Command

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In May 1990, the same month this article was published, Mikhail Gorbachev won the Nobel Peace Prize, Boris Yeltsin became the Russian Federation president and the dissolution of the Soviet Union was becoming a clear possibility. Three months after this article appeared, Saddam Hussein's Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait. General Foss's comments are very relevant in light of how quickly the politico-military situation can change.

THE EVOLUTION OF warfare, enhanced by dramatic advances in technology, has led to high demands on mobility, agility and rapid decision making. Technology has prompted not only great demands, but also a myriad of devices to assist the commander. How we command will be the key to our future success. During the coming decade, the Army must stress and reinforce some aspects of command that have always been important, but which now have become even more essential.

We can choose one of two paths-a strong command path or a strong control path. Technology and electronic devices will push us toward control. Such a path is dangerous. Only the command path provides for initiative, the acceptance of risk and the rapid seizure of opportunities on the battlefield. The control path appears safer but leads to caution, a more deliberate manner, and an emphasis on process as opposed to outcome. We must realize, though, that the future battlefield will be less forgiving of slow decisions than ever before. It will not be a place for cautious, bureaucratic centralizers glued to computer monitors waiting for that one additional piece of information which will allow a "sure" decision to be made.

This article argues for a strong command philosophy for the US Army and asserts that we must begin to embed that philosophy throughout the force now. This strong command philosophy empowers commanders with maximum authority to accomplish their tasks, to develop a strong chain of command and to practice command on a daily basis in peacetime training just as we will have to exercise it in war.

Philosophy

A strong command philosophy is essential to how our Army functions in peace and in war. We have had many fine commanders, present and past, who have practiced a strong command philosophy, whether it be:

● When in charge, take charge!—General Maxwell R. Thurman

● Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity.—General George S. Patton Jr.

As an institution, though, we are not consistent in our application of command and command authority. We often send our subordinates conflicting signals-in how we act, what we say, or even what we call things. When we say "C⁴," we tend to place all parts of command, control, communications and computers on an equal basis. However, we all know that control, communications and computers are subordinate to, and support, command.

What does a strong command philosophy entail? It is a total approach to empower commanders with the authority to deal with tasks as assigned in combat or peacetime. We have often referred to this as "mission tactics" or "mission orders" or freedom of action for the commander to execute his mission in the way he sees fit, rather than being told how to do it. To deal with such a concept, we must first place our approach to command in perspective; then discuss the role of control, with communication and computers clearly defined as what they are—components of the control apparatus that supports command.
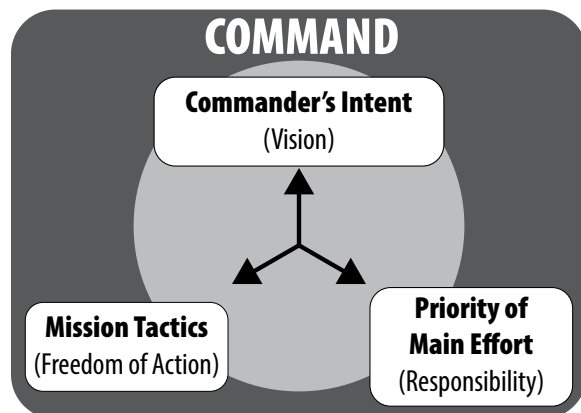
Command

A strong command philosophy is built around three precepts: vision, freedom of action and responsibility. A commander must design a simple command system that will survive the dynamics of combat and is based upon a strong command philosophy rooted in our first precept—mission tactics. Who is better able than the commander on the ground, forward at the decisive point,

to recognize and seize the opportunity? The commander must be empowered to exploit these opportunities and avoid the vulnerabilities of dynamic combat. Only the practice of mission tactics will enable the decisive commander to exercise initiative and, in recognizing opportunity, rapidly accomplish the mission.

The commander must, however, act within the parameters of the overall mission. An understanding of the intent of the higher commander is a prerequisite to mission tactics. Our next precept—"commander's intent"—provides vision and enables subordinate commanders to clearly understand what the larger force must accomplish in order to gain victory. The commander's intent is designed not to restrain, but to unleash a subordinate by giving him greater freedom of action to accomplish the mission. Subordinate commanders view their mission within the context of the higher commander's intent. Should battlefield opportunities arise, the commander can immediately capitalize on them, rather than wait on instructions from higher headquarters.

