

Military Review

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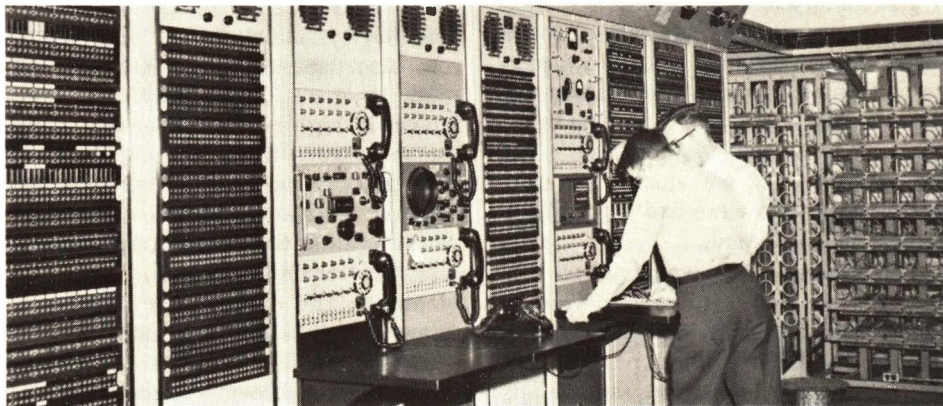
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ELECTRONIC DESPOTISM

A Serious Problem of Modern Command



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INSTANT communications are now possible over vast distances. The seat of Government can reach theater commanders in only a few seconds. Theater commanders can reach their subordinates over distances of hundreds or even thousands of miles in equal time. Communications are now possible between agencies and echelons which heretofore contacted each other infrequently, if at all.

Much of this communication capability is essential to the conduct of military operations. Yet the very ease and rapidity of these communications can lead an unwary commander or staff officer down the usually one-way road to overcentralization of control. This type of overcontrol can best be termed, for lack of another title, "electronic despotism."

Electronic despotism, which is one of many prevalent forms of overcentralization, is especially dangerous. If our training and operational doctrine does not specifically guard against it, there may be a day when none of our Armed Forces will be able to operate without complex electronic systems. The danger is that our military leaders may come to rely excessively on highly centralized direction. While such direction is essential in some types of military operations in each of our Armed Forces, electronic despotism will actually hinder the operations of others.

Certain types of worldwide operations require highly centralized control and coordination which is best served by vast and complex communications systems. Instant long-distance

communications are also needed within theaters of operations, between most major command echelons, and between some types of units which, until recently, would have communicated only in writing, if at all. A typical case in point is the need for instantaneous warning of air attack, and for theater-wide control of air defense weapon systems. No other techniques could produce success.

Decentralized Operations

On the other hand, there are some traditional types of military operations in which the need for instant communications on a wide scale will not be marked. In these cases, necessary control authority usually is delegated to subordinate commanders, who are then free to operate within specified limits, suiting their activities to the situation of the moment and the changing conditions.

To speed the flow of information these commanders often have radios and other equipment which can equal in capability those of agencies like a naval fleet. Strangely enough, it is this great capability which can cause overcentralization. This is the mechanism of electronic despotism; overcontrol

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is the result, which must be avoided. It can be avoided by orienting our leaders with the right joint doctrine.

Doctrine Points the Way

In view of our wealth of military experience, it would appear that our leaders would be warned against overcontrol of their forces. Current joint doctrine as expressed in Joint Chiefs of Staff publications does, in fact, instruct commanders to direct coordination among subordinates to ensure unity of effort in the accomplishment of assigned missions. It further explains that centralized direction and decentralized execution are goals of joint staff action. In a broad sense, doctrine of all individual services does imply that oversupervision by a commander can lead to trouble. This should be enough for today's leaders and staffs, but is it?

Our commanders today are generally better trained for their jobs than their predecessors and should be better able to exercise autonomous control of their own forces. Their staffs are more professionally trained than any American staffs that have preceded them. But a commander or staff officer can be only at one place at a time, and can absorb only so much information and advice. To assist, then, we have provided them with many types and varieties of electronic devices which can compile, collate, summarize, display, and transmit data.

