

# History, Mission Command, and the *Auftragstaktik* Infatuation



Ricardo A. Herrera

History informs the military profession and is a central, foundational element in professional military education. History is also employed to validate, provide context to, and thereby legitimate concepts like doctrine. Unfortunately, it is not always done properly, or with much regard to, or understanding of the evidence or to historians' analyses. This is glaringly so in the case of Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0, *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces*, and now-withdrawn Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-0, *Mission Command*, and their unfounded claim for mission command's historical roots in *Auftragstaktik*, more properly termed *Führen mit Auftrag*. ADP 6-0, which superseded ADRP 6-0 in 2019, states that "Mission command traces its roots back to the German concept of *Auftragstaktik* (literally, mission-type tactics)," while ADRP 6-0 similarly claims that "mission command ..., the Army's preferred style for exercising command since the 1980s ..., traces its roots back to the German concept of *Auftragstaktik*, which translates roughly to mission-type tactics."<sup>1</sup>

ADP 6-0 acknowledges that "aspects of [what is today termed] mission command, including commander's intent, disciplined initiative, mission orders, and mutual trust, have long been part of U.S. Army culture" as far back as 1864, and that American "commanders have employed elements of [what is today deemed] mission command since the 18th century."<sup>2</sup> Having

acknowledged this, the Center for Army Doctrine Development's assertion for mission command's Prussian or German lineage for longstanding American practices is curious. It ignores the historical record and overlooks the American experience. While there may be similarities between mission command and *Führen mit Auftrag*, to claim that the latter led to the former is to ignore the massive weight of evidence from Prussian, German, and American histories, and importantly, their historical origins.<sup>3</sup>

"*Auftragstaktik*," notes ADP 6-0, "was a result of Prussian military reforms following the defeat of the Prussian army by Napoleon at the Battle of Jena in 1809 [*sic*]," and then traces it through the "Franco-Russian [*sic*] War of 1870," finally culminating in the "1888 German Drill Regulations."<sup>4</sup> Rightfully, ADP 6-0 gives due credit to reformers like Gerhard von Scharnhorst and August von Gneisenau for their part in the reconstruction and regeneration of the Royal Prussian Army (*Königlich Preußische Armee*).<sup>5</sup> Putting aside the fact that the battles of Jena and Auerstädt took place on 14 October 1806, not 1809, and that France went to war with Prussia, not Russia in 1870, this assertion regarding the Prussian origins of mission command is rife with problems.<sup>6</sup> Chief among them is it ignores the evidence. Moreover, the mythical Prusso-German antecedents gloss over the vast historical, social, political, and cultural gulfs that separated and helped define the Prusso-German and American



Prussian troops retreat 14 October 1806 after the disastrous double battle of Jena and Auerstadt. The twin battles were fought near the river Saale in Germany between the forces of Napoleon I of France and Frederick William III of Prussia. Prussian military leader Charles William Ferdinand, Duke of Brunswick (1735–1806), was blinded in the battle and died soon after. (Illustration by Richard Knötel [1895] via Wikimedia Commons)

military experiences and the fact that American military leaders have, for over two centuries, exercised what is today termed mission command. Taking this to heart, there ought to be a greater wariness in embracing uncritically *Auftragstaktik*.

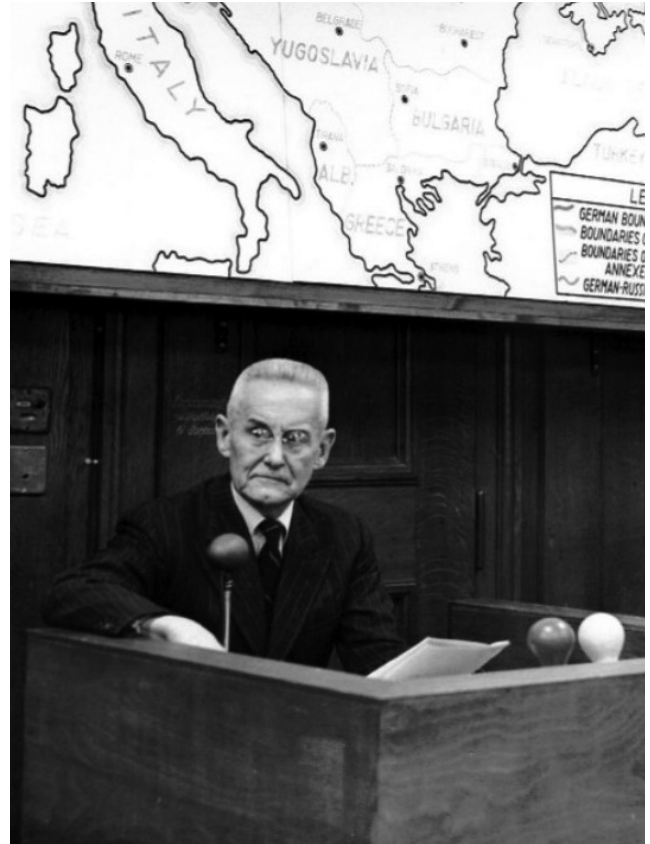
Historian and now-retired U.S. Army officer Antulio J. Echevarria II argues that the “US Army’s rather free and enthusiastic use of the term *Auftragstaktik* in the 1980s has become something of an embarrassment.”<sup>77</sup> It remains so. Echevarria traces it to Trevor N. Dupuy’s *Genius for War: The German Army and the General Staff, 1807-1945*, “An oft-cited source of this confusion.”<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, he has written that “*Auftragstaktik* has been greatly abused in military publications in recent years.”<sup>79</sup> Its original understanding was as something of a free-form approach to directing troops on the battlefield, as opposed to *Normaltaktik*,