But the display of initiative and the exercise of freedom of action within the commander's intent also bring attendant responsibilities. These are governed by our third precept—the designation of the main effort. The commander who has been assigned the main effort knows he has greater freedom of action and lesser responsibilities to the rest of the force. Commanders who have been assigned missions other that the main effort know they have responsibilities to support the main effort (for example, protect the flank, provide supporting fires, and the like) and not divert resources from the main effort. In the chaos of combat, an understanding of the main effort provides a common basis for action.

Thus, a strong command philosophy is really a three-legged stool. Mission tactics (freedom of action reinforced by knowledge of the commander's intent (vision) and focused on a main effort (responsibility) constitute the basis of a strong command philosophy.

This synergism results in effective command and a philosophy relevant to any battlefield, in any theater of operations, in any type of conflict.
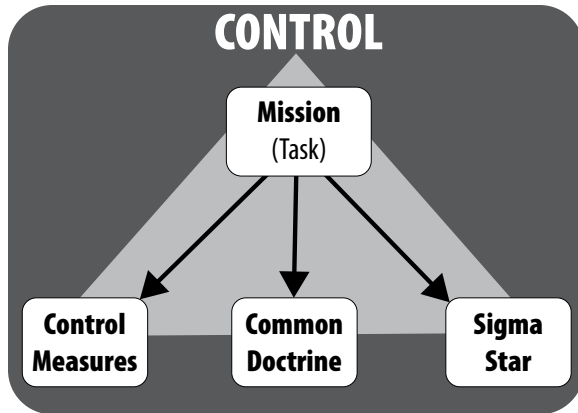
Control

The proper understanding of control is embodied in the axiom, "The more control imposed, the less command applied." Control, by definition, restricts command. This is not to say, however, that control is bad. No one has "total" freedom of action all the time. Some control is necessary to focus the effort. In some complicated actions, a great deal of control is required to ensure synchronization. Therefore, the rule is to apply only those control measures essential to the operation.

The most common form of control is the mission itself. Not only does the mission structure commonality of actions, it focuses the entire unit on the main task at the critical time.

Another control that is automatically applied is the common doctrine adopted by the US Army and instilled in commanders during their formative years in units and in military schools. *Higher commanders expect their subordinates to understand, apply and act within the tenets of Army doctrine.*

Most controls, however, are not automatic. For example, the operations order (OPORD) is tailored to the mission as are the graphics on the operations overlay. Although optional and situationally dependent, these are, nevertheless, controls and must be reviewed by the commander prior to implementation. Well-meaning staff officers sometimes sprinkle control measures into an OPORD without full cognizance of the impediments placed upon subordinate commanders. The basic rule governing optional control measures is the test of "purpose." Each control measure should have a specific purpose that contributes to mission accomplishment. If a control measure fails the purpose test, do not apply it-it unnecessarily restricts freedom of action. Occasionally, the purpose test will necessitate very restrictive controls. For example, certain night operations or attacks on fortified positions, by their very complicated nature, require a high degree of synchronization among several units and supporting fires. Thus, selective and restrictive control will be required. Once these specific mission are completed and the need for restrictive control abates, the commander should then relax controls and revert back to the minimum control necessary.

Some controls are system oriented. As with operational controls, the commander should specifically review these control systems-such as the Army Tactical Command and Control System (Sigma Star)-to determine their applicability to the mission. This is especially important because without specific direction from the

CONTROL

Mission (Task)

→ Control Measures

→ Common Doctrine

→ Sigma Star

commander, the system tends to run toward the goal of efficiency rather than effectiveness. But, as we all know, the mission demands effectiveness.

In summary, control is inversely proportional to command. A good commander is like a good horseman; he maintains a strong grip and, at the same time, keeps a loose rein. He allows freedom of action, but is prepared to take control quickly when required. Ultimately, "what," not "how," is most important.

Communications

Communications provide the link between command and control that enables commanders to lead from the front and directly influence the action. A robust communications capability facilitates command by allowing the commander to tighten or loosen control rapidly through some mode of communication other than face-to-face. A strong, flexible communications system allows the staff and subordinate commanders to pass information. Communications systems are tools that facilitate the command and control imposed by the commander, enabling him to issue timely orders directly to subordinates. But even with very sophisticated communications capabilities, the commander must strive to personally issue orders to subordinates face-to-face whenever he can or, failing that, by voice radio. The tone, rate and pitch of a commander's voice will tell more than any graphic or written message could ever convey.