In spite of all the electronic gadgetry of a modern headquarters, there comes a time when a commander must make a naked decision and, having done so, must trust a subordinate to carry out his orders. No amount of electronic assistance will improve the judgment and wisdom of the subordinate. The subordinate must act on

his own. This is true whether it be a strategic air command, a naval fleet, or a field army. The facts being such, it is amazing that overcentralized control and oversupervision should ever occur. Unfortunately, it does occur in an environment of automatic data processing systems and electronic command posts.

A Historical Example

If we can acknowledge that only techniques change in warfare, and that principles are fairly constant, it may prove instructive to look at one of the first successful joint United States military operations on which a great deal of detail is available. If we can observe any satisfactory principles of command and control in the example, perhaps they will help to test our joint doctrine.

The example selected is the Barbary War, fought by the US from 1801 to 1805 against the pirate Turkish vassal state of Tripoli, which then occupied the North African coast of what is today Libya.

On 14 May 1801, the Pasha of Tripoli, unhappy about the amount of annual tribute given him by the United States for his "protection" of their shipping in the Mediterranean, declared war by cutting down our flag in front of the US consulate in his city of Tripoli. A US naval squadron already en route to the Mediterranean was ordered (by mail) to blockade the harbor of Tripoli, and to "prey upon the shipping" of the Pasha and his subjects. It was hoped by President Jefferson that this punishment would effectually end the war. Such was not to be the case.

Eaton Receives a Mission

By 1804, after the summary relief of two commanders and a loss of ships and lives which the little US Navy

could ill afford, President Jefferson resolved to end the situation favorably. He decided to authorize a former Army officer, William Eaton, who had fought in three preceding wars,¹ to go to the Mediterranean area, and there to raise an army.

Eaton proposed to enlist the aid of the pretender to the Tripolitan throne, Ahmed Karamanli, in raising the army and, with support from the ships of the US Navy, to assault Tripoli by land. In December 1804, Eaton arrived in Alexandria, Egypt, contacted Ahmed, recruited an army, and began to train it.

Eaton and Ahmed were assisted by a US Marine detachment of one officer and seven enlisted men, and one US midshipman. Together they fielded a force of nearly 1,200 Englishmen, Frenchmen, Greeks, and Arabs at Burg al Arab (Arab Tower) west of Alexandria.

As originally planned and finally executed, Eaton's force was to be supported by a small naval squadron under Isaac Hull, Master Commandant, United States Navy. Eaton's force was to march across the desert near the Mediterranean coast, supported as required by Hull. An amphibious movement was precluded by a decision of the Turkish Governor of Egypt not to allow Turkish harbors to be used to mount and attack on Tripoli which was nominally a vassal of his Sultan. Why he permitted Eaton to train his army on Egyptian soil is not evident.