which called for a “few standardized formations.”<sup>10</sup> Hence *Auftragstaktik* originally referred more to the liberal use of skirmishers and firepower in infantry tactics over formal, heavy infantry columns or lines than anything else. Nonetheless, modern interest in the *Auftragstaktik* (and seemingly all things *Wehrmacht* [armed forces]) began with British and American efforts at crafting doctrine and tactics to counter the threat emanating from the Group of Soviet Occupation Forces in Germany, later the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany (German Democratic Republic), during the extended Anglo-American occupation of the Federal Republic of Germany during the Cold War (1945–1991). Echevarria is not alone in his critique, nor is he the first in calling out the U.S. Army’s infatuation with Germany’s supposed military prowess. Historian Roger A. Beaumont critiqued the Army’s uncritical





Konrad Adenauer, first chancellor of West Germany from 1949 to 1963. (Photo courtesy of German Federal Archive via Wikimedia Commons)



Franz Halder, former chief of the General Staff of the German army, was a prosecution witness in the "High Command" trial at the Nuremberg Trials in 1948. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

infatuation with the Wehrmacht and asks the question, "If they were so good, why did they lose? Were the odds just too great? If they were so smart, after losing once, why did they try again?"<sup>11</sup>

Robert M. Citino, a preeminent historian of the Wehrmacht, makes the point abundantly clear when he writes that merely invoking "*Auftragstaktik* is completely mythological. The Germans hardly ever used the term when discussing issues of command. Rather they spoke of 'the independence of subordinate commanders,' which is a very different thing."<sup>12</sup> Citino states emphatically that in the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth, "Operational-level German commanders (corps and above) saw themselves, and were recognized by the General Staff, as absolutely independent in spirit and behavior; they were free agents while on campaign," and that "it is almost impossible to find an occasion when a 'mission' as defined by the supreme command took precedence over the wishes of a battlefield commander."<sup>13</sup> All of this is a far cry

from the disciplined initiative American subordinates are, and have been, expected to exercise within the commander's intent. It is long past time for U.S. Army doctrine writers and military professionals to jettison their Prusso-German infatuation.

## Cold War Blinders

Anglo-American officers reasoned that the German army (*Deutsches Heer*) had often succeeded beyond expectations against the much larger Red Army in World War II. Since they anticipated fighting outnumbered the same enemy in World War III, they believed that had much to learn by adopting German practices, a narrative shaped by German generals. At the tactical level of war, the German army had won some stunning victories against larger forces, and that enthralled Anglo-American officers. Tactical virtuosity aside, that army was sorely bereft of any capable or serious strategic thought or action in either of its wars, but that was beside the point.



Anglo-American admiration dovetailed with the much larger and more extensive project of rehabilitating Germany and its armed forces, and the German generals were only too eager to whitewash their crimes and tell their captors what they wanted to hear. Chancellor Konrad Adenauer led the political effort to rearm the forces of the Federal Republic of Germany. Central to his efforts was cleansing the name of the Wehrmacht and

numbers of its subordinate officers, noncommissioned officers, and enlisted men eagerly participated in these crimes against humanity.<sup>17</sup> Organized murder and the enslavement or extermination of undesirables were central tenets of the Nazi strategy of territorial expansion. Hence, the myth of the clean Wehrmacht is a lie. With Adenauer and Halder having led the whitewashing of the Wehrmacht, an open American embrace followed.

“Starry ..., like DePuy, was impressed with the German army’s tactical prowess in World War II, never mind its strategic ineptitude and criminal conduct.”

assigning all crimes to the SS (*Schutzstaffel*) and its ilk.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Adenauer was also after the votes of veterans, and what better way to garner their support than by purifying their units’ records.<sup>15</sup> Assisting Adenauer was Franz Halder, former chief of staff of the German army’s High Command (1938–1942). Halder led the cleansing while working for the U.S. Army Historical Division, today the Center of Military History as a consultant.<sup>16</sup>

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With NATO a recent creation and the defense of Western Europe paramount in American eyes, the United States silently acquiesced. An essential pillar of the clean Wehrmacht was assigning all responsibility for the murder of Jews, intellectuals, communists, gays, and countless others to the SS, the armed SS (*Waffen-SS*), concentration camp guards (*SS-Totenkopfverbände*), and the extermination or deployment groups (*Einsatzgruppen*), when in fact, the Wehrmacht leadership and countless

The most overt admiration of the Wehrmacht came during one of the U.S. Army’s most difficult periods, its emergence from the Vietnam War and focus on the defense of Western Europe. Gens. William E. DePuy and Donn A. Starry, who were instrumental in the Army’s revitalization following the Vietnam War, played leading roles. DePuy was a veteran of the war against Nazi Germany and had served in the postwar Federal Republic of Germany. Importantly, he was also the first commander of Training and Doctrine Command from 1973 to 1977, and drove the creation of FM 100-5, *Operations*.<sup>18</sup> His biographer, Henry G. Gole, writes that DePuy “admired German [tactical] elasticity in 1944 and 1945 and later rediscovered it in his reading of German military history.”<sup>19</sup> DePuy especially admired the “skill of the Wehrmacht, particularly on the Eastern Front against the vastly numerically superior Russian Army in World War II.”<sup>20</sup> In his mind, German techniques “demonstrated an elasticity in the German way of war that he felt was ‘never understood, mastered or accepted by the U.S. Army.’”<sup>21</sup> In Gole’s telling, DePuy’s “frequent praise of both the old and new German Armies” verges on idolatry, and in doing so, he dismissed American soldiers’ capabilities.<sup>22</sup> According to Gole, DePuy believed that only one-tenth of the soldiers he led in World War II had stuff of soldiers.<sup>23</sup> In his quest to revamp the Army’s doctrine and prepare the force for combat against the Soviets, DePuy took inspiration from his former enemies.