Computers

These remarkable and ubiquitous devices are an aid to help provide information to the staff and commander. This information must then be assessed for its operational relevance by the staff and passed to the commander. The commander must resist the temptation to tie himself to the computer. Although the flow of information is facilitating, most data is input by the staff and is intended for the staff. The commander cannot treat the computer information as totally correct

because a computer can be given poor, partial or outdated information on which to compute. The computer also passes on all the trivial data important to only a few individuals, none of whom is a commander. After all, a computer does not question the input. Output must be assessed. Excessive reliance on computers, or a series of computers, can be embarrassing when the computer "crashes."

Properly used in their intended role, computers provide invaluable assistance; therefore, our development of them must continue. They can "mechanically" pass information, orders, data and graphics in almost real time. But the computer is not, nor can it be, a substitute for commanders talking to commanders.

The Commander

Having commanded at every level in our Army, I have learned—usually the hard way—some points along the way that I have developed into my command philosophy. Perhaps the most important thing to know about command is that it is personal. One cannot successfully command through the staff. Nothing communicates commander-to-commander as well as face-to-face. Patton observed that the senior should go forward to visit the junior, rather than the junior back to see him. The obvious exception is when it is necessary to collect several commanders at one location. Notice that Patton said "go forward." He did not say "call," or "communicate" or "write." The value of face-to-face command cannot be stressed enough, especially during critical moments of the battle. What the commander says, and how he says it, is the basis for the unit's actions. In peacetime, when routine activities tend to be turned over to the staff, a commander must constantly speak of the important issues, because staffs tend to treat everything as equal in importance.

Command is more than responsibility; it is also authority and authority must be actively exercised. Thurman's often-stated maxim, "When in charge, take

COMMUNICATIONS

Command ↔ Control

Communications ← Computers

Communications → Control
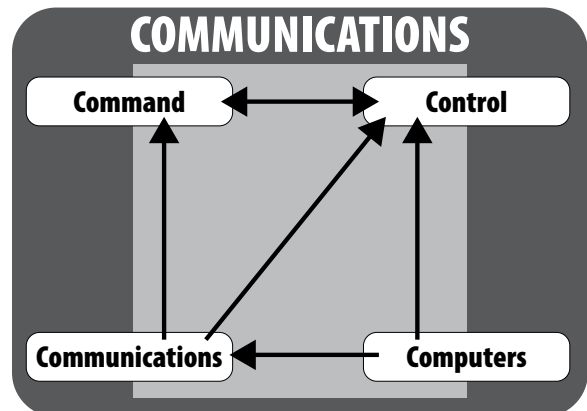
charge," contains a lot of wisdom—be in charge and practice the authority given to you. Commanders must make decisions. Regardless of the difficulty at hand, a decision must be made in a timely and resolute manner.

Many years ago, I learned to command only one echelon down. This not only contributes to the entire chain of command having maximum freedom of action, it also reinforces the span of control theory. Commanding two levels down violates a fundamental principle of war—unity of command. Commanding one level down maximizes the information flow and increases the opportunity for face-to-face or voice-to-voice command. The commander must keep abreast of what is going on two or more levels down. By contrast, commanding too far down gives one a stereoscopic view, and this tunnel vision inhibits the ability to "see" the overall battle. The absolute worst effect of such a command style is that the chain of command goes into "neutral" and steps out of its responsibilities when a senior commander usurps its authority. That commander then misses the most vital input he needs—a subordinate commander's assessment of his unit's overall capability.

Next, good commanders anticipate. Not only do they anticipate the enemy, they anticipate their subordinates' needs and provide help and support to facilitate overall mission accomplishment. In this regard, the staff plays a key role. They must be forward—looking, helping the commander anticipate.

Successful commanders also have a vision of the task. They "see" the task in its proper perspective; they understand the "what" and "how" of the mission; and they understand the conditions necessary for success. Further, they can articulate those points to others. Good commanders are able to visualize not only the capabilities, but the intended actions of subordinate units in the accomplishment of the larger mission. It is especially important that the commander, not the operations officer (S3/G3/J3), personally articulate the commander's intent portion of the order. If others do this for the commander, the unintentional, yet inevitable, filters are applied and the result becomes not "what the commander intends," but "what the staff officers thought he intended."

