through the political, economic, social, intelligence, and security space, and is a combination of all of these. So even if we can get capitals to talk to each other, there will be inbuilt frictions between the various departments with responsibility for policy and execution. This has been recognised in the United Kingdom by creating the National Security Council, an initiative designed to provide more coherent, comprehensive direction to all the departments of state. It is still too early to assess how well this is working, but I believe that we are moving in the right direction.

In British military doctrine, *Selection and Maintenance of the Aim* is a “master” principle of war. In ISAF, it was assumed that the NATO strategic command mechanisms would provide the necessary military leadership. It brings the partners together in a well-tested forum (the North Atlantic Council), with supporting processes and a clearly defined chain of command. But in my time in Afghanistan it felt reactive, bureaucratic, and detached from the immediacy of the debate in capitals. In short, it felt to me as if NATO mechanisms provided window dressing while the core business was conducted informally and bilaterally between capitals.



Carl von Clausewitz.



Adrian Pingstone

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Whitehall, London.

Once again, the flaw lies with an insufficient sense of common purpose among the partners. The North Atlantic Council worked in the Cold War because perceptions of the threat were more consistent among Allies, and because it was never tested in combat. Today the NATO process lacks the sophistication to deal with the challenge we face, and struggles to afford the appropriate priority to Afghanistan in comparison to its other interests. I have to submit that to propose that we place much greater emphasis on NATO's ability to take charge will be naïve—certainly in an Afghan context.

So if the official mechanisms are not working, what about the various bilateral “special relationships”? I have tried to identify the U.S.-U.K. strategic coordination machinery for Afghanistan, and the arrangements that exist seem to me unduly ad hoc. There is a view that the practice of U.K.-U.S. coordination at the highest level is so embedded in the habits of both our governments that it comes naturally and easily. With each new U.S. administration, there is often a nervousness in the British camp

about whether the new president and his advisers will continue to want to work so closely with us. But there is an assumption that it will not take very long before the utility of our close and trusting relationship becomes apparent to the new team. This bothers me a little. There is a whiff of complacency. The timing and format of the exchanges between our political masters and officials can be somewhat ad hoc, and I can see no evidence of a willingness to subordinate national objectives which would have been evident during World War II.

I have asked whether the grand strategic coherence that we have managed to develop in previous conflicts is achievable in the contemporary operating environment. I have advocated greater international coherence in the Afghan operation. I am aware that this could sound like an alibi for the security line of operation, but that is not my intention. In such a complex region where there are so many conflicting interests and an enemy that has time on its side, grand strategic coherence is a prerequisite for success.

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What Can Be Done?

I have three comments. The first is that perceptions of the threat must be managed carefully so that there is a collective view among partner nations that it is in their self-interest to defer to the common good. This requires a change to current political attitudes, certainly in the European nations that I have observed, for this to be “battle winning.” But the narrative can be matured so that it is more convincing in the capitals of those who are dispatching their young men and women into harm’s way.

The second is probably more pragmatic, since it is to advocate lead nation status from the United States and do everything that we can to reinforce the coherence and momentum that this generates. The nation with the largest stake will have the tightest command and control mechanisms, the most effective staff engine, and the resources to exploit priorities and main effort.

The third is to invest in command and control at the theatre strategic level and, in so doing, mitigate the confusion caused by any grand strategic incoherence. In both Iraq and Afghanistan, it is self-evident that the United States is the dominant operational and tactical contributor. In both cases, the chain of command to Washington has in practice provided the principal strategic command link. Decisions are made between Washington and the theatre, which are subsequently settled with other allies. This works, but only up to a point. The political commitment to the campaign in Washington must be unequivocal. There has to be a consistent and agreed line between the departments of state, and there should be a sophisticated mechanism to keep partners fully engaged. This must be managed more formally and forcefully than at present if we are to provide the context for operational and tactical success.

The Theatre/Operational Perspective

In its way, Iraq was relatively uncomplicated at the theatre level with fewer stakeholders and a clear

mission. There was limited NATO involvement, fewer coalition partners, a reduced European influence, and a “host nation” whose emerging sovereignty would not summarily reject coalition plans, certainly at the time I was there. There was also an existing, if battered, infrastructure and the immediate potential for considerable economic wealth.

