

## BOOKS

'Your guidepost stands out like a ten-fold beacon in the night: duty, honor, country.' —Douglas MacArthur

## Firm Hands on the Helm

**Douglas MacArthur:  
American Warrior**By Arthur Herman  
Random House, 937 pages, \$40**Commander in Chief**By Nigel Hamilton  
HMH, 464 pages, \$30

BY JONATHAN W. JORDAN

'I AM A JUGGLER,' Franklin Roosevelt once quipped. "I never let my right hand know what my left hand does." Our fascination with "great men" turns, in large part, on contradictions between their psychological right and left hands. From the Bible's Samson to Broadway's Hamilton, the juiciest grist for the biographical mill is found in figures whose yin and yang defy easy summary.

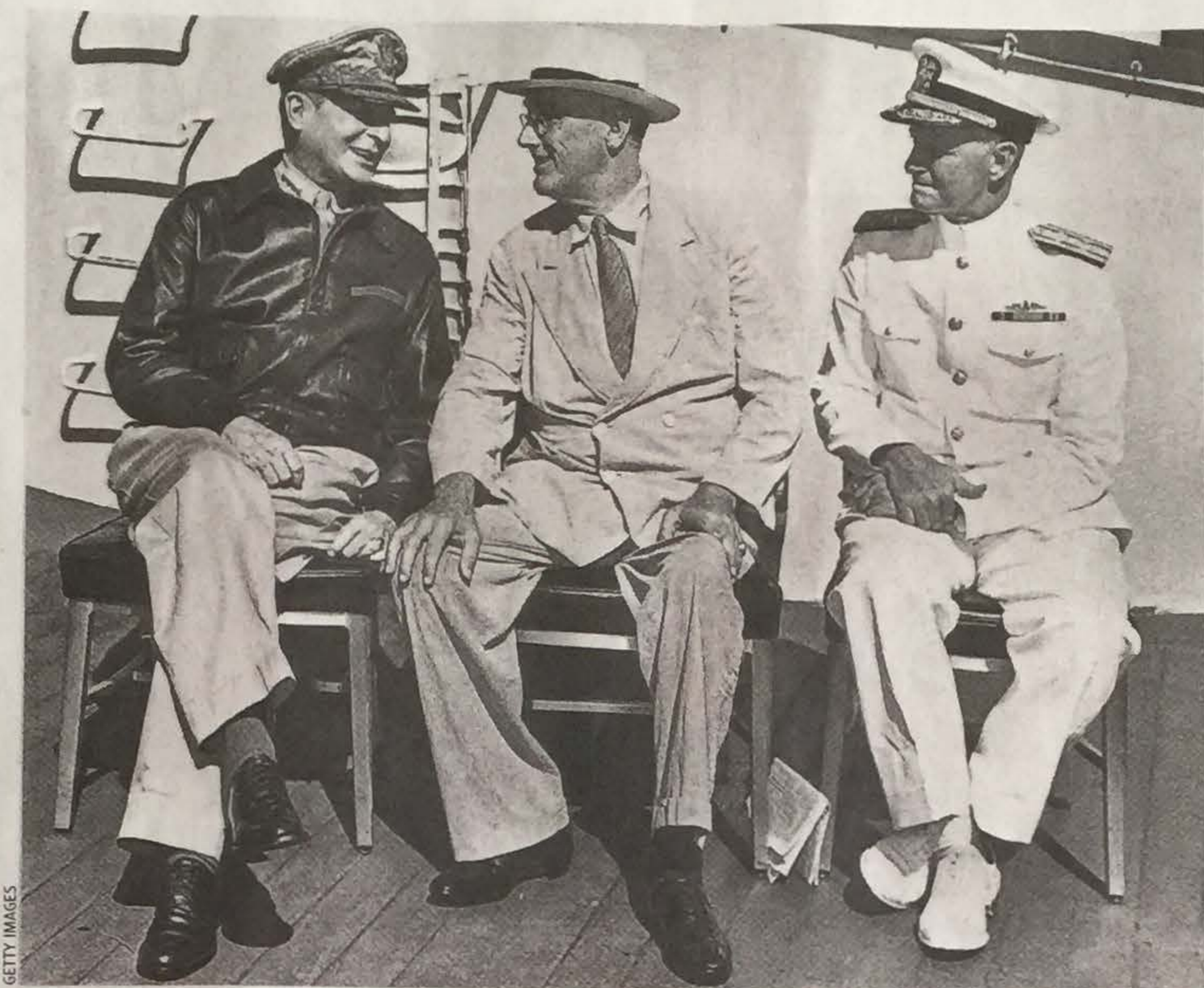
Gen. Douglas MacArthur is a staple of the "flawed hero" genre. He pulled off one of military history's most audacious feats—his amphibious landing at Korea's Inchon harbor in 1950—only to be caught flat-footed by a Chinese counteroffensive. Denied a Medal of Honor for unquestioned bravery at Veracruz and in the First World War, he received one on flimsy grounds in the Second. He demanded absolute obedience from his subordinates, yet defied his commander in chief and lost his job. Humiliated as a war leader, he delivered stirring benedictions to wild applause in a joint session of Congress and in an emotional farewell to his beloved alma mater, West Point.

