

World War I as a Chapter in the Life of Georges Clemenceau

by Pr Joanny Moulin, Membre de l'Institut Universitaire de France

What is the point coming to Washington to speak about another George – Georges Clemenceau (1841–1929)? In other words, if I were to undertake to write a biography of Georges Clemenceau *for American readers* today, what would be the best writing strategy? For I take it as an axiom that you do not write the same biography for different readerships, and that in biography even more than in other literary genres, both the choice of topics and the way you handle them are strongly conditioned by the national community your readers belong to. Maybe I am prejudiced in holding this opinion that if I wrote a biography for the French, I would have a very small chance of seeing it one day translated and successfully published in America. There are many good reasons for this. However, my prejudice goes so far as to think that the reverse is not true: if I wrote a biography for American readers it would quickly be published in France as well, and further than that it would be likely to reach an international readership. There are powerful reasons for this too.

To return to my initial question: Why and how should I write a biography of Clemenceau for American readers? To misquote the famous words of Lieutenant-Colonel Charles E. Stanton on the grave of La Fayette on July 4, 1917, I would quip that it's a case of '*Washington, nous voilà !*'. What I mean by this – and this would be my take as a biographer – is that Clemenceau remains for us the man who won the Great War – the French still call him '*le Père la Victoire*' ('Father Victory'), and as such he is with de Gaulle and very few others one of our closest equivalents to the Founding Fathers. Clemenceau the Republican is literally an embodiment of the Republic, and I would further argue that he is the most American of our Great Men. That is, if you are willing to forget for one moment that he was a God damned atheist. Clemenceau used to say: 'What I am interested in is the life of men who have failed, because it is the sign that they have tried to surpass themselves.' What does it mean, 'the most American of our Great Men'? Let Clemenceau answer this question himself once again: 'It is to the Vendean character that I owe the best of my qualities. The courage, the headstrong obstinacy, the fighting spirit.'

It is not always remembered that Clemenceau was one of the very few politicians of the Third Republic who was perfectly fluent in English, because he had lived in the United States for four years, from 1865 to 1869. He had come to New York City as a political refugee of sorts, when the agents of Napoleon III began to crack down on dissidents, and he would probably have stayed in America if his father had not compelled him to return. He tried to settle as a medical doctor, but really made a living as a journalist for *Le Temps*, that regularly published his 'Letters from America', reporting on American political life in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. He also taught French at the home of Calvin Rood Great Barrington, Mass. then at a private girls' school in Stamford, Connecticut, and married one of his pupils, Mary Plummer, who was the mother of his three children. This was not a successful marriage, and it ended by a contentious divorce in 1891. Comparatively little attention has been given to the influence of his American years on Clemenceau's character.

Much has been written on his contacts with English Radicals, his admiration for John Stuart Mill, his friendship with Admiral Frederick Maxse, his correspondence with Henry

Hyndman, etc. But the mark that America left on him remains to be appreciated: it taught him the effectiveness of political pragmatism, documented his criticism of the institutions of the French Republic where the President shares power with the Prime Minister, and it certainly taught him crucial lessons in lobbying, political campaigning, and the impact of the press on public opinion. Most certainly it reinforced his self-confidence, by convincing him that his natural buoyancy, upfront outspokenness, undaunted stamina in the face of adversity, unswerving fidelity to one's ideals against all odds, were determining political assets in the quagmire of European intrigues. In spite of the well-known disagreements between George Clemenceau and Woodrow Wilson over the Treaty of Versailles, deep down the two men had in fact much in common.

Be it as it may, Clemenceau's admiration for the ancient Greeks, the fact that he himself wrote a biography of Demosthenes (1926), should encourage us not to forget Plutarch, whose main virtue as a biographer is the concentration on illuminating details rather than extended narrative. Plutarch's main defect for us is perhaps the suppression of uncomfortable facts to maintain nobility of character. We don't want another hagiography of Clemenceau. His disgraceful attitude toward his wife Mary Plummer, for instance, brings nothing to his credit. However, it does reveal the ruthlessness of his character. Clemenceau was nicknamed 'le Tigre' ('the Tiger'), and he didn't like it, saying: 'All jaws and no brain. That's nothing like me.' But it did reflect his killer mentality: a very unpleasant, but very effective defect.

The reason why details like the American episode in his life are scarcely brought into focus is that they are easily drowned in a mass of historical facts, as most biographers of Clemenceau find it very difficult to resist the temptation of cramming in a history of France from the Revolution of 1848 to the outcome of World War I. How his father Benjamin was a Republican leader of underground networks in 1848, who got arrested and exiled in Belgium after the coup of 1851. How Georges went to prison himself in 1862 for similar reasons, because 'When one has the honour to be alive, one speaks out!' England. The USA. His action during the siege of Paris in 1870 as mayor of Montmartre. His struggle for the emancipation of the transported leaders of the Commune. His many electoral mandates in Paris and the Var. His opposition to Ferry's colonial policy. His involvement with General Boulanger. The many ministers that became famous for tripping. The Whole of the Dreyfus Affair and how he gave its title to Zola's '*J'accuse*!' The Schnaebelé affair. His opposition to Jaurès and the socialists of SFIO. The Panama Affair that caused his political downfall. His friendship with impressionist painter Monet. His first mandate as Prime Minister from 1906 to 1909. His travels abroad. His career as a journalist. His friends and mistresses. You finally come to the really interesting bit – from his return to power on November 16, 1917, to the Armistice on November 11, 1918 – in the last chapter but one or two.