Afghanistan takes this to Ph.D. levels of complexity. The security force has a NATO brand without the supporting marketing or sales capacity; there are a large number of international players both inside and outside the coalition, and all have different objectives, some subtle, some less so. The region is complex, with porous borders providing safe havens for insurgents on two sides, and a complex history of enduring conflict. The sovereign government led by President Karzai has called for support, and yet in economic terms its prospects will only be realised in the medium- to long-term.

The only place where all these interests are played out is in Kabul. The various authorities in political and development arenas are only loosely coordinated by the UN—an organisation that has a grand strategic stake and will ultimately play a vital role when the situation has matured to the status of a “normal” developing country. So, how do we bring order to this challenging situation?

We start by accepting that the lead nation takes charge, probably subtly, given the inevitable sensitivities. Initially this will be in the security space, partly because this is pragmatic—the military are comfortable with complexity—and partly because security provides the foundation for everything else. But we have to encourage the development of a wider plan which synchronises efforts and establishes priorities.

The four lines of activity illustrated in the Theatre Strategic Idea (Figure 3) are designed to meet a common objective. Security is the most obvious, the one which everyone marks and which tends to divert attention from other more important areas. I would suggest that security is broadly on track; it is hard, but the foundations are being maintained for other decisive activity.

The economic line at the bottom is just as important. The people of Afghanistan need to be *free from want*, indeed the country needs to become a “normal” developing country as soon as possible. Again, this line is going reasonably well. There is almost too

much short-term aid, and its coordination is poor, but there is plenty of activity in this area. In the longer 10- to 15-year timeframe, President Karzai's undertaking from the United States to enter into a long-term strategic agreement during his trip to Washington last April [2010] provides the confidence that there is a prize to be gained if progress can be sustained.

It is the middle two lines that should concern us. Building Afghan capacity requires the government of Afghanistan to become a credible partner, supported by a concerted effort from the international community in Kabul. It has been very disjointed, but the upgrading of the NATO senior civilian representative and the appointment of Mark Sedwill has provided a focus which was not evident in the past. This empowerment was intended to provide a focal point for all the nonmilitary actors working with the government of Afghanistan, whose coordination was so important to progress and success. But it is the political diplomatic line that should

concern us most. This links back to the comments that I made about strategic commitment and leadership. If it was effective then, it would have a more significant impact in Kabul and Islamabad than has been evident up to now.

Whatever happens, there is a need for theatre strategic leadership, and I have seen two fine U.S. four-stars take charge of the military operation. They developed and described their own clear and convincing plan, systematically brought the other stakeholders alongside, and then created structures that bring all the interested parties together to synchronise effect. In particular, General McChrystal produced a plan over the summer of 2009 which is still broadly in play today. He invigorated the hierarchy by forming the subordinate NATO Training Mission and CJIAF 435 [Combined Joint Interagency Task Force-435], and creating the operational level three-star ISAF Joint Command. These were critical in clarifying the mission and approach.

