Spring 2018

Figures of WWI

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Grant Morgan (‘18)
Philosophy, Political Science, Economics
Honors Thesis

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This is a somewhat long introduction to two papers I wrote while attending a summer school at the University of Oxford in 2017. The papers are about two very great men of the early 20th century: T.E. Lawrence, better known as Lawrence of Arabia, and David Lloyd George, the Swiss army knife of British politics for more than two decades.

The papers need hardly any introduction. They are pretty much complete in themselves. I would, however, like to say a few words about the connection between The University of Akron and the University of Oxford which sent me to Oxford in the first place: the PPE major. Having done so much for me, and generally so little known by the student population at UA, I think it is worth much more attention.

To show its significance, I'll begin with a history of Oxford PPE. Then I'll go into its adoption by other schools, including Akron. After this discussion will be the two papers I wrote at Oxford as part of the summer program.

**PPE**

In 1920, the University of Oxford established a new degree called “Modern Greats.” This degree program was supposed to provide an alternative for those studying to become part of the civil service, whose students, traditionally, studied medieval or classical topics, and came from private schools. But by getting rid of the requirement to know ancient Greek, Oxford also opened up the program to a whole host of public-educated students; the degree’s first informal name, in fact, was “Greats without Greek.”

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Modern Greats students would be studying a mixture of philosophy, political science, and economics. Their focus would be both on the historical development of those disciplines, but, more importantly, on the contemporary application of them to relevant issues. As The Guardian writes in its history of PPE, it was a degree that “engaged with the contemporary world...[producing] graduates better able to serve Britain and its empire.”

This new degree would be more “modern” not only because it focused on contemporary issues, but also because it was a more modern method of obtaining an education. It aimed to produce the competent generalist, so to speak, whose greatest asset was an ability to quickly and thoroughly understand, analyze, and communicate broad swaths of information about almost any topic.

At first, the degree was doubted to work. Many Oxford tutors thought it would be incoherent and useless. This was especially because it lacked a hard science component, notwithstanding its general vagueness and breadth. This lack of any sort of hard science is still one of the main criticisms of the degree, no matter how hard economics tries to become one.

Almost from the beginning, the degree was attracting impressionable students with a yearning for political adventure. This was a self-perpetuating cycle: eager students come to study PPE would, in turn, be mesmerized by the young, enthusiastic PPE dons; would then find their own calling within the variety of the degree; and would then go out into the world to follow that calling, usually

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2 Beckett, "PPE: The Oxford Degree That Runs Britain."
4 Beckett, "PPE: The Oxford Degree That Runs Britain."
in the realm of politics (but also, prominently, the media). Meanwhile, the success and visibility of PPE graduates was its own advertisement for the degree, and enrollment and notoriety continued to climb.

Today, the degree is considered somewhat of a factory for not only British, but international politicians, media moguls, journalists, bankers, historians, writers, and, in short, world figures.

More than any other course at any other university, more than any revered or resented private school, and in a manner probably unmatched in any other democracy, Oxford PPE pervades British political life. ... It also gives many of these public figures a shared outlook: confident, internationalist, intellectually flexible, and above all sure that small groups of supposedly well-educated, rational people, such as themselves, can and should improve Britain and the wider world.

In time, as the degree modernized even more and gained greater reputation, its name also changed. This new name is what it still goes by today: Philosophy, Political Science, and Economics.

Strangely, however, PPE’s rise at Oxford has been mysterious. Though it commands respect and attention from the sheer number of politicians it produces, there is still no building to house the “department of PPE” (which also does not exist). Instead, there is only a somewhat nebulous “PPE committee” which meets, infrequently, “somewhere in one of the [Oxford] buildings,” according to British economist Andrew Graham. And though it is almost 100 years old now, there are still no senior tutors of PPE.

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6 Kelly, "Why Does PPE Rule Britain?"
7 Beckett, "PPE: The Oxford Degree That Runs Britain."
8 Beckett, "PPE: The Oxford Degree That Runs Britain."
In all, it is a program which has somehow maintained its youth and perpetual newness despite its rise to what now might be considered an established tradition for Britain’s ruling elite. Lots of this must be attributed to the degree’s focus on contemporary issues – there will never be a time when the study of current events is not “current,” so to speak. But PPE’s continued prominence must also be attributed to its breadth; it is not often, in a higher education world of increasing specialization, that any one course of study provides such flexibility as to what is actually studied; this flexibility, in turn, allows students to study what they want, rather than what they must, which is a constant source of excitement.

