Ultimately, when the British cabinet upheld Kitchener, Curzon resigned. He went on to occupy other high political offices, but the ultimate prize, the prime ministership, eluded him. Kitchener himself, though disappointed at not being named viceroy, was later appointed to the British War Cabinet during World War I. The appointment did not quite facilitate liaison between the civil and military powers, presumably the main purpose for which it was made. Kitchener quarreled "endlessly with 23 gentlemen" in the cabinet, and when he drowned at sea after his ship was struck by a mine, I wonder if he was deeply or genuinely mourned. He could not have been, by all accounts, a very amiable or companionable individual. We have it on the authority of Churchill himself that, in Sudan, Kitchener had the body of the slain Mahdi disinterred and cut to pieces. Was this simply to cow the local population into servility? Or was it to quench some atavistic and savage craving in the man?

Sir William Robertson -- who also saw service in British India and who belonged to a rare breed, a soldier who rose from enlisted ranks to Field Marshal -- was the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS) for the greater part of World War I. He differed strenuously with his War Minister, Lloyd George, as did Field Marshal Haig. Today the world "Imperial" has been dropped from the title, and the holder of the office is known more modestly as Chief of General Staff or CGS.

By the time of World War II, circumstances had clearly evolved to the advantage of the civilian and political leadership. Churchill personally retained the defence portfolio, and there was no scope for any doubt as to who was the boss. He went through three Chiefs of the Imperial General Staff in succession before he settled on Field Marshal Alan Brooke for the job. Field Marshals Gort, Ironside, and Sir John Dill were all tried and got short shrift -- although all were in their distinct ways outstanding professional soldiers.



Altogether 10 officers made it to the rarefied rank of Field Marshal during, or just following, World War II. The others were Maitland Wilson, Alexander, Montgomery, Auchinleck, Wavell, and Slim. Alexander was the favourite British general of the Americans. He went on to become governor general of Canada, and then defence minister of the UK. Montgomery became CIGS after the war and then moved on to NATO as Ike's deputy. Slim also became CIGS, and later governor general of Australia. Wavell was the last but one viceroy of India. Montgomery and Slim are generally thought to have been the two finest field commanders of the ten, although Wavell, Alexander, and Auchinleck also have their share of admirers.

In the late 1970s, or perhaps 1980, ten plaques were placed in St. Paul's Cathedral in London to honour the ten field marshals. Only Auchinleck was then still alive, but settled in Morocco. He was too old, and possibly too infirm, to travel to London for the ceremony.

The UK remains one of the few countries where the five stars, or highest military rank, are still given, even in peace-time. It is interesting to note that the notion of civilian supremacy notwithstanding, a few military leaders in British India did hold the highest civilian office of viceroy. I am not aware that any officer of the heaven born ICS ever held the office.

I have never quite grasped the French system of promotion to marshal -- as the 5 star rank is known in France. A French friend did once try to explain the process and, from what I recall, some fairly exacting conditions have to be met for this purpose. In World War I, the four eminent marshals of the French army were Joffre, Lyautey, Petain and Foch. Foch and Joffre are still remembered as authentic war heroes.