Would we remember Leonidas if it were not for the Battle of Thermopylae? If it had not been for his action in the last, decisive year of the Great War, Clemenceau would have remained only one among the numerous 87 successive 'Présidents du Conseil' (Prime Minister) of the Third Republic (56 before 1917, 31 after), drowned in the roll call on along with the Ferrys, Freycinets, Fallièreses, Brissons, Loubets, Combeses, Sarriens, Painlevés and other Poincarés, with whom he ceaselessly fought duels in words or deeds. But who would buy a biography of Émile Combes, except perhaps if it were a comical

‘parallel lives’ with that of François Hollande? Neither is Clemenceau’s life story really interesting after the Armistice of 1918. As his posthumous enemy Marshal Foch rightly said: he won the war, but lost the peace. What we really want to read about is how it came to pass that Clemenceau rose to power in November 1917, and how his action as head of state contributed to the final victory one year later.

Clemenceau was called upon by President Poincaré to form a government on November 15, 1917, one week after the October Revolution in Russia (November 7th). The United States had entered the war against the continental powers since April 1917, but the American troops had not yet arrived. In April, General Nivelle had launched the great French offensive of the Second Battle of the Aisne (‘Chemin des Dames’), but failed to achieve the expected victory, and the battle dragged on well into October. There were many mutinies in the French ranks, occasioned by the failure of the Nivelle Offensive and its many casualties, and no doubt encouraged by news of the imminent revolution in Russia, and the arguments of the socialists of the SFIO in favour of immediate peace on the borderlines of 1914. At the same time, Ludendorff had successfully inaugurated in Caporetto, on the Italian front, a new strategy based on surprise effect, in an effort to achieve victory before the arrival of the American reinforcements. In secret diplomatic moves, former premier Joseph Caillaux and Prime Minister Aristide Briand were negotiating a ‘blank peace’, with no annexation of territory. Conscious that the French people would never accept a peace that left Alsace and Lorraine to Germany, they lured themselves to believe that the Germans could swap the ‘lost provinces’ for compensations in Eastern Europe.

Meanwhile, Briand remained feckless, his Minister of the Interior Louis Malvy not even daring to crack down on the traitors of ‘Carnet B’: a list of personalities notoriously in German pay, like businessman Paul Bolo (‘Bolo Pacha’), the dancer Mata Hari, or Émile-Joseph Duval, administrator of the anarchist paper *Le Bonnet Rouge*. Clemenceau kept storming against the government on a daily basis in the pages of *L’homme libre*, the newspaper he had founded in 1913, clamouring that the French were ‘Neither governed no defended!’ He was speaking up in particular against censorship and for the freedom of the press, insisting that it was crucial that the French people should be well informed, and that the government should stop treating them like minors. *L’homme libre* was banned by Malvy in September 1914, reappeared the next day as *L’homme enchaîné* that was immediately banned in its turn. Clemenceau went on writing directly to the members of Parliament.

He was particularly well informed on current affairs, as a senator, and a member of the Committee of Foreign Affairs and the Committee of War, both of which he soon became president of. He kept sending reports and reproaches to the government, making frequent visits to commanding officers and ordinary ‘poilus’ on the front. He constantly howled against pacifist, tirelessly affirmed the legitimacy of the control of Parliament over the government and the military commanders, true to his aphorism: ‘War is too serious an affair to be left to military men.’ He was instrumental in the dismissal of General Joffre in 1916, saying: ‘stripes on a cap are not enough to transform an imbecile into a clever man’. About the President of the Republic he said: ‘Poincaré knows nothing except by the blanks his own censorship cuts in the papers.’ Yet Poincaré it was who called him to power on November 15, 1917. Clemenceau had taken great care never to mention it, not to speak

of asking for it openly, but he had struggled hard, since 1909 at least, to create the conditions for this to happen. 'I was never a candidate to anything, he said: it had to come from outside.'