**PPE’s Expansion**

The closest match to Oxford PPE, in terms of consistently producing future politicians and other public figures, is Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government. There, students go through a course that emphasizes breadth, contemporary events, and the merging of many social disciplines, just like at Oxford.

Many universities around the world, however, have adopted an eponymous PPE course of study, regardless of whether they’d like to become the next factory for world politicians. In many ways, this is the main proof of the standalone value of the degree, distinct from the value of notoriety which the graduates of only one university, albeit the founding university, has produced over the years.

Many of the universities which have adopted PPE have not done so with a dedicated program, either. Instead, they will concoct a curriculum filled with classes of various disciplines, with specific elective requirements for each department within that curriculum.
The degree truly becomes, then, an interdisciplinary course of study; students bounce around from department to department, learning things not directly related to, but perfectly relatable to, their other courses; and in the end, they must form their own judgments about how the information fits together, and how it must be used.

This is the case at The University of Akron, where PPE maintains a small but consistent flow of graduates. The degree is housed under the Department of Philosophy, but has designated advisors in each of the three departments. There are certain requirements for each discipline that are mostly the same as the requirements for freshman and sophomore students in those disciplines individually. Afterward, however, PPE branches off, and allows flexibility in its upper-electives.

Like many undergraduates, I was very hesitant to commit to any one course of study. I never knew if it was the “right” one; or if, in a couple years, I might deeply regret my choice, but not be able to change it for fear of falling behind. The oft-repeated advice I received – don’t worry so much about your major, you’ll end up doing something else anyway – was also not doing any good. It was impossible at the time to see that far in the future.

When I learned of it, PPE seemed to be the remedy to most of those concerns. It combined the math, analytics, and broad practical concepts of economics with the topicality of politics and the wisdom of philosophy. And as I progressed through the major, I quickly learned that this breadth, rather than thinning the major, makes it much more valuable: it adds the component of connection between the disciplines, the making of which is entirely the task of the student.
For a senior capstone course, Akron’s PPE program suggests students go to Oxford for a summer program in History, Politics, and Society, through Oxford’s Department of Continuing Education. Though “HPS” is not necessarily PPE – it is very close. And that is the link that connects Oxford, the founder of PPE, with Akron, a disciple of PPE, the result of which, for me, were the papers below.
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The Importance of T.E. Lawrence as
Guerrilla Leader

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It will be difficult to write anything about T.E. Lawrence that has not been written. I hesitate to give a history, detailed or general, of his Arabian exploits; there are enough of those. I hesitate to attempt any new analysis of his tactics; they are clear, they are logical, and they worked. What I can do is tell how and for whom he was important as a guerrilla leader: First for the British, for a paradoxical reason. Then for the Arabs, for two key decisions early in their Revolt. Then for the success of the Revolt, through his understanding of guerrilla tactics and strategy. Next for the Great War, for one main reason. And finally for himself, for personal reasons.

T.E. Lawrence was and still is a mystifying character. By the qualities of his mind and the construction of his character he would appear almost destined for fame, regardless of his profession. It is fortunate for the world and for the Arabs that his early experiences led him to the Middle East. If he had not half the love he claims to have had for Arabic culture, land, and people – which began on a trip to Syria when an undergraduate and developed more fully when an archeologist in that same region—there is no possibility things would have turned out as they did. Great Britain was the first to see this and take advantage of it.

It was Britain’s priority to win on the Western front; its interest to defeat the Ottoman Turks and join Russian forces on Germany’s flank; its fear to initiate any hostilities outside the European theater. An Arab rising against the Turks might satisfy the latter two but, when the Sharif of Mecca did declare the Revolt in 1916, swiftly taking over Mecca and advancing on Medina, things went bad quickly. Lawrence, noted for his work in the Cairo intelligence

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office and his familiarity with the Arabic culture and language, was sent to assess the situation; Britain, wanting badly the revolt to succeed, asked Lawrence to determine who might be its leader, and how he might win.