Eaton's Force Moves Out

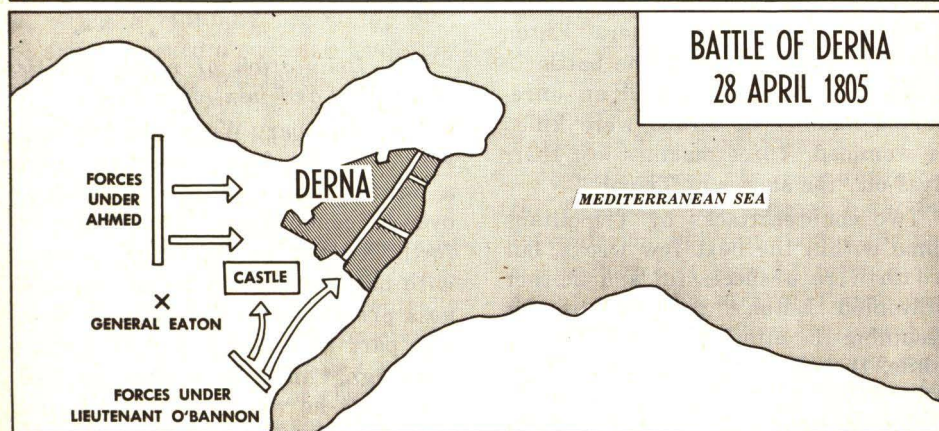
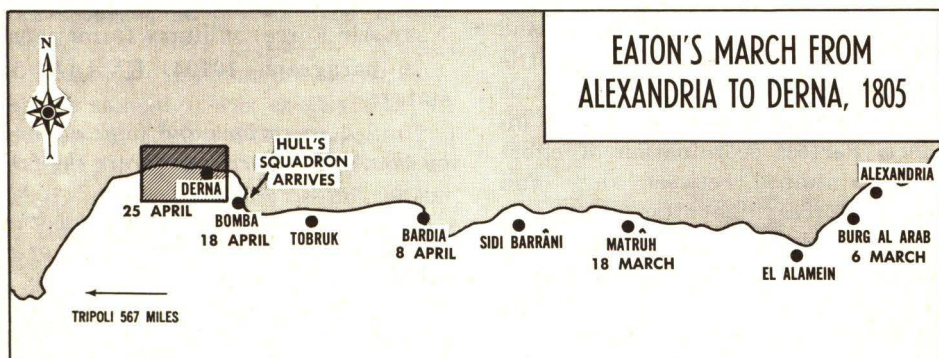
On 8 March 1805, Eaton's force moved into the desert, westward toward Tripoli. The march across hun-

¹ Eaton was a sergeant in the Revolutionary War, a captain under General Wayne in the war with the Indians in Ohio, and as a captain fought in the war with the Indians in Georgia. He left the service in 1797 and was rewarded for his outstanding service by being appointed consul to Tunis.

dreds of miles of wasteland, some never before visited by Christians, was incredible in itself. Water was always in short supply Eaton's diary records, for example:

Tuesday 9 April.—Halted at a water cistern. In this cistern we found two dead men—probably pilgrims mur-

On 18 April, Eaton's force arrived at Bomba. The next day, just as another mutiny was beginning, Hull's squadron of ships arrived with provisions and pay for the troops. With this, the temporary loyalty of the little force was reassured and the army renewed its march to the west.



*dered by the Arabs—We were obliged nevertheless to use the water.*²

Mutiny threatened constantly, and Eaton never knew from day to day how many troops he led. The progress of his heroic march is illustrated in the sketch. The suffering and bravery of his force can only be imagined.

² Eaton's diary is recorded verbatim in *Naval Documents Related to the United States Wars With the Barbary Powers*, US Government Printing Office, Washington, D. C., 1944.

Before the city of Tripoli could be captured, the fortified town of Derna had to be reduced. Therefore, Eaton and Hull agreed to meet outside Derna on 28 April. Eaton arrived three days before Hull and spent his time reconnoitering the town. When Hull arrived with his ships, Eaton proposed to start the attack that very day. Hull attempted to land a battery of light artillery requested by Eaton, but lack

of suitable beaches and a high surf combined to prevent the landing of all but one cannon. Eaton decided to attack, cannon or no.

Attack of Derna

Eaton's senior drillmaster was Lieutenant Presley Neville O'Bannon, United States Marine Corps, of Hull's flagship, the *Argus*. It was he and Eaton who led the attack of the little army against Derna. Hull's ships bombarded the town from close inshore. Perfect coordination of effort was maintained between ships and ground forces; the attack went entirely as planned. By midafternoon O'Bannon led the final assault which captured the ruler's palace, and ran up the US flag on the battlements—the first time such an act had taken place on foreign soil. General Eaton was wounded during the battle in which 47 Christians and an unreported number of Arabs were killed or wounded. Three marines lost their lives on "the shores of Tripoli."