For over half a century, biographers have reflected on the sublime and profane of MacArthur the man, but few have been able to reconcile the two competing sides. William Manchester's "American Caesar" (1978), D. Clayton James's three-volume "The Years of MacArthur" (1970-85), and Walter Borneman's recent "MacArthur at War" (2016) remain the best examples of the middle ground lying between hero-worship and derision.

Arthur Herman's "Douglas MacArthur: American Warrior" joins the cast on the admiring side of the middle ground. From the birth of MacArthur's father, Gen. Arthur MacArthur, to the son's death in 1964, Mr. Herman devotes 848 pages to a thorough exploration of MacArthur's character, his influences—an overshadowing father and a helicopter mother—and the context in which MacArthur's blunders and triumphs can be judged.

Sympathetic but not sycophantic, Mr. Herman peels away the medals, general's stars and rumpled uniform to find what made MacArthur tick—and what made him fail. MacArthur's limits as a team player played a central role in many of his missteps. Of his efforts in the early 1920s to modernize West Point's curriculum over the objections of hidebound academics, for instance, Mr. Herman writes: "It was MacArthur's fate that his impatience to reform the curriculum alienated those who would have to carry it out. . . . He was learning that things got done best when he could handpick his staff. Otherwise, he tended to make as many opponents as he did converts to his vision of what must be done." MacArthur's ratio of converts to enemies would not change much over the next three decades.

While Mr. Herman clearly admires the controversial general, he does not overlook MacArthur's faults. His disastrous marriage to a Washington debutante, his assignments with a Filipino mistress, his exaggerated reports home, and his vetoing the Medal of Honor for Gens. Wainwright



TRIUMVIRATE MacArthur, Roosevelt and Nimitz on board the heavy cruiser USS Baltimore in Hawaii on July 28, 1944.

and Eichelberger are small but telling blemishes that Mr. Herman appropriately debits against MacArthur's legacy. He addresses MacArthur's epic blunders—his failure in the hours after Pearl Harbor to protect his priceless bomber force from a Japanese air attack, his tone-deafness to the building Chinese offensive in Korea and, arguably, his ground campaign that turned Manila into a charnel house—by putting these disasters into context. "Blessed with the inestimable gift of hindsight, later historians and commentators almost unanimously condemn MacArthur's decision to advance to the Yalu [River, the border of Korea and China] as a disastrous one," Mr. Herman observes. Yet, taking into account MacArthur's air superiority, control of the seas and strategic momentum, he notes that "MacArthur had good reason to believe that the tools of victory were still in his grasp."

In "Douglas MacArthur," Mr. Herman offers a rich portrait of the man behind the Ray-Bans and corn-cob pipe. The general's strategies, he explains, were frequently the product of inner dialogues. "When MacArthur was pacing like this, like a tiger in a cage, and speaking to his guest, he was actually 'communing aloud with his own mind. He was questioning MacArthur's reasoning in front of a live witness,'" Herman writes, quoting an old Army comrade. "It was something subordinates would see again and again, at the War Department, in the Philippines, Brisbane, and Tokyo." Beautifully scripted, "Douglas MacArthur" takes its place among the general's best biographies for its prose, construction and insight.