This was the beginning of Lawrence’s path to becoming the British-Arab liaison, after which he always, if not always openly or willingly, and simultaneously as military adviser of the Arab irregulars under Prince Feisal, worked for Britain’s benefit: drawing the Ottomans from the war through an Arab uprising, and establishing British presence in areas which, post-war, were Britain’s desire to control. Yet, paradoxically, he worked so well for British interests precisely because he opposed them.

Lawrence wanted the Revolt to do two things. First, naturally, to defeat the Turks. Second, to make sure no other imperial power stepped in to fill the vacuum created by the Turks’ absence. The first of these goals was normal and aligned with British interest. The second of these goals was radical and directly opposed British interest. Yet without someone as passionate as Lawrence for giving the Arabs independence – if the Arabs knew they were fighting only to be split up and sold off to other imperial powers after the war – it is doubtful that the Revolt would have worked as well as it did, or perhaps have been successful at all.

Lawrence thought there were three elements to the guerrilla strategy. I will discuss them as they come up. Here it is fit to introduce the third element: the psychological element. Lawrence says this element

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concerns the crowd, the adjustment of spirit to the point where it becomes fit to exploit in action. It considers the capacity for mood of the men, their complexities and mutability, and the cultivation of what in them profits the intention.\textsuperscript{12}

The psychological element deals with the enigma of men’s minds and human motivation. A successful leader, which Lawrence was, must give his followers something worth fighting for, and a man worth fighting under. For the Arab irregulars it was “at least some feeling of semi-independence, or the comfort of knowing that they were in the fight.”\textsuperscript{13} Lawrence was able to do this because he felt the same motivation as them. For Lawrence, as for the Arabs, the Revolt was for freedom from the Turks, and with this he won the Arabs’ hearts and minds and trust. For Britain there was nothing better than such a man, and with different intentions they desired, and achieved, the same goal.

Lawrence also, in a later essay, discussed the personal aspects of assimilating with the Arabs, of being a successful leader and adviser among them. His “27 Articles” of advice center around one theme: stay out of the way and let the Arabs think they are doing their own fighting and planning. Don’t noticeably become their leader; they must have their own fight; they must win their own fight for themselves. If Lawrence advocated detachment in war, he also advocated it in personal relations: “Do not try to do too much with your own hands. Better the Arabs do it tolerably than that you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are to help them, not to win it for them.”\textsuperscript{14} Lawrence was a master of the psychological element of guerrilla warfare.

\textsuperscript{13}Barclay, “T.E. Lawrence and the Arab Revolt.” 24.
As for the Arabs, Lawrence was crucial for making two strategic decisions early in the Revolt. After the irregulars had captured Mecca and were advancing on the outskirts of Medina – the Revolt having officially begun – things went stale. The Arabs could not get into Medina, and the Turks were bringing in reinforcements from up north in preparation for an attack on Mecca, to retake the city. Time ran down quickly. The British high command thought, to save the Revolt, Medina must be taken. This was typical of “many of the [British] strategic decisions of WWI...firmly rooted in the tenets and theories of...Clausewitz.”

Lawrence saw when no one else did the mistake in this thinking. At any cost the Turks should be kept in Medina, not driven out. If the Arab irregulars could disrupt the flow of Turkish troops and supplies from the north, the existing forces at Medina likely would not advance down to Mecca. Not only this, but the Medina troops would also be isolated from the rest of the Turkish army, and spend their time defending a useless city, rather than consolidating their hold on the Hejaz.

As there was only one Hejaz rail line connecting Turkish forces up north with those in Medina, all the Arabs needed to do was frequently disrupt the line north of the city. The disruptions need not be major; in fact, the smaller and quicker the better. Constant and clandestine disruption, such as blowing small portions of track or raiding supply cars, was better than fighting troops – the “attack need be...directed not against [the enemy’s] men, but against his materials: so it should not seek for his main strength or his

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16Wilson, Lawrence of Arabia, 44.
weaknesses, but for his most accessible material.” Eventually the irregulars, with help from a British naval assault on the coast of the Red Sea, were able to take a key city, Wejh, which could act as a base for Arab guerrilla operations, and a center for British supply throughout the Hejaz. This was a brilliant strategy coming straight from Lawrence’s unconventional suggestion. For the Turks, it was nearly impossible to defend.

