



Command Responsibility and Accountability

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“The privilege of command is a fleeting sensation. Those who are commanded are the beneficiaries of the system, as their lives—their very existences—are placed uniquely in the care of the commanding officer. They have a right to expect that their leader will be held to exacting standards of professionalism and personal accountability. Their parents, husbands, wives, children, and friends should also expect this to be so, as the commander is entrusted with the treasured life of their loved-ones.”

—Bryan McGrath, *Information Dissemination*, 18 September 2010

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PHOTO: U.S. Army LTC Michael Infanti (right), commander, 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry Regiment, briefs COL Michael Kershaw (left), commander, 2nd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division, LTG Ray Odierno, commander, Multi-National Corps Iraq, and Iraqi Army LTC Iman Ibrahim Mansour, Commander, 4th Battalion, 4th Brigade, 6th Iraqi Army Division, on the partnerships between the coalitions forces and the Iraqi forces, 4 March 2007, Forward Operating Base Yusufiyah, Salah ad Din Province, Iraq, (U.S. Army, SGT Curt Cashour)

TWO MAXIMS ARE inculcated into naval culture. The first is that if a ship runs aground, it is the captain’s responsibility. The second is that the captain is always responsible, even if he or she isn’t. These are not just words by the U.S. Navy—the Navy backs them up. Many skippers have been relieved of command for collisions or groundings. For example, according to the 17 September 2010 edition of *Navy Times*, two commanding officers, both holding the rank of commander (O-5), were relieved in 2010 for collisions. Being relieved under these circumstances is the norm in the Navy, part of their professional ethic. Navy ship and submarine commanders have an *expectation* that they should and will be relieved of their duties when incidents of this nature occur on their watch. This expectation is different than a performance or behavior standard. According to the same issue of *Navy Times*, 12 other commanders and captains (O-6s) were relieved for inappropriate conduct, temperament and demeanor, or loss of confidence in the ability to command.

Everything the Unit Does or Fails to Do

In the Army, there is an old saying that the commander is responsible for everything the unit does or fails to do. But are they *accountable*? Historically, the Army does not relieve commanders at the O-5/O-6 level at the same rate as the Navy, and maybe it shouldn’t. Maybe the Navy is too quick to relieve ship commanders. However, for our Army to maintain a healthy

professional ethic, commanders need to embrace the *spirit* of this saying as their command *responsibility*, and Army leadership should consider how they hold commanders *accountable* for what their units and soldiers do and fail to do.

A few common themes permeate the two adages mentioned above:

- A commander can delegate authority but not responsibility. Authority refers to who is in charge, while responsibility refers to who is accountable.

- A commander is responsible but very often *not* in control.

- Commanders have a responsibility to ensure their subordinates are trained and can operate independently based on the commander's intent.

- Commanders have a responsibility to set a command climate wherein subordinates will act ethically in the absence of leaders.

Former Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom brigade commanders commented on two of these themes: the commander is responsible for everything the unit does and fails to do, and a commander is responsible but not in control:

- “I agree with first one, we can't step back from this, but expect senior echelons to exercise

judgment in when/how to hold them accountable for a unit's actions. I disagree with the second, decentralization doesn't mean 'not in control.' We can train and educate for mission command and decentralized operations, I did this with my brigade combat team and it worked.”

- “I think this idea of accountability is essential to success. This puts energy on the commander to develop subordinates, stay involved and take responsibility for operations, and manage risk. It is imperative in higher commanders to balance this. For example, in a detainee abuse case, we investigated and found it was not a systemic problem in command. We held those responsible accountable. As a result I changed the way I checked leaders and organizations. Since the Army is human, bad things will happen. It is not always what happens but how we react to it . . . after all, commanders bring order to chaos. We should not expect that chaos will not happen.”

- “Organizationally, yes, though I do not agree that a commander should be responsible for criminal activity by subordinates unless he was aware and ignored or clearly set the conditions to enable it. I agree pretty much with the second one. Organizations are



(SSG Martin K. Newton, U.S. Army)

U.S. Army LTC Robert Morschauer, commander of the 2nd Battalion, 15th Artillery Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, goes over battle plans for a combined mission with BG Ali Jasim Mohammed, commander of the 4th Brigade, 6th Division, Iraqi Army.

like aircraft carriers, they don't turn on a dime and one man can't do it all, so leaders must describe where they want the ship to go, the values they will rely on to get them there and then describe and execute the preparation (training, etc.) necessary to get there. They then constantly assess against [the] changing environment and adapt as necessary."

- "Responsibility for *successes* should always be attributed to the folks who actually did the hard work to make it happen, and that is not the commander. Take public responsibility for all failures, aggressively investigate what happened, correct it and put systems in place to ensure it does not reoccur. Set an appropriate command climate to ensure the unit does the harder right rather than the easier wrong. Bad stuff will happen, no matter what you do. The larger the organization, the more bad stuff and the more it will stink. In a proper command, as described above, those things that go wrong will be understood to be exceptions and out of the immediate span of control of the commander. Furthermore, how the commander responds to the event is more important than the event itself. In the end, there will be times when circumstances or political equities demand that someone take a fall, and that may be the commander. But it is not always necessary that someone take a fall, aside from the individual(s) whose direct actions caused the failure or event."

