

## *Preface*

Shortly after arriving at Fort McPherson, Georgia, in 1989, to head the U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM), General Colin L. Powell put up a framed poster of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a present from Dr. King's widow, in the main conference room. On it were inscribed Dr. King's words: "Freedom has always been an expensive thing." Dr. King had in mind the sacrifices of the civil rights movement, of which he had been a major catalyst, in the 1950s and 1960s. But to Powell, a career Army officer who would soon leave FORSCOM to become the 12<sup>th</sup> Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Dr. King's words had a broader, deeper meaning. Not only did he find them applicable to the civil rights struggle, but also he felt they spoke directly to the entire American experience and the central role played by the Armed Forces in preserving American values—freedom first among them.<sup>1</sup>

For the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), the defense of freedom began with their creation as a corporate body in January 1942 to deal with the growing emergency arising from the recent Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Thrust suddenly into the maelstrom of World War II, the United States found itself ill-prepared to coordinate a global war effort with its allies or to develop comprehensive strategic and logistical plans for the deployment of its forces. To fill these voids, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the JCS, an ad hoc committee of the Nation's senior military officers. Operating without a formal charter or written statement of duties, the Joint Chiefs functioned under the immediate authority and direction of the President in his capacity as Commander in Chief. A committee of coequals, the JCS came as close as anything the country had yet seen to a military high command.

After the war the Joint Chiefs of Staff became a permanent fixture of the country's defense establishment. Under the National Security Act of 1947, Congress accorded them statutory standing, with specific responsibilities. Two years later they acquired a presiding officer, the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, a statutory position carrying statutory authority that steadily increased over time. While often criticized as ponderous in their deliberations and inefficient in their methods, the JCS performed key advisory and support functions that no other body could duplicate in high-level deliberations. Sometimes, like during the Vietnam War in the 1960s, their views and recommendations carried less weight and had less impact than at other times. But as a rule their advice, representing as it did a distillation of the Nation's top military leaders' thinking, was impossible to ignore. Under legislation enacted in 1986, the Joint Chiefs' assigned duties and responsibilities passed almost in toto to the Chairman, who became principal military advisor to the President, the Secretary of Defense, and the National Security Council. But even though their corporate advisory role was over, the Joint Chiefs retained their statutory standing and continued to meet regularly as military advisors to the Chairman.

The history of the Joint Chief of Staff parallels the emergence of the United States in a great-power role and the growing demands that those responsibilities placed on American policymakers and military planners. During World War II, the major challenge was to wage a global war successfully on two fronts, one in Europe, the other in Asia and the Pacific. Afterwards, with the coming of an uneasy peace, the JCS faced new, less well-defined dangers arising from the turbulent relationship between East and West known as the Cold War. The product of long-festering political, economic, and ideological antagonisms, the Cold War also saw the proliferation of nuclear weapons and soon became an intense and expensive military competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. Though the threat of nuclear war predominated, the continuing existence of large conventional forces on both sides heightened the sense of urgency and further fueled doomsday speculation that the next world war could be the last. A period of recurring crises and tensions, the Cold War finally played out in the late 1980s and early 1990s, not with the cataclysmic confrontation that some people expected, but with the gradual reconciliation of key differences between East and West and eventually the collapse of Communism in Europe and the implosion of the Soviet Union.

The narrative that follows traces the role and influence of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from their creation in 1942 through the end of the Cold War in 1991. It is, first and foremost, a history of events and their impact on national policy. It is also a history of the Joint Chiefs of Staff themselves and their evolving organization, a reflection in many ways of the problems they faced and how they elected to address them. Over the years, the Joint History Office has produced and published numerous detailed monographs on JCS participation in national security policy. There has never been, however, a single-volume narrative summary of the JCS role. This book, written from a combination of primary and secondary sources, seeks to fill that void. An overview, it highlights the involvement of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the policy process and in key events and decisions. My hope is that students of military history and national security affairs will find it a useful tool and, for those so inclined, a convenient reference point for further research and study.

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—Steven L. Rearden  
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## NOTE

- 1 Colin L. Powell, with Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), 399–400.