Starry, who followed DePuy as Training and Doctrine Command commander from 1977 to 1981,



Gen. William E. DePuy, first commanding general of Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) from 1973 to 1977. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)



Gen. Donn A. Starry, second commanding general of TRADOC from 1977 to 1981. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

drove the creation of a new doctrine as he too took inspiration from the German army.<sup>24</sup> In the development of AirLand Battle, Starry went to great lengths to ensure that U.S. Army doctrine was consonant with Deutsches Heer doctrine, HDv 100/100.<sup>25</sup> Although Starry had not served in World War II, he, like DePuy, was impressed with the German army's tactical prowess in World War II, never mind its strategic ineptitude and criminal conduct, but also the postwar Deutsches Heer's emphasis on trust and subordinates' initiative within the scope of their commanders' intents. In the search for allied doctrinal consonance and profound doctrinal change in the U.S. Army, DePuy and Starry seem to have planted the seeds for the false historical narrative that eventually accorded primacy of place to Auftragstaktik in the creation of mission command. The embrace of German practices thus shunted aside long-held American practices that antedated the creation of the U.S. Army and left unexamined the fuller history underpinning the much-admired Auftragstaktik.

## The Historical Basis and Development of Auftragstaktik

The tradition of German commanders' autonomy on the battlefield did not develop overnight. It was not immediate, nor readily apparent, but evolve it did, slowly, and from the world of the early-modern Hohenzollern state, wherein the seventeenth and early eighteenth-century rulers of Brandenburg sought to stabilize, defend, and expand Brandenburg-Prussia, largely a flat, sandy, and agriculturally worthless land in northern Germany. Not fully geographically contiguous, defending the dominion was no small challenge, hence the need to create an effective and powerful army.<sup>26</sup>

Over the course of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Prussia's rulers turned to the nobility, the Junkers, to both officer the army and staff the Hohenzollern bureaucracy. A symbiotic relationship between the prince and his officer corps developed. Each relied upon the other to prosper. A process initiated by the "Great Elector" (*Der Große Kurfürst*), Frederick William





Frederick William of Brandenburg, circa 1650–1651 (Painting by Frans Luycx, *Friedrich Wilhelm [1620-1688], Kurfürst von Brandenburg*, canvas, 139 cm x 199 cm, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie via Wikimedia Commons)



Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke the Elder (Photo courtesy of Kunstverlag der Photographischen Gesellschaft Berlin via Wikimedia Commons)

(r. 1640–1688) during the ‘Thirty Years’ War, created the social, political, and economic seedbed out of which commanders’ autonomy grew. The Great Elector used the army to suppress provincial autonomy in outlying lands, particularly to the west, and to tax those provinces. In doing so, he established the basis for Prussian absolutism and the foundation for Prussia’s service nobility, which became the bulwark of the ruler and his state.<sup>27</sup>

Both monarch and Junker needed the other to exist, and consequently, for the Prussian state to exist. It was personal relationship, a social contract predicated upon distinct, even inviolable, rights, privileges, and customs unique to the social order into which they were born—once a Junker, always a Junker. The monarch’s absolute reliance upon Junker officers and bureaucrats endowed those nobles with enviable degrees of autonomy and independence, even as they relied upon the ruler for their positions within the army and the state’s bureaucracy.<sup>28</sup> “We should keep in mind the true nature of its

[Auftragstaktik] social background,” Citino reminds us.<sup>29</sup> Their symbiotic relationship was the “basis of the Prussian state. Toward those of the lower orders under his control, whether [serfs or peasants toiling] on the land or [soldiers toiling] in the army, a Prussian Junker had not just privilege, but absolute sovereignty.”<sup>30</sup> As the Prussian and later German army increased in size, members of the bourgeoisie gained entrance into the officer corps, and in doing so were educated and socialized according to its Junker norms. None of this is to say Prussian commanders exercised the operational autonomy of late-nineteenth century or World War II corps or army commanders; rather, the early relationship between the ruler and the Junkers was the basis for that establishment and growth of that autonomy.

By the mid-nineteenth century, for a prince of the house of Hohenzollern, or even his senior uniformed representative, the chief of the Prussian and later German General Staff (*Chef des Großen Generalstab*), “to

insist on close supervision of a subordinate commander's plan of action would have been a grievous infraction. In other words, Auftragstaktik grew directly out of [nineteenth-century] Prussian culture."<sup>31</sup> It was a mutually exploitative and beneficial relationship and tradition between the ruler and his officer corps that morphed, ebbed, and flowed until 1945.<sup>32</sup> Even before the creation of the Second Reich and the Imperial German Army

commands' lines of advance and then along their axes of attack and engaged in foolhardy battles that cost the lives of thousands of German soldiers.<sup>36</sup> Steinmetz is evidence that for every successful application of a commander's autonomy, there was the attendant risk of foolishness and disaster, but as a Junker, Steinmetz and those of his ilk need not brook any interference from senior officers. This was true even when some thirty percent

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(*Kaiserlich Deutsches Heer*) in 1871, historian Geoffrey Wawro argues that “*Auftragstaktik*—‘mission tactics’—permitted orderly decentralization,” and that this philosophy permeated the ranks of the Prussian army.<sup>33</sup> ADP 6-0, however, mistakenly credits Field Marshal Count Helmuth von Moltke the Elder (1800–1891) for first promulgating Auftragstaktik in the 1888 infantry exercise regulations, which distilled and reinforced his earlier and more expansive injunctions in the “1869 Instructions for Large Unit Commanders.”