Here it is fit to introduce another of Lawrence’s elements: the algebraic element. This encompasses all the “known variables, fixed conditions, space and time, inorganic things like hills and climates and railways” of guerrilla fighting, all the “essentially formulable” aspects. Raiding the Hejaz rail line mainly consisted of this. The Arabs, suffering little to no real danger, could precisely disrupt the Turkish flow of supplies to Medina with disproportionately effective results. Lawrence would maintain this strategy – fighting the enemy’s materials, not the enemy – throughout the Revolt.

Later on Lawrence, in line with the algebraic element, calculated specifically what it would have taken for the Turks to control the Arab guerrilla threat. He figured that, of the 100,000 square miles of the Hejaz, the Turks would need a post every four square miles. With each post containing no fewer than 20 men, the Turks would need nearly 600,000 men – or 500,000 more than they had in total. Indeed, it surprisingly seemed that “the assets in this sphere were with the Arabs, and climate, railways, deserts, technical weapons could also be attached to their interests.”

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The second of Lawrence’s key strategic decisions in the Revolt came right after Wejh. With the Turks successfully isolated at Medina, with Mecca under control, with British reinforcements at Wejh and with the Hejaz rail line in the Arabs’ pockets, Lawrence saw now that the Revolt must use its advantage and spread north – this also before the British launched a traditional ground campaign up the Mediterranean coast, which, succeeding, would take the “Arab” victory out of the Revolt, which Lawrence so fervently believed was needed for the Arabs to become independent, if successful.

However, to spread north into Lebanon, Palestine and Syria, the Revolt would need more supplies. Lawrence here devised another unconventional plan: take control of Akaba, the fishing village on the northernmost point of the Red Sea, which through a strongly-guarded mountain pass led northeastward to Maan, a strategic Turkish stronghold. If all three – Akaba, Maan, and the pass between them – could be gotten, Britain would have greater ability to supply the Arabs, and the Arabs greater ability to launch operations and spread the Revolt north, eventually reaching Damascus. But how to do so.

Around this time there was...a discernible change in [Lawrence’s] tactical approach...heretofore, the Arab irregulars had been employed to support the...British preference for coastal operations. Lawrence redirected the guerrilla operations to penetrate further inland and exercise more of a disruptive force against the Turkish lines of communication.22

Akaba would be taken from inland, not from the coast; Maan would be attacked first, and if this action “was decisive, the rest would be easy.” And all of it would happen by complete surprise.23

21Wilson, Lawrence of Arabia, 46.
23Wilson, Lawrence of Arabia, 47.
The strategy worked, and it was only a matter of time until the Revolt, maintaining to the end its guerrilla tactics devised by Lawrence, and backed by Britain’s traditional maneuvers up the coast, spread north into Damascus.

These were two of the key decisions Lawrence made to help the Arabs and their Revolt (and Britain, as its goal at this point was to defeat the Turks as well). Through the rest of the Revolt Lawrence devised the same tactics and used the same strategy: a “war of detachment...[containing] the enemy by the silent threat of a vast unknown desert, not disclosing themselves till the moment of attack”; effectively, “never engaging the enemy at all,” and certainly never giving the enemy a target at which to shoot. Raids, hit-and-runs, surprise attacks, quick withdrawal, logistical disruption, perfect intelligence, owning the initiative – these would give the Arabs the means to win. Passive defense, over-extension, uncertain communications and reinforcements – these would be the downfall of the Turks.

And here can be introduced the last of Lawrence’s elements: the biological element, or the “humanity in battle.” This element deals “nine-tenths [with] the tactics of battle; one-tenth [with] the commander’s competence and ability to lead intelligently and persuasively; to assess and control situations, to respond to and plan for attack.” Lawrence was the man for both. As Arab military adviser he was able to both devise tactics and implement them. It was, as shown, his suggestions which led to the unconventional yet successful strategy in Wejh and Akaba, and it was his suggestions
and guidance which would dictate the guerrilla tactics of the Arab irregulars as a whole.

