

King John – ‘Softsword’?

John Gillingham	Ralph V Turner
<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Mirebeau – John “had defeated his enemies more decisively than ever his father or even his warrior brother, Richard the Lionheart, had been able to do.”➤ But “in the space of just two summers John’s continental empire had collapsed like a house of cards.”➤ John lacked his brother’s skills – military, diplomatic & political➤ John was able to take his enemies by surprise in 1202 because they were used to him not acting decisively➤ “He was almost never to be found where the action was.” Autumn/Winter 1202-3: threat was in Anjou/John was in Normandy Spring 1203: threat in Seine valley & east Normandy/John was in the west 1204: Philip’s final great attack on Normandy/John was in England➤ John had succeeded at Mirebeau because of the help of others – Aimeri of Thouars & William des Roches (who then turned against him)➤ John’s record in diplomacy was no better. Richard had built up a series of very useful alliances – counts of Flanders, Blois, Boulogne, Perche & Toulouse. By 1202 there was a “diplomatic revolution” – Boulogne & Toulouse were with Philip & the rest were on the 4th Crusade. “From John’s point of view the break-down of his brother’s carefully cultivated alliances was a disaster”.➤ John was faced by a multitude of enemies & had to dissipate his forces – Philip could concentrate his forces where and when he chose.➤ Throughout the autumn & winter of 1203-4 John made no effort to relieve Chateau-Gaillard or even harass the blockading French troops➤ “No man may ever trust him for his heart is soft and cowardly.” Bertrand de Born the younger	<ul style="list-style-type: none">❖ Medieval kings were judged by bravery in battle. Richard was famous for warfare yet John was also at war or planning war for most of his reign❖ Many of John’s critics have not understood the nature of medieval warfare. The victor in a medieval war was often one who plundered the enemy’s resources & besieged his castles. John “like any capable general, had a sense of geography and an ability to plan a strategy to gain ground.” Pillage & robbery were basic elements of chivalric warfare & this accounts for some of the criticisms of John’s lack of boldness BUT “his rival Philip Augustus was no bolder in offering battle.”❖ John must be recognised as a skilled builder & besieger of castles but he had the disadvantage of a long frontier requiring him to spread his resources thinly among many fortresses. Philip had the advantage of interior lines of communication, a compact centre from which he could concentrate his forces❖ A successful general needed administrative skill – especially at raising revenue. John is criticised for not defending Normandy in 1202 – but the administrative records show him mobilising resources for the war❖ Mirebeau – “the most decisive military action of his career, an action so bold that it still confounds his critics.”❖ By the end of August 1203 John devised a plan for running the French blockade on Chateau-Gaillard & resupplying the castle. Kate Norgate commended John’s plan as a “masterpiece of ingenuity”. The plan failed because of a miscalculation in timing.❖ John’s secret flight in Dec 1203 did not mean he had abandoned Normandy – in 1204 he prepared defence of lower Normandy along the Touques River❖ Loss of Chateau-Gaillard & death of Eleanor left John “emotionally immobile, incapable of coping with military matters for a time.”