Two counterattacks by Tripolitans came within the next few weeks, but both were unsuccessful and neither prevented Eaton's preparations for resuming the attack on Tripoli. Meanwhile, the US Consul General "Colonel" Tobias Lear, with full authority from Jefferson, had succeeded in working out in Algeria the terms of a treaty of peace with Tripoli, and the war ended without a further battle. The pretender, Ahmed, failed to regain his lost throne, and Eaton returned to the US a hero. Thus ended a war which began rather inauspiciously, but ended as an outstanding example of joint military coordination and cooperation.

Having reviewed this historic operation, let us resume our test of cur-

rent doctrine and the principles on which it is based. The best source of common US military doctrine is Joint Chiefs of Staff Publication 2, *Unified Action Armed Forces (UNAAF)*, published by the Department of Defense in 1959. This manual outlines principles for all US unified commanders—those who command joint (Army-Navy-Air Force) military formations.

In paragraph 10104, *UNAAF*, it states:

Unified operations and joint actions by the Armed Forces generate the following requirements:

a. *Integration of effort by the Armed Forces in the attainment of a common objective.*

b. *Planning and conduct of operations and exercises under unified direction.*

* * * * *

d. *Delineation of responsibilities for unified and joint operations.*

In the Barbary War these principles were followed fairly effectively from a military standpoint. There was an over-all commander of the entire effort, Commodore Barron, US Navy, with headquarters in Malta. While illness prevented his taking a more active part in the action of Eaton's campaign, his correspondence indicates that he was regularly informed of its progress, and that he responded without delay to Eaton's requests for logistical support.

Coordination Deficient

Unfortunately, however, Barron and Tobias Lear, the Consul General, were physically separated. Lear was in Algiers. This was possibly a major drawback. Some authors indicate that had Eaton and Lear consulted more thoroughly before Lear signed the treaty of peace, the US could have obtained

more favorable terms. (The US had to pay defeated Tripoli a ransom for Captain Bainbridge and other survivors of the crew of the *USS Philadelphia*, captured in Tripoli harbor in 1803.)

Barron's illness was clearly not detrimental to the success of the combined operation. Indeed, after he had issued his orders to Eaton, Barron's only means of influencing the outcome of the campaign was exactly what he did do—to send to Eaton supplies and money for his troops, and to keep Hull's ships on station, helping Eaton.

Had Commodore Barron visited Eaton's force in Egypt, he could have offered little more than his encouragement or advice. Both Eaton and Hull were in perfect agreement, and were pursuing a mutually acceptable plan of action toward a successful military conclusion. No commander could have asked for more loyal support from his subordinates. Few have received as much as Barron got.

Decentralization Achieved

On the other hand, Barron's illness probably kept him in the best place—his headquarters, located centrally with respect to the major scenes of action in the theater, Tripoli proper, and the desert east of there. Time spent by Barron in Egypt could have reduced his ability to influence the blockade which extended as far as Cape Bon, 250 miles northeast of Tripoli. Certainly, messages would have been at least one or two days later in reaching him, and his replies delayed twice that long.

UNAAF (paragraph 30205) goes on to state:

Sound command organization should provide for:

a. Centralized direction.

b. Decentralized execution.

And in paragraph 30207, it states further:

. . . it is the responsibility of the superior to:

* * * * *

d. Delegate to his subordinates authority commensurate with their responsibility.

A caution is added in another paragraph for the commander to exercise coordination of forces only as necessary to prevent their mutual interference.

Commodore Barron certainly had commensurate authority from President Jefferson. His orders read, in part:

. . . to prey on all vessels, goods and effects belonging to the Bey of Tripoli, or to his subjects, and to bring or send same into port.

These orders were amplified by the Secretary of the Navy, in a letter to Barron, which said, in part:

It is however the expectation of the President that you will without intermission maintain during the season in which it may be safely done, an effectual Blockade of Tripoli, and that you will by all other means in your power annoy the enemy so as to force him to a peace honorable to the United States, and it is submitted to you whether during such Blockade it would not be advisable to keep some of your squadron cruising off Cape Bon.