The Arabs were not equipped to fight conventional, Clausewitz-like warfare. First because they were, until the outbreak of the Revolt, under Turkish control. A regular army could not be built up in such circumstances. Second because they were still a tribal, hyper-factional group of people. In fact, commanders of the Arab irregulars had to be very careful not to mix certain tribes in their raids and missions, for fear that the soldiers would not get along well enough to carry them out – or worse, would perform sabotage. But the Arabs did have something. They could raid. They knew how to raid. They had been practicing it on other tribes for hundreds and hundreds of years. They were skilled horsemen and skilled looters and skilled raiders. They had the tactics; all they needed was the strategy. The man with the strategy was Lawrence. He saw the peculiar Arab propensity for guerrilla warfare, and exploited it to a larger strategy that would complete the Revolt. Guerrilla tactics were nothing new for them. What was new was that a commander and military adviser like Lawrence could so effectively use the “biological” element of guerrilla to his advantage.27

Lawrence would later write that, at the time, military opinion “was obsessed by the dictum of Foch that the ethic of modern war is to seek for the enemy’s army, his centre of power, and destroy it in battle,” but that the Arabs were both incapable and unwilling to do that, as they “would not attack positions and so they seemed to [the British] incapable of forcing a decision.”28 So Lawrence needed to

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adapt, as successful leaders must. And if the Arabs could not be – to their benefit – “modern,” could they not at least be

an influence, a thing invulnerable, intangible, without front or back, drifting about like a gas? Armies were like plants, immobile as a whole, firm-rooted, nourished through long stems to the head. The Arabs might be a vapour, blowing where they listed...

This is a threat ever more dangerous and ever more menacing than a conventional force fighting conventional battles. More, it perfectly suited the abilities and capabilities of the Arabs. The key was having the initiative. With the initiative, the Arabs controlled the pace and direction of Turkish defense, which, kept always on its guard, was wasting remarkable amounts of men and supplies to defend against this gas-like, intangible influence. Lawrence showed his brilliance and competence in being able to adapt himself not only personally, to the Arab way of life, but strategically, to the Arab way of war, and as such was invaluable to the success of the Revolt.

I have shown how, for a paradoxical reason, Lawrence was important to the British; for two key reasons, to the Arabs at the beginning of the Revolt; and to the success of the Revolt, for his understanding and application of guerrilla warfare throughout. Now, as a sort of addendum, I will explain why he was so important as a guerrilla leader in two more aspects: for the Allied cause in the Great War, and for himself.

The Allies concentrated most of their attention on the Western front. Yet a victory on the periphery was not unwanted. By late 1917 British and Egyptian forces under General Edmund Allenby were smashing up the eastern coast of the Mediterranean, attacking from the water with their navy and from land with their regular armies.

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The Arabs, much further inland, were wreaking logistical and strategic havoc on the Turks’ right flank, disrupting communications, looting supplies, confining and isolating Turkish troops, and in any way possible causing hell for Turkish operations.30

On Oct. 1, 1918, the Allies entered Damascus. Later that month the Ottoman Empire signed the Armistice of Mudros. Not long after, on November 9, Kaiser William II abdicated. The downfall of the Central Powers came in a rush, with the success of the Arab Revolt and the defeat of the Turkish forces near the beginning.31 The “sideshow of a sideshow,”32 as Lawrence (perhaps too humbly) once characterized the Arab Revolt, was crucial to the total Allied victory.

I will finish with a short discussion of the importance of Lawrence as a guerrilla leader – to himself:

All men dream: but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dream with open eyes, to make it possible.33

From this passage of his major work Lawrence is quite obviously speaking about himself. Since a child, those around him noticed an “unusually strong will-power, often employed to achieve feats of strength and endurance.”34 At Oxford, he went above and beyond what he was required as an undergraduate, even contributing original archeological finds to the Ashmolean museum. His digging

32T.E. Lawrence, Seven Pillars of Wisdom (London: Jonathan Cape, 1950), 281.
33Lawrence, Seven Pillars, 23.
34Wilson, Lawrence of Arabia, 8.
in Syria was successful and relevant. His reports at the Cairo Intelligence Office were exceptionally perceptive, cogent and thorough. Everyone who ran into him seemed unable to forget him. And, after his success in the Middle Eastern theater during WWI, he was able to achieve “his enduring ambition...to be a writer,” with the success of his “Seven Pillars of Wisdom” and several other military and autobiographical works. The mythic sobriquet by which he is known today – “Lawrence of Arabia” – was popularized during his life.35

No matter how much he later deprecated or humbled the legacy of his work in Arabia, no matter how much he tried, once famous, to escape fame and live inconspicuously, and no matter how many psychological problems with which he left (or entered) the war, men such as himself are most important to themselves. It is my opinion that, as a guerrilla leader, T.E. Lawrence was most important to himself, for it was his experiences and recognition in the Middle Eastern theater of WWI which gave him the pad from which to launch his ambitions, and the reputation to achieve them. That more than anything else was important to him. For one who so badly wants fame and fulfillment, the means by which he gets them are infinitely precious.