Indeed, at the summer of 1917, public opinion was strongly in favour of Clemenceau. From the beginning of the war, in speeches, reports, and newspaper articles, he had constantly hammered in a die-hard determinacy to fight the bitter end. 'To die is not enough: we must vanquish!' He would still be driving the nail in March 1918: 'Home Affairs: I make war! Foreign Affairs: I make war! I always make war!' On November 24, 1917, the *Tigre* would be 76, and he had a long record of dauntless political and physical courage, unswerving fidelity to his professed ideas, and fiercely outspoken independence from everyone else. He was also resurrected, as it were, from at least two political deaths: a fatal media lynching in 1893, and a damaging fall from power in 1909, at the end of 3 years of government during which he had definitely alienated one half of his left-wing supports as Clemenceau the 'strike breaker'. But this most probably played in his favour, for he had long ago and consistently fallen out with the Marxist socialists. In 1880 already he had declared: 'I am in favour of the integral development of the individual. And if you ask me what I think of your collective appropriation of the land, etc. I answer categorically: No! no! I am for integral liberty, and I will never consent to enter the convents and the barracks that you intend to prepare for us!' Resolutely allergic to Bolshevism, there was no way Clemenceau would ever yield to the sirens of socialist pacifism. The internationalist socialists were obviously against him, but they were a minority, and he would find a majority in the Parliament with the 'social patriots' and a large part of the right on a 'Sacred Union' basis. All the more so because, during his first mandate from 1906 to 1909, Clemenceau had won for himself the other nickname of 'France's first cop' by demonstrating his determination to maintain law and order throughout a severe wave of strikes. As a matter of fact, when he came to power the repression against internationalists and pacifists intensified.

As President of the Council and War minister, Clemenceau ruled the country from the War Ministry, with General Mordacq as chief of military staff. Socialist politicians Caillaux and Malvy, suspected of treasonable contact with the enemy, were arrested. 'Neither treason nor half-treason: War!' he said in his inaugural speech in Parliament, but he added: 'We are under your control. The question of confidence will always be asked.' Only the socialists voted *Nay*. Then he immediately undertook to purge the administration of suspect or incompetent civil servants, and to energetically curb all revolts in the armed forces and strikes in factories. He cracked down on 'Carnet B' traitors, and put pressure on the pacifist press as much as possible short of censorship, which he restricted to military and diplomatic affairs. 'The right to insult the members of the government must remain absolute,' he said, in reply to articles waging fierce attacks against him.

In the army he dismissed incompetent officers, maintaining Pétain in spite of his poor opinion of him: 'He has no ideas, he has no heart, he is always sombre in the face of events, hopelessly severe in his judgements on his peers and his subordinates. His military valour is far from exceptional, he has in action a certain timidity, a lack of pluck.' At the Supreme War Council, working with Lloyd George, Italian premier Orlando and American councillor Edward House, he urged President Wilson to send troops, and manoeuvred to have General Foch nominated commander-in-chief of the allied forces in March 1918. In

The Grandeur and Misery of Victory, written in 1929, the year of his death, in reply to Foch's posthumous *Memorial*, he would regret that the General did not exert his commandment energetically enough. Manpower being most in need, Clemenceau the anti-colonialism turned to colonial troops against the advice of Pétain, turning to Senegalese representative Blaise Diagne to recruit the 'black force' of the 9th Corps under General Mangin. With Orlando he negotiated the employment in French factories of 70,000 Italian immigrants to sustain war production. Regularly, Clemenceau visited the 'poilus' on the front, thinking nothing of exposing himself to 'smell the Boche' and keep up the spirit of these men for whom he more than once wept in hours of exhaustion.

For all that, in the spring of 1918, Paris was partly deserted by its inhabitants fleeing the bombardment of Big Bertha. In May, when Ludendorff launched the Third Battle of the Aisne at the Chemin des Dames, the situation was so critical that Clemenceau came close to firing Pétain for the second time. In July, at the moment of the Second Battle of the Marne, there were over one million American soldiers fighting in France, and the balance tipped in favour of the Allies. Paradoxically, when Clemenceau decided to sign the armistice without waiting for the total defeat of Germany, it was against the judgement of President Poincaré, to whom he presented his resignation because he had written to him saying that would 'hamstring our troops'. Paradoxically too, in late 1918 and early 1919 Clemenceau was still making war, but it was in the Black Sea, to support the White Russians against the Bolsheviks.

Before I conclude, I would like to draw attention to a detail barely adumbrated in this miniature sketch of the life Clemenceau: the contrast between his character and that of Philippe Pétain, 15 years his junior, who would cut a very different figure in French history. Seen through the lens of Clemenceau's life, World War I looks terribly inconclusive, and much rather like a much longer story that only came to an end, perhaps, on VE Day, May 8, 1945. Clemenceau never stopped fighting with all his might till the last days of his life: in 1929, at the age of 87, he was still writing a book to reply to Marshal Foch's scathing postmortem criticism of his conduct of the war, touching issues that had a crucial incidence on the outbreak of World War II. Foch derisively called him 'the superman', and it is true that there is a strong Nietzschean side to Clemenceau, and not just the moustache. But Clemenceau is precisely not a superman. He is interesting rather because his character appears as a knot, a link, a hyphen of sorts between the Founding Fathers of the French Revolution whose cult he was brought up in by his own father Benjamin, and the Republican spirit of our democracies today. Perhaps, as such, his life is worth writing for his defects, that are his best qualities, like Samuel Johnson's: 'warts and all'. In November 1918, the French Academy elected both Clemenceau and Foch. Clemenceau never took his seat. Perhaps because this noble institution was founded by the French Monarchy, the rude old Republican Tiger said: 'Give me forty assholes and I'll make you an Académie Française'.