With respect to the Ex-Bashaw of Tripoli (Ahmed), we have no objection to you availing yourself of his cooperation with you against Tripoli, if you shall upon a full view of the subject after your arrival upon the station consider his cooperation expedient. The subject is committed en-

tirely to your discretion. In such an event you will, it is believed, find Mr. Eaton extremely useful to you. . . .

Col. Tobias Lear, our Consul General at Algiers is invested by the President with full power and authority to negotiate a Treaty of Peace with the Bashaw of Tripoli. . . .

Eaton's orders from the Secretary of the Navy were a model of brevity, directing that:

You will receive instructions from and obey the orders of Commodore Barron and will render to our Squadron in the Mediterranean every assistance in your power.

Contrast these orders with today's often ponderous directives, with their many annexes and appendices, which can be qualified almost daily with changes and revisions, often unnecessarily, by almost any staff officer with access to a telephone.

Selection of Leaders

Complexity of war cannot be fully blamed for overcontrol. In the early 19th century the mails were infrequent and uncertain. For this reason, perhaps more than any other, men were selected for command who could be relied on to act with discretion in their country's best interest at all times, and who would always accept full responsibility for their actions.

When the abilities of the men using them are considered, the equipment used by men in those early days of our country must certainly compare in complexity with today's weapons. For example, the principles of gunnery in 1805 must have seemed hopelessly complex to the new recruit in his country's navy, just as today's new sailor must often be equally mystified by a ship's guided missiles. Considering the education of both, each

seems equally well-prepared for his job, however.

Logical reasoning would, therefore, appear to dictate a possible need for increased emphasis in current doctrine on selection of subordinates, as opposed to a growing capability for commanders and their staffs to overcontrol.

Possibilities and Temptations

While today's commander and his staff can chat with subordinate headquarters across vast distances—and these contacts can be vitally necessary at times—this procedure has some built-in disadvantages. For example, a staff officer, through frequent receipt of electronic reports, can come to feel so familiar with the situation at lower echelons that he is tempted to issue "modifying instructions," whether or not the instructions are asked for. These instructions could thus turn out to be unnecessary and even harmful, rather than helpful hints. Such instructions could be issued by the staff in the guise of "coordination" without the commander's knowledge.

It is even possible to conceive of "coordinating instructions" being issued in the name of the commander by automatic data processing systems which have taken in electronic digital data from the field. Yet major errors are often found in reports relayed by even the most trustworthy officers during the heat of the battle. Thus fast electronic communication in combat between headquarters could sometimes be worse than no communication at all.

A fear of blunders or errors by subordinates can prompt a commander to centralize direction of his forces. An instructive incident in this regard

occurred following the conclusion of the Barbary War.

In 1806, Congress called President Jefferson to account for the poor judgment and faulty decision of "Colonel" Tobias Lear in granting such lenient terms to Tripoli. In his reply to Congress, which could stand today as good doctrine, Jefferson noted:

In operations at such a distance, it becomes necessary to leave much up to the discretion of the agents em-

this advice appears in such varied publications as Mao Tse-tung's works, and US Army Field Manual 100-5, *Field Services Regulations, Operations*.

Even in an era of instant global communications, a military commander cannot always "consult his government" on every action. He must, as Jefferson said, "act as he believes that (government) would direct him were it apprized of the cir-



US Army

The main section of the Army communications center in Seoul, Korea

ployed, but events may still turn up beyond the limits of that discretion. Unable to consult his government, a zealous citizen will act as he believes that would direct him were it apprized of the circumstances, and will take on himself the responsibility. In all these cases the purity and patriotism of the motives should shield the agent from blame, and even secure the sanction (of the government) where the error is not too injurious.

This advice is as sound today as it was over 150 years ago. Paraphrased,

cumstances." Omniscient electronic devices, however well made, cannot simulate a decision of the National Security Council, a meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, or even of a commander and his staff at battalion level. By the same token, devices with huge memory cores to digest thousands of reports cannot simulate a constantly changing situation as seen through the eyes of the local commander, and make his decisions for him.