Auftragstaktik, in its original nineteenth-century usage, “amounted to something of a free-form approach to directing troops on the battlefield,” as opposed to Normaltaktik, which called for a “few standardized formations,” and “accords well with the principle of maneuver recognized in most of today’s armies.”<sup>34</sup> It was a tactical philosophy that drew from Prussia’s unique history, circumstances, and military theorists. Auftragstaktik developed against the backdrop of theoretical tactical innovations proposed in the aftermath of the Seven Years’ War (1756–1763), enacted during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars (1791–1815), and further refined in later conflicts.

The Prusso-German command tradition often worked brilliantly, and just as often failed spectacularly, and soldiers paid the price. A typical exemplar of Junker privilege was Gen. Karl von Steinmetz (1796–1877), a “willful, obstinate” officer, whose “appointment had been greeted with surprise” in 1870.<sup>35</sup> In the wars against Austria and France, Steinmetz marched across other

of one Prussian corps fell to French rifles, artillery, and mitrailleuses (multiple barrel guns that could fire in volley or in rapid succession) at Saint Privat on 18 August 1870.<sup>37</sup> “What often is overlooked,” as historian Gerhard P. Gross argues, “is that as early as World War I, Auftragstaktik, as the name implies, was a tactical rather than an operational procedure. At the operational level an excess of command freedom can lead quickly to disaster,” as the German army experienced at the battle of the Marne in August and September 1914.<sup>38</sup> Once Germany’s enemies adapted, as they did at the Marne and later at the battles of Moscow in 1941, El Alamein in 1942, and elsewhere, Auftragstaktik degenerated into incoherent assaults devoid of a higher guiding principle or commander. As for linking tactics toward the accomplishment of clear, realistic strategic goals, the German army of 1939–1945 was every bit as bad as its 1914–1918 predecessor.

## The American Experience

Unlike Prussia, the United States had no serious threats to its security following independence. Even before the completion of continental expansion in 1854, the Early Republic had little to fear from other countries. Following the end of the War of 1812, the United States and Great Britain had come to a modus vivendi. Mexico, independent since 1821, was in a near-continuous state of turmoil as empire replaced empire, republic replaced empire, and a series of generals overthrew one another. Except for the brief war against



Mexico (1846–1848), the U.S. Army was an imperial constabulary and nation-building force rather than a proper army designed, trained, and prepared for war against an enemy force. Its policing and nation-building mission scattered it in penny packets across the frontier and in coastal fortifications. Its officers were surveyors, engineers, policemen, diplomats, and more. Distant from the centers of power, they were accustomed to acting with little direction, and even greater freedom, a far cry from the Prussian experience.<sup>39</sup>

The guiding lights for the nineteenth-century U.S. Army were the imperial French armies of Napoleon I and his nephew Napoleon III.<sup>40</sup> Dennis Hart Mahan, a long-serving professor at the U.S. Military Academy and noted Francophile, declared, “The systems of tactics in use in our service are those of the French.”<sup>41</sup> Although his works seemed in some cases to reduce warfare to a series of geometrical propositions, Mahan understood that chance and contingency worked to defeat the most carefully laid plans. He believed that campaign plans had to be “limited as to comprise only the leading strategical dispositions, thus presenting only the outline features, within which the meshwork of the minor operations is to be confined; thus leaving ample latitude for all movement of detail and their execution.”<sup>42</sup> Moreover, Mahan argued that the commanding general had to have “*carte blanche* for carrying out the details of the campaign, the plan of which may have been decided upon by a council” well in advance.<sup>43</sup> Even this most admiring of Francophile theoreticians argued for the disciplined initiative of the commander. Yet, like so many admirers of the Corsican, Mahan equated tactical victories with strategic insight and ability.

Napoleon Bonaparte’s marshalate system was probably the first true example of so-called Auftragstaktik exercised in the strategic realm. Broad mission orders, expansive command latitude, and minimal guidance to his marshals allowed Bonaparte to consistently wage and lose wars from Spain to Russia, each one a sparkling failure. Like the later German generals of 1914–1918 and 1939–1945, Bonaparte’s marshals, with few exceptions, were mere tacticians. They might defeat their enemies, but they failed to suppress them for long, and in the end, France’s enemies learned, turned, rose, and defeated Napoleon and his marshals. Stunning battlefield victories do not a successful strategy make.<sup>44</sup>