As for Lawrence’s military legacy, as one author writes, his most important achievement was not “crafting a template” for guerrilla warfare – guerrilla warfare has been around as long as warfare – but his own example of “how hard any soldier fighting an irregular war must work to understand and adapt himself to local conditions.”36

And so for the British, for the Arabs, for the success of the Revolt, for

35Wilson, “Formative Years,” 1-19.
the Allied victory in the war, and for himself – he was absolutely imperative as a guerrilla leader.
#3

*WWI Party Politics: Winners and Losers*

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Nearly every paper on the fall of the British Liberal Party preempts its inconclusiveness with the excuse that others, too, find the topic equally inconclusive and, at any rate, unmanageably complicated. Now there are even scholars studying the history of scholars studying the history of 1916, that all-important year for any understanding of the Liberal decline. Some think they know the exact reasons. It is more likely that, as one scholar has it, “Liberal politics of the past has no future,” and it must remain simply “a subject of historical inquiry – and of intense debate among historians – for many years to come...[emerging] as one of those permanently fascinating ‘Problems’ [sic] of history.”

I will not attempt to explain precisely why the Liberal party broke as it did. It did. What I will attempt to explain is why the split was so damaging to the party’s future, and why, when the Liberals fared so poorly, the Conservative and Labour Parties fared so well during and after WWI.

Most of the Liberal Party’s problems start and end with David Lloyd George, the wonderfully powerful yet strangely corrupting figure who weaved in and out of the heights of British politics before, during and after the war. Yet there are some who find historians and researchers much too interested in him, and who think that, before investigating the personalities of the era, one should look at how structural changes in the British government could explain the Liberals’ decline. So I will start with that. Then I will discuss the split in the party between Lloyd George and Herbert Henry Asquith. Next I will talk about Labour; then the Conservatives; then the post-war election; and, finally, the final defeat of the Liberals.

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Often changes in the British electorate are used to explain the rise of the Labour Party more than the fall of the Liberal Party, but they can be used to do the latter. The Representation of the People Act of 1918 tripled the electorate and allowed a certain subpopulation of women to vote.\textsuperscript{38} For various reasons, as some scholars argue, the Liberals seemed particularly attached to the “political community” of 1867-1914. After 1918’s enfranchisement, the new electorate was not only “divided by class in a way that increasingly excluded the Liberals, but it was less likely to respond to policies that demanded a comparatively high level of political intelligence,”\textsuperscript{39} as did most of the issues on which Liberals focused. Also, because of their somewhat close alliance on broader issues, many voters, even “dyed-in-the-wool Tories, who had voted Conservative since getting the franchise,” were now talking “not ‘Liberal’ but ‘Labour.’”\textsuperscript{40}

What is more popular to discuss is the split between Asquith, who led a Liberal and then a coalition government for the first half of the war, and Lloyd George, who moved to multiple different positions in Asquith’s government before superseding him as prime minister in 1916.

Unlike the event of Asquith’s resignation, his reasons for making a coalition cabinet in the early months of 1915 are somewhat clear. He was influenced to compose the coalition, originally, to keep the political truce with Unionists he had declared at the start of the


\textsuperscript{39}Thompson, “The Historians,” 749.

This is how the Conservatives came onto the scene. Once there, they were free to pull political maneuvers in any fashion they wanted. Indeed, as the war progressed, Asquith was proving more and more vulnerable to attack by the press and, “as time passed without victory, his hold weakened on what he knew was a discontented Liberal party” – the only thing keeping his coalition together.