Nigel Hamilton's "Commander in Chief: FDR's Battle With Churchill" centers on President Franklin Roosevelt's record as military leader during 1943. FDR loved working the levers of power, and Mr. Hamilton's lush vignettes of Roosevelt pushing for an invasion of France in 1944, or approving the assassination of Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto, cast a glowing light on a leader whose wisdom enabled him to pull the right levers with remarkable consistency.

Occasionally Mr. Hamilton's zeal to stress Roosevelt's force of will drives "Commander in Chief" to interpreta-

tions for which documentary support is thin. Take the Anglo-American atomic-bomb project. Mr. Hamilton claims that in a private meeting at the president's Hyde Park, N.Y., home, FDR ensured British access to U.S. nuclear secrets on the condition that Churchill support an invasion of France in 1944—an invasion Churchill had opposed on more than one occasion. FDR's "D-Day for the Bomb" demand, says Mr. Hamilton, was a "bitter pill" that "stunned" Churchill. Quoting the prime minister's memoirs, he writes: "Churchill was not

FDR loved working the levers of power, and during the war, he pulled the right ones with remarkable consistency.

happy with the outcome—indeed, he woke in the night 'unable to sleep and hardly able to breathe.'"

Mr. Hamilton cites no oral or documentary evidence of an explicit deal, and Roosevelt/Churchill scholars such as Warren F. Kimball, Richard M. Langworth and David Reynolds have written extensively on FDR's atomic diplomacy without finding the quid pro quo Mr. Hamilton suggests. (Churchill's inability to sleep that night, according to his memoirs, was due to the August heat: "It was indeed so hot that I got up one night because I was unable to sleep and hardly able to breathe," Churchill wrote.) The "historic deal" at Hyde Park is an interpretation driven by how events played out—possible, perhaps plausible, but a thin reed for an emphatic factual claim.

The heart of "Commander in Chief" is FDR's opposition to an invasion of France in 1943 and his insistence that the invasion take place in the spring of 1944. Mr. Hamilton concludes that a 1943 invasion of France would have been "mass American slaughter" because German veterans were better soldiers than American troops in 1943—a weakness unknown to Gen. George C. Marshall and his planning staff but clearly perceived by

their commander in chief. From a lean comment by FDR to Canada's prime minister in late 1942, Mr. Hamilton concludes that Roosevelt was "determined to stop his top military staff from insisting upon a suicidal assault in the wrong place, at the wrong time." When a consensus among the Allied high command at last swung to the idea of a push into Sicily in 1943—instead of a cross-Channel invasion—Mr. Hamilton credits the president with overcoming the strategic myopia of Gen. Marshall and his senior planners. "Mass American suicide in a premature Second Front would once again be avoided that year, thanks to the President's military realism," Mr. Hamilton concludes.

The image of a wise FDR teaching befuddled generals the limits of their soldiers' capabilities stretches Roosevelt's wartime acumen, formidable as it was. Like many of the war's great decisions, the Mediterranean strategy for early 1943 emerged as a slow, painful consensus among military leaders that Roosevelt sympathized with in its nascent state and agreed with when it crystallized in January 1943. Marshall favored an invasion of France that year but was honest enough to acknowledge problems of supply, air cover and landing craft that could make it unsustainable. Roosevelt questioned and probed, but he did not bowl over his military professionals, as he had the previous year when he insisted on an invasion of North Africa.

In the main, however, Mr. Hamilton finds ample support for his portrait of a commander in chief who possessed strategic vision, meddled when he needed to meddle and left giant footprints on the war's winding path. Mr. Hamilton's prose is sharp and engaging, and the foundation of his narrative—FDR's struggle to bring Churchill around to an invasion of Normandy at the right time—is admirably constructed. In a Twitter era when public figures are reduced to two-dimensional memes, "Douglas MacArthur" and "Commander in Chief" highlight a pair of deliciously complex souls.

Mr. Jordan is the author of "American Warlords: How Roosevelt's High Command Led America to Victory in World War II."