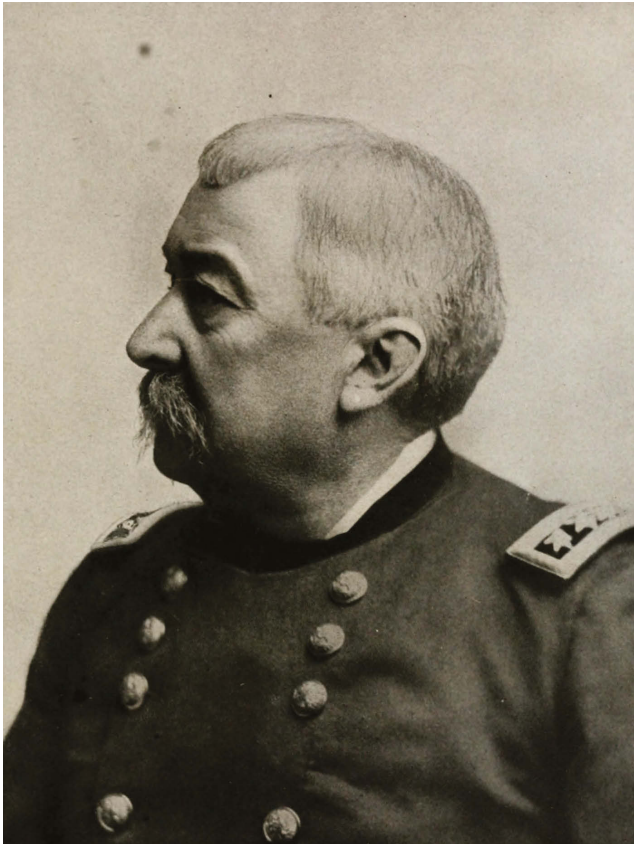
Nevertheless, and well before Mahan, U.S. commanders had nearly always acted in accordance with the broader orders of their superiors. As was the case in the Prussian tradition, some commanders were better and more successful than others. This notwithstanding, trust, but also physical distance and the nature of communications, precluded anything but the broadest of guidance and the expectation that commanders acting away from headquarters would do the right thing.<sup>45</sup> Certainly, during the American Civil War, the U.S. Army learned how to wage war, however imperfectly, on a continental scale that surpassed the entirety of France in 1871. As the size of the U.S. Army grew, it increasingly operated along extensive rail, riverine, and coastal lines, and communicated at a distance by telegraph. By 1864, with the appointment of Ulysses S. Grant as general-in-chief, trusted field army commanders like Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman demonstrated the Army’s mastery of what is today called mission command. Sherman’s campaigns for Atlanta, Savannah, and the Carolinas were perhaps the greatest examples what of what is deemed mission command. There was no need to emulate Prussia, and Americans did not.

For the post-Civil War U.S. Army, Lt. Gen. Philip H. Sheridan did not believe there was much to learn from Prussia’s army. Sheridan, who had observed Prussian forces during the Franco-Prussian War, wrote that the “methods pursued on the march were the same as we would employ,” save the ability to find quarters easily.<sup>46</sup> France, more densely populated than the American South, provided (however reluctantly) fixed quarters in homes, barns, and public buildings for soldiers. The general who had campaigned across far more extensive territory than any Prussian army in the war of 1870–1871 found “campaigning in France ... an easy matter, very unlike anything we had during the war of the rebellion.”<sup>47</sup> He could “but leave to conjecture how the Germans would have got along on bottomless roads—often none at all—through the swamps and quicksands of northern Virginia, from the Wilderness to Petersburg, and from Chattanooga to Atlanta and the sea.”<sup>48</sup>

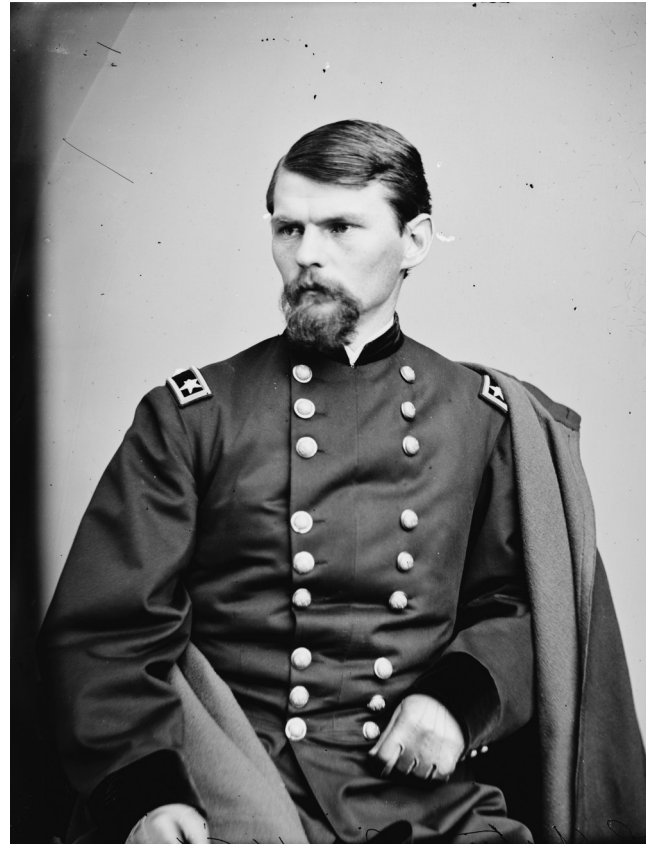
Although Sheridan admired the “perfect [Prussian] military system,” he noted it had been “devised by almost autocratic power,” and in this he detected but one element in the nature and culture of Prussian command.<sup>49</sup> In Sheridan’s final reflection, he “saw no new military principles developed, whether of strategy







General of the Army Philip H. Sheridan (Photo courtesy of Internet Book Archive Images via Wikimedia Commons)



Gen. Emory Upton (Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress)

or grand tactics, the movements of the different armies and corps being dictated and governed by the same general laws that have so long obtained, simplicity of combination and manoeuvre, and the concentration of a numerically superior force at the vital point.”<sup>50</sup> Sheridan observed that “the earlier advantages gained by the Germans may be ascribed to the strikingly prompt mobilization of their armies, one of the most noticeable features of their perfect military system.”<sup>51</sup> Still, as Sheridan noted, the Prussians’ “later successes were greatly aided by the blunders of the French, whose stupendous errors materially shortened the war, though even if prolonged it could, in my opinion, have had ultimately no other termination.”<sup>52</sup>