Before I conclude, let me offer a few words on peacetime command. If we learned nothing else from the recent operations in Grenada and Panama, we have learned that soldiers fight exactly as they are trained in peacetime. We must command in peacetime as we command in war. We must place the same responsibilities upon subordinates in peacetime that we expect of them in combat. We must foster the same relationships in peacetime as in war. As

commanders, we must demonstrate daily that we will say what to do, not how to do it; and that we will not skip echelons in directing and overseeing tasks, but consistently adhere to the chain of command. We must emphasize the important things and avoid the

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trivial. If a commander finds himself or his unit doing something for peacetime only, he should question how this will affect his war-fighting mission. If the answer is: there is no war-fighting purpose to the task, then he should not do it. It is that simple. But if he has no option, then he must convert the execution of the task into an exercise of the chain of command so as to gain maximum benefit from the task.

Just as command personifies the commander, so must the chain of command represent and personify the command system. A strong chain of command is essential to a successful unit. It implies trust and confidence between echelons of command and develops junior leaders by placing the appropriate authority, responsibility and decision making at each level. Authority, responsibility and decision making must be practiced. Senior commanders must remember that we do not live in a perfect world; they must underwrite subordinates' honest mistakes as part of the developmental process. That is what produces risk-taking, initiative-grabbing and war-winning commanders.

Commanders train, teach, coach and develop their subordinate leaders and units to a high standard. One way senior commanders develop subordinate commanders is by watching. The process of watching them leads to training, teaching and coaching in such a manner that both the subordinate commander and his unit can overcome weaknesses and improve performance. While commanders must avoid dictating "how," they must never be afraid to tell a subordinate what to do or even when to do it.

We can choose one of two paths-a strong command path or a strong control path. Technology and electronic devices will push us toward control. Such a path is dangerous. Only the command path provides for initiative, the acceptance of risk and the rapid seizure of opportunities on the battlefield. The control path appears safer but leads to caution, a more deliberate manner, and an emphasis on process as opposed to outcome. We must realize, though, that the future battlefield will be less forgiving of slow decisions than ever before. It will not be a place for cautious, bureaucratic centralizers glued to computer monitors waiting for that one additional piece of information which will allow a "sure" decision to be made.

Good commanders must be willing to take some risks. In combat, commanders operate within the higher commander's intent, tempered by doctrine and procedures. In peacetime, commanders must understand and operate within the same guidelines. The "garrison" exercise of command entails risk just as it does in wartime. The combat requirements of initiative and risk taking are just as applicable in peacetime as they are in war. The commander who makes no mistakes and takes no risks probably does not accomplish very much—nor does he have soldiers with great confidence in the unit or its leaders. The commander who centralizes everything in an attempt to be strong everywhere is, in fact, strong nowhere. But worst of all, his chain of command and his junior leaders will never develop responsibility and initiative.

There is a saying in our Army, "Command is command." Translated, that means command of any unit—combat, combat support or combat service support, in the Continental United States or forward deployed, tactical or non-tactical—is still command, which beats not being a commander. Equally important in that statement is that command—in the field, at one of the combat training centers, in peacetime, during a contingency operation or in war—must be practiced as it will be executed in war.

We have talked about command, control, communications and computers. I have asserted that we must have simple, robust command systems built upon a strong command philosophy. Commanders must be provided the maximum freedom to command and have imposed on them only those control measures necessary to synchronize mission accomplishment. A strong command philosophy recognizes the many tools available to the commander, but emphasizes that tools are no substitute for exercising the personal element of command.

In the next war, the price of failure will be very high and the margin for error grows smaller. We must get the maximum effect from our leaders and our units. At a time when technology and electronic devices appear to offer an easy path to overcome the complexities of modern battle, the Army must empower commanders, embrace the mission tactics and use technology to assist—not take over—the art of command. Most important, we must be an Army that practices strong command on a day-to-day basis in peacetime, so our units are always ready for the demands of combat. The capabilities we now possess in our officer and noncommissioned officers corps say that now is the time to empower leaders to get the most out of this great Army. **MR**

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