Multiple factors hastened Asquith’s eventual fall. One was the omnipresent force of Lloyd George, then at the War Office, who was, along with being generally discontented with Asquith’s leadership, indirectly pressuring Asquith to form a small War Cabinet, no more than three to five men, that could run day-to-day war operations more expeditiously. Lloyd George would head the War Cabinet – and Asquith would not even be a member. When this got out to the press it was political humiliation, and Asquith’s reputation, already declining, dropped further.

The Conservatives, most notably Edward Carson, Bonar Law and Arthur Balfour, saw a better leader in Lloyd George, and maneuvered for him to replace Asquith. Though one notable historian thinks it was on the “protean issue [of labor union dilution], not on pre-existing rivalries or ideological divergence,” that Asquith’s alliance with Lloyd George broke, this does not account for the strong Conservative preference of George over Asquith, nor with George’s quite obvious disillusionment over Asquith’s running of the war, nor with the general sentiment that

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“Lloyd George, for all his faults, provided a dynamic leadership which the stolid Asquith never achieved.”

And so, “the victim of neither sudden national crisis nor adverse vote in the House of Commons,” Asquith resigned in 1916, taking most of the Liberal members of the coalition cabinet with him. Lloyd George was soon after made prime minister, and the Liberal Party was split open.

If Lloyd George wasn’t a problem for the Liberal Party before, he was now. Elevated to the premiership by Conservatives, George “never forgot whom he had to please,” and showed this by reconfiguring the coalition cabinet in the Conservatives’ favor. Here was the sign of a definite and divisive rift in the Liberal Party: the Asquith supporters and the George supporters; that is, those who could stand the “illiberalism’ of Lloyd George’s coalition,” and those who maintained “loyalty...to Liberal principles which had been made almost irrelevant by the impact of total war.”

Regardless of the faltering support of his own party, Lloyd George proved a competent and successful leader in time of war. Along with finally setting up his small War Cabinet, he is remembered for quickly and effectively directing the efforts of the nation’s industry and labor to supplying the war effort. For this he had to form a sort of alliance, or at any rate working relationship, with the trade unions, whose support was critical to his goals of expediency and efficiency; the shortage of labor had already put the unions in a strong bargaining position, giving them the initiative in negotiating with the government, rather than the government the initiative in

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46 Fair, “Politicians, Historians,” 5.
dealing with the unions. And with the success of these dealings, George corrected one of the main faults of the Asquithian cabinet: its inability and unwillingness to “exercise effective control of the direction of the war effort.”

Yet George’s newfound affinity for unions bolstered the unions’ power and influence, which, it must be remembered, provided funding and support to the Labour Party. It is one of the many paradoxes of the time that Lloyd George, himself a Liberal, was one of the main factors in elevating the Labour Party, which would ultimately displace his own party. At the start of the war there were around four million trade union members nationwide; at the end of the war there were around eight million, which numbers give a sort of unorthodox numerical representation of the increase of union, and also Labour, power. “Waiting in the wings,” one author writes, the Labour Party “came out of the war in a very strong political position,” both because of its increased influence under the moves of Lloyd George, and because “it bore no responsibility for either the causes or the effects of the [the war].”

The electoral reform act, mentioned above, also played a large part in increasing Labour support. And this for a very simple reason: the newly enfranchised male population (a large portion of the new electorate) was, by its demographics, naturally part of the Labour constituency, and would vote for that party in the next election.

Further easing Labour’s path to the top was the split in the Liberal Party. With support divided between Asquith and Lloyd George (or neither), their party, as will be shown, could not muster sufficient

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49 Clarke, *Hope and Glory*, 85.
50 Clarke, *Hope and Glory*, 97.
52 Clarke, *Hope and Glory*, 97.
votes to give a purely Liberal government any sort of mandate. And with the two parties’ close alliance on many issues, the Liberal divide – so pronounced that the Liberals seemed “more intent on fighting each other than winning Parliamentary elections”53 – nearly assured “the supplanting of the Liberals by Labour as the anti-Conservative party in modern politics.”54

The precise standing of the Liberal Party at the time was revealed in an event known now as the “Maurice Debate,” which happened in May of 1918. Through a somewhat complicated procedure, Asquith made his “one faltering bid as a real leader of the Opposition” by getting a vote of confidence in Lloyd George. The plan backfired, however, when the results came in: 70 Liberals supported George’s coalition, 100 voted with Asquith, and 85 abstained. George survived, but only with “massive Conservative support.”55 This showed not only how dependent was Lloyd George on the Conservatives, which in itself would alienate more Liberals; not only how even was the split, which promised to keep the Liberals dividedly weak; but also that, far from only two alternatives, a large number of Liberals supported neither leader, and “the truth was that the Liberal party was divided into three parts.”56

Now, surely, it was proven that “Asquith offered no coherent alternative to the Lloyd George coalition,”57 and with a rising Labour Party and an intact Conservative Party, the Liberals were doomed.