Historian David J. Fitzpatrick has deemed Sheridan’s view, like that of a handful of other Civil War generals, “American chauvinism.”<sup>53</sup> Most American officers admired Prussian military education, the general staff system, and more, and herein is the distinction. Col. Emory Upton, perhaps the most consequential American

military thinker and reformer of the late nineteenth century, proposed a thorough-going reform of the Army. He did not, however, seek to emulate the nature of command, for there was no need. In his posthumously published *Military Policy of the United States*, Upton observed the “want of post-graduate schools to educate our officers in strategy and the higher principles of the art of war.”<sup>54</sup>

Writing to Lt. Col James H. Wilson in 1870, Upton, like Sheridan, tartly declared “the stupidity of the French generals has no parallel in History.”<sup>55</sup> Five years later, Upton attributed Prussia’s success to “French incompetence,” even as he challenged the “efficacy of the entire Prussian tactical system.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, Upton’s views were in line with Sheridan’s. Prussia’s general staff, its system of professional education, the army’s organization, and other structural elements offered much to be admired and emulated, but it offered little in the way of tactics, the art of war, or command for experienced officers like Sheridan and Upton. As historian Brian

McAllister Linn stresses, “Upton wanted to replicate another nation’s military structure, but without transposing the underlying philosophy of war that had created these forces and guided them to victory.”<sup>57</sup> In reviewing “The Prussian Company Column,” Upton offered a profound criticism of those given to uncritical appreciation and mimicry when he advised that “prudence would therefore suggest that we pause in our

the terrain and stated that the “captain determines upon the direction and character of the attack” of his company and relied upon the company commander’s judgment and discretion when acting alone.<sup>62</sup> In a like vein, the battalion commander, a major, “regulates the progress of the action ..., leaving the execution of the details to his subordinates, he exercises a general control, and endeavors constantly to increase the energy

“ In 1905, the U.S. War Department issued the *Field Service Regulations (FSR)*, the first American publication rightfully deemed doctrine. ”

admiration of a system which has been insufficiently tried, and refuse, till further developments take place, to abandon a company organization, which, notwithstanding all changes in arms, has met every requirement for more than thirty centuries.”<sup>58</sup> Upton was not alone in critical analyses of Prussia’s stunning victories.

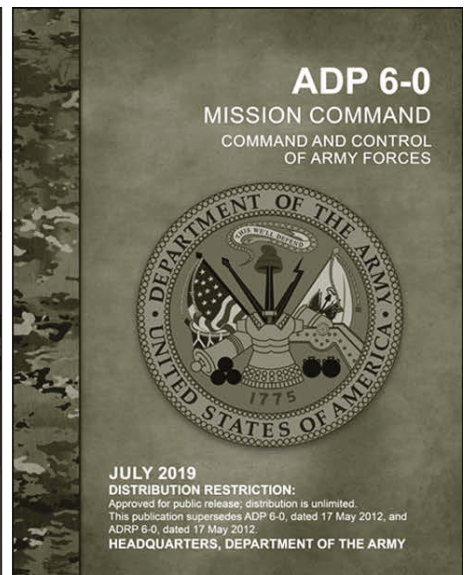
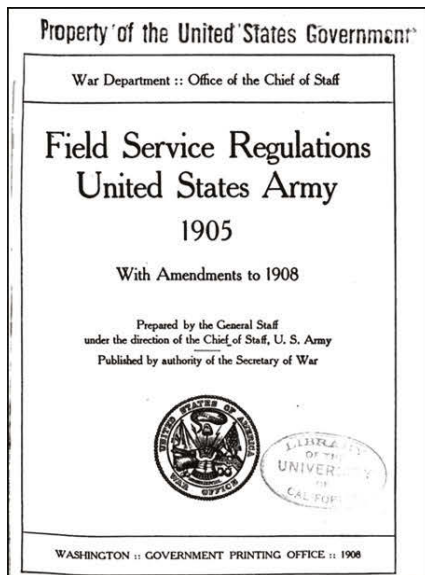
In a series of lectures on the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 at the Infantry and Cavalry School at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, Lt. Col. Arthur L. Wagner, a leading theorist of the late nineteenth-century Army and admirer of the Prussian army, emphasized its preparation and technological advancements in the victory over Austria. Wagner then criticized the Austrian commander at Königgrätz of having wanted “nothing more than ... blind obedience” from his corps commanders, and for having communicated poorly with them.<sup>59</sup> He praised the high quality of the Prussian general staff, but generously claimed that the senior generals, one and all, deferred to the “wisdom” of Moltke.<sup>60</sup> Like Upton before him, nowhere did Wagner draw upon Prussian regulations or their philosophy of command. Impressive as Prussian staff work was, its command philosophy was unremarkable to this admirer.