This topic is relevant today for three key reasons:

- Operations in Afghanistan and Iraq are decentralized at a level that is new to our Army's culture, and it appears this operating environment will not change in the near future.
- Soldiers across the Army are committing suicide or injuring themselves due to high-risk behaviors at unacceptable levels.
- The Army, at the earlier direction of General George Casey, is taking the time to look at, define, and perhaps codify, its professional ethic.

Responsible but not in Control?

Without question, in an operational environment, the fixed command space of a naval vessel is quite different than an Army commander's battle space. In terms of control, a ship commander has much more direct control of his or her sailors than an Army commander. Within the Army, this issue is exponentially exacerbated by the decentralized nature of our current operations. Clearly a battalion

or brigade commander cannot be everywhere their platoon leaders or company commanders are. With that reality, what are the implications for the Army commander?

The key learning point behind the statement that the commander is responsible for everything the unit does and fails to do is really *philosophical* because in reality commanders cannot lead, supervise, or micromanage their subordinates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, nor should they. Commanders and leaders cannot prevent every possible bad thing from happening in a unit, but commanders who understand, internalize, and command their unit by being *responsible but not in control* will be thinking, planning, and acting in a way that sets up the unit and its soldiers for success.

In practical terms, accountability means *consequences*, both positive (awards, promotions, superb ratings, etc.) and negative (letters of reprimand, Article 15s, relief for cause, poor ratings, etc.). For example, the Army's officer evaluation reporting system is an easy way to hold commanders accountable for what happens in their units, but how effective are senior raters using it? The current system was *intended* to have as the "standard" 33 percent receive above center of mass ratings. The reality is that senior raters shoot for 49.99 percent above center of mass ratings. Is this the best way to hold commanders really *accountable*?

How responsible and accountable should commanders be for a high suicide rate, incidents of sexual harassment, war crimes, or a high number of drug-and alcohol-related incidents within their units? Discussions of accountability should revolve around whether the commander knew or should have known the unit's level of readiness and training, and command climate. For example, in 2008, a Houston-based recruiting command that experienced four suicides was found to have a command

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climate that was a contributing factor in the deaths. The battalion commander was reprimanded, but not relieved.

Commanders set their units up for success primarily through the command climates they establish. At its most basic level, a command climate sets the conditions for how the unit and its soldiers should act when the commander is not around.

Without question, a commander who sets or allows an unethical command climate is setting up his unit and subordinates for failure. Historically, there are many examples of this. The My Lai massacre in 1968 is one of the most well known and studied examples. Another example occurred in Kosovo in September 2000, in Alpha Company, 3rd Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division was found, according to the investigation, to have a command climate that contributed to torture and a tragic case of rape and murder. The battalion commander was reprimanded but not relieved of command. More recently, there are a few examples from Afghanistan and Iraq where questionable command climates contributed to misconduct or crimes.

Commanders should intentionally and thoughtfully establish and maintain a positive and ethical climate in their units. This effort should not be an afterthought or of secondary priority. *It must be considered, along with mission accomplishment, as the top priority.* An ethical command climate must be maintained through constant reinforcement of positive actions.

There is no such thing as a neutral or non-command climate. *Something* is going to happen based on the words and actions of the commander. And importantly, there is an enormous difference

between promoting unethical conduct, looking the other way, and a “wink and a nod” to certain behaviors. None of these are good and some are worse than others. Every commander in the Army should be acutely aware that everything they say (or don’t say) and do (or don’t do) is being seen and internalized by their subordinates. Commanders must lead by example. The climate the commander establishes will greatly influence how soldiers think and act in the absence of their leaders, good or bad.

Clearly, commanders know they have the responsibility of ensuring their units are trained to a high level of competence. They must also understand and internalize that they have a responsibility for the *character* of their units.

Many may read this and conclude we are recommending that commanders micromanage subordinate commanders, have overly intrusive and pedantic POV inspections, weekend safety briefs, and other techniques that are obtuse and sophomoric. That is not the case. Others may read this and think we are advocating “witch hunts” or more opportunities to play “gotcha” with commanders. Again, that is not the case.

We are recommending that commanders rethink and critically reassess who they are as commanders (become more self-aware), what their responsibilities entail, and whether they are ready for the awesome privilege and responsibility of commanding America’s soldiers. Discussions of a commander’s responsibility and accountability are difficult, sensitive, and often political, especially when discussing serving commanders, but as the Army discusses and reaffirms its professional ethic, it is a discussion that needs to happen. **MR**

NOTE

1. Joe Doty and Walt Sowden, “Competency vs. Character: It Must Be Both!” *Military Review* (November-December, 2009): 69.