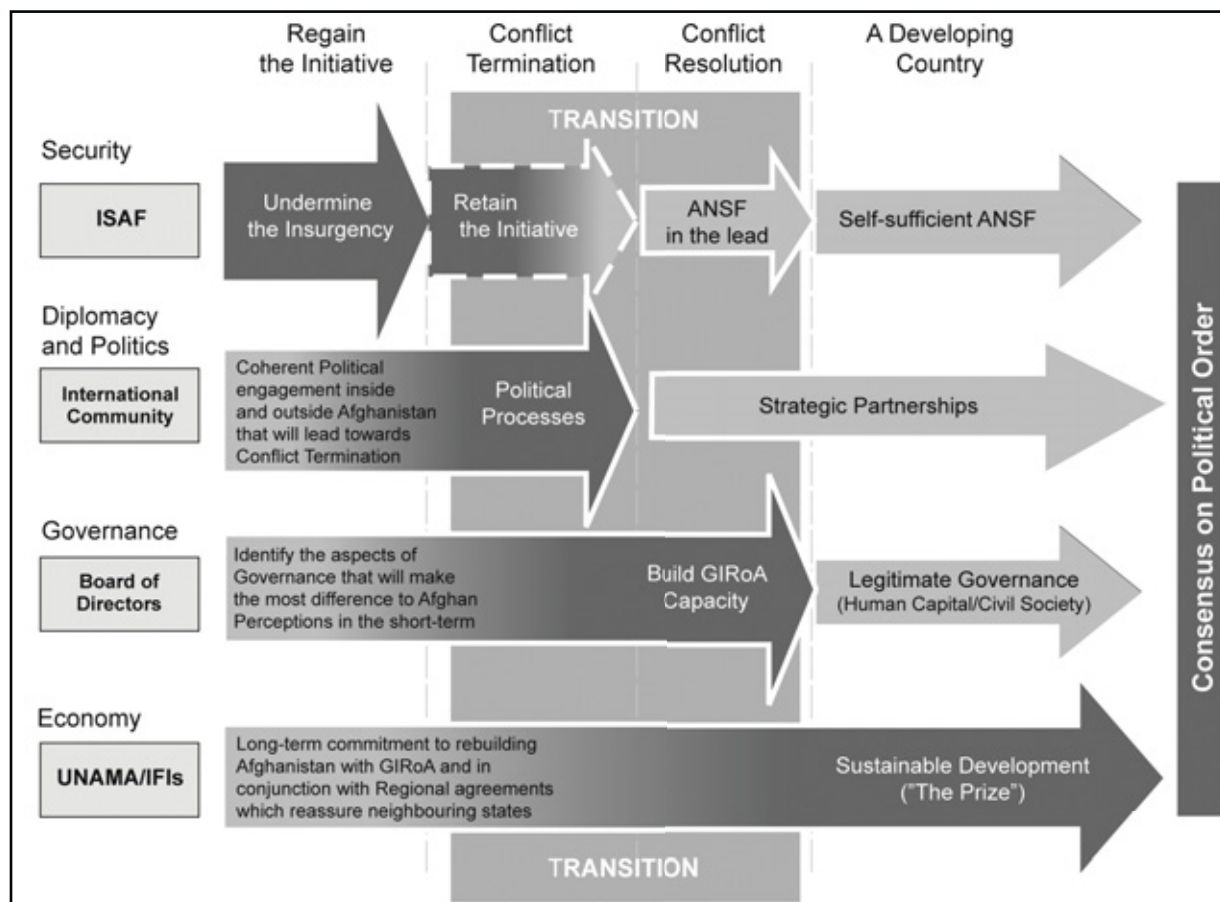


Figure 3

One other theatre perspective is about achieving common situational awareness. This is difficult. Not only is there a mass of information swilling about, but there are also sensitivities over how much some of that information can be shared between allies.

Communication is difficult. It takes time and it can be frustrating. How often are those who do not have English as a first language bypassed because they are not quick enough to grasp what is going on? We don't let them see much of the relevant material and then speak too quickly for them to understand what we are saying. I recognise that the demands of the operation, in particular the troops putting their lives at risk, require rapid and incisive decision making, but at the theatre level there is scope to resolve this. We can ensure that national interests are properly represented. Yet, why do national contributors resist sharing their policies at the point where the theatre plans are being made and, just as importantly, where their ambassadors are based? The United Kingdom has started to come round to this, but it has been a struggle.

During my time in Kabul, I tried to get the military representatives of eight core nations to meet

regularly, stimulating contact between capitals and their military representatives at NATO headquarters. But there was resistance. Nations were not prepared to empower their representatives, and I suspect that it has come to nothing.

“Followership”

What makes a good coalition junior partner? The bottom line has to be someone who, at every level, is honest about what he will do and then does it in a timely manner. This is easy to say, but if it were so, we would have far fewer challenges. So what must be done?

At the grand strategic level, I have emphasised enough the need to share our interpretation of the mission and make sure that differences are reconciled.

There needs to be a greater willingness to accept the importance of the theatre strategic level. A good follower will discipline itself not to focus on tactical outputs in national isolation, bypassing the coalition chain of command. It will allow its interests to be managed by the coalition headquarters structure through influence, persuasion, and constant engagement. A good follower must



ISAF, U.S. Air Force SSGT. Nestor Cruz

NATO's newly appointed Senior Civilian Representative, Ambassador Mark Sedwill, and his ISAF military counterpart, GEN Stanley McChrystal, at a senior-level briefing, Kabul, 7 February 2010.

be prepared to engage constructively in the coalition debate and empower its representatives to do the same, and this has to reflect the interests of all the national stakeholders—a comprehensive view shaped by grand strategic engagement.