## An American Doctrine of Command

In 1891, the U.S. Army broke with its nineteenth-century past when it adopted the *Infantry Drill Regulations*. It made the infantry squad led by a corporal the “basis of extended order.”<sup>61</sup> It emphasized individual soldiers’ discretion in using and exploiting

of the action.”<sup>63</sup> Trust, individual skill and judgment, flexibility, and an adherence to the broader concept of the operation were central. The battalion commander “should leave to each [company] commander the discretion necessary to enable him to profit by all circumstances.”<sup>64</sup> The same spirit informed ever higher levels of command, from regiment to brigade to division.<sup>65</sup> This was an American philosophy of command and leadership written by and for American soldiers. Moreover, as Echevarria notes, many American commanders were skeptical of German practice, although historian Perry D. Jamieson noted that a reviewer in the *Army and Navy Register* “deduced that the Leavenworth panel had ... [drawn] on French, and, to a lesser extent, Belgian and German, sources.”<sup>66</sup>

In 1905, the U.S. War Department issued the *Field Service Regulations (FSR)*, the first American publication rightfully deemed doctrine.<sup>67</sup> It was much more than drill. The *FSR* amplified or expanded upon well-established practices in the U.S. Army, such as the all-important mutual trust and “complete confidence” between the commanding general and his chief of staff.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, declared the *FSR*, the chief of staff needed to enjoy a “considerable degree of independence in the performance of his ordinary duties.”<sup>69</sup> Yet, Article II, “Orders. General Principles,” is chock full of nearly verbatim plagiarism from “Communications Between Staffs and Troops. The Issuance of Orders. General Principles,” *The Order of Field Service of the German Army*, an 1893 translation of the 1887



*Felddienst-Ordnung*, the German field service regulations as modified through 1892.<sup>70</sup>

Orders, according to the *FSR*, had to be brief, clear, and precise, but they “should not trespass on the province of a subordinate.”<sup>71</sup> They “should contain everything which is beyond the independent authority of the subordinate, but nothing more.”<sup>72</sup> In the translation, it reads “the order must be short, clear, definite, and suitable to the receiver’s range of vision.”<sup>73</sup> The new regulations recognized the dynamic nature of battle when it stated that “orders should not attempt to arrange matters too far in advance.”<sup>74</sup> Reinforcing that point, the *FSR* noted that “frequent changes weary the men, shake their confidence in their commander, and tend to make subordinates uncertain in their action.”<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, the *FSR* recommended that orders include “intentions of the commanding officer.” Because of the fluid nature of combat, not every circumstance could be anticipated. Moreover, the *FSR* enjoined commanders to “lay stress upon *the object to be attained*, and leave open the means to be employed.”<sup>76</sup> The *FSR* had codified the Army’s long-standing practices of trust, initiative, experience, and commander’s intent.

On the surface, the *FSR* suggests the truth underpinning ADP 6-0 and mission command’s Prusso-German origins. Yet, going beyond the *FSR*’s plagiarism and examining the historical development and practices underpinning Prusso-German and American command and leadership traditions reveals a different story. Grafting the bud of *Auftragstaktik* upon the root stock

*Field Service Regulations, United States Army: Prepared by the General Staff, Under the Direction of the Chief of Staff, U.S. Army (1905); Field Manual 100-5, Operations (1976) ; and Army Doctrine Publication 6-0, Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces (2019).*

of American military history and well-established practice does not a Prusso-German practice create.

## Conclusion

In his 1875 critique of the Prussian army’s tactics, Upton writes, “History teaches, that after every great modern war, which has surprised the world by brilliant results, the organization and tactics of the victor have been the subjects of admiration and imitation, to a degree often bordering on servility.”<sup>77</sup> The irony of Upton’s observation is that in the twentieth century, the U.S. Army departed from its past practice of emulating foreign victors and embraced, defended, and whitewashed the consistent losers of two world wars. Consider instead the degree to which FM 100-5, *Operations*, and the doctrine of AirLand Battle and concept of operational art resemble the work of Soviet theoreticians like Georgii Samoilovich Isserson, Aleksander A. Svechin, and V. K. Triandafillov. In those cases, U.S. Army doctrine embraced the victors, though it did not directly recognize them as such since the Soviets were the new potential enemy.<sup>78</sup>

While there is no historical basis to assert that *Auftragstaktik* is a root for mission command, this is not to say that the baby should be thrown out with the bathwater. Rather than claiming this fictional



ancestor, doctrine writers would better serve the Army by acknowledging that while there are some similarities between Auftragstaktik (Führen mit Auftrag) and mission command, that is where the relationship begins and ends. The U.S. Army was practicing what it today calls mission command long before it discovered German practices, and ADP 6-0 acknowledges this, even as it returns to its imaginary German origins.<sup>79</sup>

It is long past time to shed the infatuation with the German military experience and fatuous lineage of mission command. Historians have more than amply demonstrated for over two decades that similarities aside, there is no exclusive or even specific Prusso-German foundation in what is today termed mission command. Confusion about complex historical concepts such as the origins of mission command and Auftragstaktik reveals why doctrine writers and military professionals should consult professional historians and their works, those whose analyses and conclusions are grounded in primary sources, archival research, and historiography when they seek to understand and draw from the past and to understand the past as it exists in the present and informs it. There is much to be studied, learned, and even

adopted in some fashion from the practices of other armies, just as there is much to realize that mission command is far more American, and far less German than doctrine pretends. This is not to say that there is nothing of value in German, or other armies' practices. Rather, deeper understanding, greater historical literacy, and more precision in thought and language are needed, and a recognition that longstanding American practices do not require other armies' validation. A conjured past is worse than no past at all. ■

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## Notes

1. Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0, *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2019), vii; Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-0, *Mission Command* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2012 [obsolete]), v.

2. ADP 6-0, *Mission Command*, vii.

3. Examples of what is today termed mission command abound in scholarly works on American military history. A highly selective list of works, whose bibliographies are also well worth consulting, includes John Grenier, *The First Way of War: American War Making on the Frontier, 1607–1814* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); John Ferling, *Almost A Miracle: The American Victory in the War of Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Ricardo A. Herrera, *Feeding Washington's Army: Surviving the Valley Forge Winter of 1778* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022); William B. Skelton, *An American Profession of Arms: The Army Officer Corps, 1784–1861* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993); Samuel J. Watson, *Jackson's Sword: The Army Officer Corps on the American Frontier, 1810–1821* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013); Samuel J. Watson, *Peacekeepers and Conquerors: The Army Officer Corps on the American Frontier, 1821–1846* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013); Durwood Ball, *Army Regulars on the Western Frontier, 1848–1861* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001); Robert Wooster, *The United States Army and the Making*

*of America: From Confederation to Empire, 1775–1903* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2021).