Here I will make a short note about the Conservatives. Since their inclusion in the first coalition government under Asquith, they had been in a particularly influential position. Succeeding in removing

55 Clarke, Hope and Glory, 89.
56 McGill, Asquith’s Predicament, 298.
57 Clarke, Hope and Glory, 88.
Asquith, they then placed Lloyd George – who, dependent on their support, was rightly seen by some as a Conservative puppet – in the premiership, a man they could count on to do as they wished, and yet on whom they could put the fault when, and if, things went sour. After all, he was a Liberal and he was the leader; any leader, ideally, has ultimate responsibility, and this must have been a very comforting fact for Conservative ministers. They could trail and take credit for his successes; they could hide behind and blame him for his failures, if needed. As one scholar writes, “the Conservative hierarchy not only elevated Lloyd George to the premiership, but sustained him through the remaining years of the war and the reconstruction.”

A few months after the Maurice Debate, the Central Powers collapsed. The Allies proved victorious, and the main question facing the leader of Parliament now was whether to return to normal party politics or try to extend the wartime coalition into peacetime. George, knowing well the reality of his precarious position in between the Liberal and Conservative Parties, went for the latter option, and called a general election. Still at this time Asquith was in control of the “bulk of the regular party machinery.” Yet for such a divided Liberal Party, that did not amount to much. Besides, the press supported George, and George’s newfound reputation as “the man who won the war” propped him up as a desirable leader – but a leader in his own right, and not necessarily of any one party.

The odds seemed to favor George and, as it turned out, did. The results were decisive. Coalitionists, with Conservative coalitionists providing the overwhelming majority of support, destroyed their competition. Labour came out as the Official Opposition. The

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58 Fair, “Politicians, Historians,” 5.
Asquithian (Asquith himself did not get a seat) or abstaining Liberals were reduced to parliamentary inconsequence, and from this point on would never make a major return to British politics. The fall of the Liberal Party was nearly complete, with only Lloyd George hanging on as its last, and awfully spurious, crusader.

The 1918 election was especially damaging for Liberals in another way. When Lloyd George and his coalitionist props began sending out “coupons” to men looking for a seat in the House, effectively ensuring a seat for those who got one and denying a seat to those who didn’t, they were looking for those who had, in the past, showed their loyalty to the coalition and to George. The votes cast in the Maurice Debate were a heavy indication of “past loyalty and future allegiance,” and so the coupons went largely on those lines. For his personal benefit Lloyd George might deny Asquithian Liberals a coupon, but in doing so he would be stamping into the ground the very party that had brought him up in the past, and which might have been salvaged for the future.

The 1918 general election was, in reality, the sure defeat for the Liberal Party; though the final defeat came when Lloyd George, after a scandal of selling honors, was ousted in 1922. At this time, the government was back to “discovering its centre of gravity in the Conservative majority which has always been its mainstay,” and Labour had already come up as the Official Opposition.

It is possible that the Liberal Party was doomed before the war began. Indeed, many scholars argue that “within the [pre-war] Liberal government, those who had held office since 1906 were

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60 Clarke, Hope and Glory, 89.
61 Clarke, Hope and Glory, 109.
undoubtedly stale.” Yet, if anything, the war and the post-war era only hastened its decline, what with its mixture of electoral reform; the rise of a new and similar party laden with an increased voter base and greater bargaining ability; the maintenance of an old party that, clandestinely, pulled the strings on most of the major maneuvers of wartime politics; the near-equal divide of support between two strong, Liberal leaders; the exigencies of a post-war election based on prior loyalty; and, last but not least, the disappearance of its last leader, Lloyd George, in 1922. All that may be said conclusively about this topic has already been written: “The literature on the rise and fall of the Liberal Party is voluminous and inconclusive.” I trust this paper keeps with the tradition.

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