The influence effort should be replicated where possible at every level of the chain of command, so that there is a parallel “hierarchy of wisdom” that reflects national interests as well as contributing to coalition staff capacity. There is a need for junior partners to develop increasingly sophisticated national influencing networks inside the coalition. I made it very clear to the British in the ISAF chain of command that they were always representing, to some degree, their national interest. This was not a threat to the coalition. It meant that national risks and opportunities would be exploited far more easily throughout the chain of command, caveats would be managed before they had a significant impact, and plans could be shaped to take account of any sensitivities in as close to real time as possible. This is conceptual interoperability.

And finally, personality. People’s personalities played some part in events; their relationships with others had an impact on the outcome, no matter what the structures, plans, or common understanding. One of the arts of followership is to mix the character cocktails so that you gain the maximum amount of influence and leverage. This does not mean that everyone has to get on—quite the reverse. On some occasions it will be necessary to confront and disagree. But there must be respect. Appointing an individual into a coalition post must not be a haphazard exercise. It must be the result of careful planning, possibly over many years. There is one

supreme example of this. I often speak of Sir John Dill, and there is one particular instance where personality made a strategic difference.

Dill was Chief of the Imperial General Staff in the early years of World War II. Churchill didn’t get on with him and posted him to Washington as his personal representative, where he became Chief of the British Joint Staff Mission, and then senior British representative on the Combined Chiefs of Staff. He was an extraordinary military diplomat who became immensely important in making the Combined Chiefs of Staff committee—which included members from both countries—function. President Roosevelt described Dill as “the most important figure in the remarkable accord which has been developed in the combined operations of our two countries.” He died suddenly in Washington in November 1944. The route to the Washington National Cathedral was lined by thousands of troops, and when his body was interred in Arlington National Cemetery, a witness recorded that “I have never seen so many men so visibly shaken by sadness. Marshall’s face was truly stricken ...”²⁴

Coalitions are rooted in the past and are here to stay. I am in no doubt that they work best when we are in bed with an elephant—but not the one that Trudeau referred to, rather one who is swift as a cheetah, cunning as a fox, with a brain enabled by Apple or Microsoft, and surrounded by a loyal and honest herd. U.S. capacity has tipped the balance in the wars of the 20th century and now, in the 21st century, it is providing the foundation to build security in an intensely complex environment. Without this capability, commitment, and leadership our endeavours would be incredible and ineffective. **MR**

NOTES

1. Kermit Roosevelt (10 October 1889–4 June 1943), son of U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, explored two continents alongside his father, graduated from Harvard University, served with the U.S. and British Armies in both World Wars, and was an astute businessman.

2. This section was written with material provided by Professor Gary Sheffield, Professor of War Studies, University of Birmingham.

3. Harold Nicolson, *The Congress of Vienna 1812-1822: A Study in Allied Unity* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 51.

4. “Kermit Roosevelt,” Wikipedia.



Cap badge of The Rifles

“The Battle of Gettysburg,” Verse V

Edgar Lee Masters (1869-1950)

The peach orchard, the oak trees,
The graves of those long dead,
The pastures where the cattle fed,
The old farm houses in the meadow,
The rocks in Culp Hill's shadow,
The old bridges and wooded ridges,
Waited through many years for these
To come to them for this event,
Fulfilling their fated destinies
By the road of Emmitsburg,
Near Gettysburg,
Where perished Pickett's regiment.
None passing this spot for many a year
Saw in oak trees and in peach trees
The demon of luring sorceries,
As a place where thousands in wonderment
Should suddenly see the implacable Fear
Under a summer sky,
With white clouds drifting high.

The Battle of Gettysburg, 1-3 July 1863, is often called the Civil War's high-water mark or turning point. Between 46,000 and 51,000 soldiers from the two armies were killed, wounded, missing, or captured.

The statue on the right is the 72nd Pennsylvania Infantry Monument, sculpted in 1888 by Stephens and dedicated on 4 July 1891. (Photo: Robert Swanson, 2005)