Commanders, today and in the fu-

ture, will still be expected to act on their own initiative as relatively independent agents, under broad operational guidance furnished by their superiors. Should they occasionally fail to execute faithfully a command through honest error, ". . . their purity and patriotism . . . should shield them from blame, and even secure the sanction (of their government) where the error is not too injurious." To do otherwise could soon mean an effectual end to initiative and resourcefulness of US military leaders. Leaders could not, thereafter, reasonably be expected to operate without electronic "advice" from higher headquarters.

Advantages in Electronics

Much of the foregoing has discussed the dangers of overcontrolling an operation through misuse of modern, instantly responsive long-distance communications. Of course, we must not overlook the advantages these communications can give a commander and his staff, for they do give real benefits if used wisely.

No subordinate can be expected to use his initiative in such a way as to best accomplish the mission if he is not fully aware of the latest and best information which concerns his unit. Electronic means offer the best technique for the spread of such information. Ignorance of the situation in combat has been referred to as "the fog of war." This fog blinds the commander to many things which he should know to make better decisions. Any means of helping to clear this fog benefits a commander and his subordinates. To fail to use electronic systems would be inexcusable.

What commander can ever hope to know at all times what his next su-

perior is thinking? To do so the subordinate would have to trade both body and mind with his commander. The subordinate can ask for guidance, and most commanders expect such queries. In the heat of combat, when an issue may be in doubt, perhaps the only way for a subordinate to contact his superior is through electronic means. Through judicious use of radio and telephone a subordinate can inform his superior of his situation, recommend a solution to a problem, or ask the superior for a decision, if an action involves more than one element of a command. This can all be done electronically very quickly.

Most commanders will withhold part of their resources for use in meeting contingencies. These resources are called by such names as "the reserve," the "general support" artillery, "contingency supplies," or other equally descriptive terms. The commander judges when to use these resources based on information and requests from his subordinates and his personal observation. Next to personal observation, his best source of rapid information from lower echelons is by electronic transmission. The reserve can be committed, general support artillery fires shifted, and movement of supplies started rapidly through use of electronic means. Often the few minutes saved in this way will spell the difference between victory and defeat, as our experience in recent wars has shown us.

The Situation Today

Today's commander is infinitely better served than were either Commodore Barron or his contemporaries. Military forces of the 20th century can move faster and farther than Commodore Barron ever dreamed possi-

ble. The officers who command in today's Armed Forces are more extensively trained for their jobs than were the officers of the early 1800's, when any "gentleman" was expected to have the talent of military command. Today's soldiers and sailors are better able to perform their various technical jobs than were those of 150 years ago, thanks to improved military training techniques and higher standards of qualification for entry into the Armed Forces.

In view of these facts, our joint doctrine—which sets the tenor of uni-service doctrine—should follow clearly the admonition of Jefferson to "leave much up to the discretion of the agents employed." A commander must not fail to seek necessary information, assistance, or clarification of orders from any source when the benefits of such action are plain. Yet every commander must beware of overcontrolling a subordinate.

The guideline of command should be, "The best possible command is the least control." The test should be, "Can this order be carried out without further command direction?" Such a query can be both a test of a commander's trust in his subordinate's

initiative, and in the usefulness of his staff.

This could be expressed as a single short paragraph added to current US joint doctrinal publications where applicable. Such a paragraph might read:

A superior can only imperfectly visualize the situation at a subordinate level, regardless of the thoroughness or completeness of communications available. Instructions to subordinates, therefore, must be simple, and be broad enough to permit a subordinate to plan his own actions in view of the changing situation.

The resources a commander has to control his forces in war are enormous compared with those of 150 years ago. Ironically, these vast modern resources can actually weaken our leadership. The door to electronic despotism is open.

If 150 years ago men with little or no formal military education could be trusted to accomplish broad tasks with relatively inferior forces, infrequent supervision, and comparatively limited information, we should reverse the trend toward centralized direction of operations. Electronic despotism is a serious problem of modern command.

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