4. ADP 6-0, *Mission Command*, vii.

5. *Ibid.*

6. David Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon: The Mind and Method of History's Greatest Soldier* (New York: Scribner, 1966), 479–502. For a more recent study, see Dennis Showalter, "The Jena Campaign: Apogee and Perihelion," in *Napoleon and the Operational Art of War: Essays in Honor of Donald D. Horward*, ed. Michael V. Leggiere (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2016), 173–98. Dierk Walter, "A Military Revolution?: Prussian Military Reforms Before the Wars of German Unification," *Forsvarsstudier/Defence Studies* 2 (2001): 7–9; for a more nuanced appreciation of the differences, see Jens Küster, "Führen mit Auftrag: Mission Command from a German Point of View," *Military Review* (Online Exclusive, 13 May 2016), accessed 24 March 2022, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2016-Online-Exclusive-Articles/Fuehren-mit-Auftrag/>.

7. Antulio J. Echevarria II, "Moltke and the German Military Tradition: His Theories and Legacies," *Parameters* 26, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 99n35.

8. Trevor N. Dupuy, *Genius for War: The German Army and the General Staff, 1807–1945* (Englewood, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977), 116, 268, 307; Roger A. Beaumont, "On the Wehrmacht Mystique," *Military Review* 66, no. 6 (July 1986): 44–56. See also Daniel J.

Hughes, "The Abuses of German Military History," *Military Review* 66, no. 11 (December 1986): 66–76.

9. Antulio J. Echevarria II, *After Clausewitz: German Military Thinkers Before the Great War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 38.

10. Ibid., 33.

11. Beaumont, "On the Wehrmacht Mystique," 44–56; see also Hughes, "The Abuses of German Military History," 66–76.

12. Robert M. Citino, *The German Way of War: From the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 308.

13. Geoffrey P. Megargee, *Inside Hitler's High Command* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000).

14. Wolfram Wette, *The Wehrmacht: History, Myth, Reality*, trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), especially chapter 5, "The Legend of the Wehrmacht's 'Clean Hands.'" Wette turns to the process of proper historical examination of the myth in chapter 6, "A Taboo Shatters."

15. Ronald M. Smelser and Edward J. Davies II, *The Myth of the Eastern Front: The Nazi-Soviet War in American Popular Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 74–75.

16. Ibid., 4, 56–61; for the narrative crafted by the German generals, see the post-World War II "German Report Series," written by former generals of the Nazi army and published by the Historical Division, European Command. The series is available at "Former DA Pamphlets," U.S. Army Center of Military History Publications Catalog, 10 December 2021, <https://history.army.mil/catalog/browse/pubnum.html>; see also Records of the Foreign Military Studies (FMS) Program and Related Records, 1941–67 (RG 549.3), Records of United States Army, Europe, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. The literature exposing the myth of the clean Wehrmacht is too extensive to note.

17. Waitman Wade Beorn, *Marching into Darkness: The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust in Belarus* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 12–17; for visual evidence, see "Photo Archives," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed 29 December 2021, <https://www.ushmm.org/collections/the-museums-collections/about/photo-archives>. The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum holds an extensive collection of photographic materials documenting Wehrmacht war crimes. It is but one of many archives with similar materials.

18. Field Manual (FM) 100-5, *Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976).

19. Henry G. Gole, *General William E. DePuy: Preparing the Army for Modern War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 49, 112, 142, 262–63; FM 100-5, *Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982).

20. Gole, *General William E. DePuy*, 262–63.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., 49.

23. Ibid., 49, 112.

24. Donn A. Starry, "To Change an Army," *Military Review* 63, no. 3 (March 1983): 21–23.

25. Donn A. Starry, "US and Federal Republic of Germany Doctrine, Letter to Lt. Gen. John R. Thurman, 27 September 1978," "US and Federal Republic of Germany, Letter to Col. William F. Burns, 30 April 1979," "FM 100-5, *Operations*, Letter to Gen. E. C. Meyer, 26 June 1979," in *Press On!: Selected Works of General Donn A. Starry*, ed. Lewis Sorley, vol. 1 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2009), 335, 340, 343–44; FM 100-5, *Operations* (1982); Federal Republic of Germany, HDv 100/100,

*Command and Control of the Armed Forces* (Bonn, DE: Minister of Defense, 1973).

26. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, or the Matter, Forme, & Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiastical and Civil* (London: Andrew Crooke, 1651), 98. Depending on the period and geographic and political context, the ruler of Prussia was variously styled duke, elector, king in Prussia, or king of Prussia. It was only after the dramatic maneuvering and fighting across Germany and portions of the Habsburg realms, and surviving the Seven Years' War (1756–1763), that Frederick II, "the Great," and his successors were acknowledged solely as kings of Prussia; see Peter H. Wilson, *The Thirty Years War: Europe's Tragedy* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 463, 717. Wilson is also the most recent and authoritative history of the war; see also Peter H. Wilson, *German Armies: War and German Society, 1648–1806* (London: UCL Press, 1998).

27. Tim Blanning, *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia* (New York: Random House, 2016), 6–17, 22–26; William W. Hagen, *Ordinary Prussians: Brandenburg Junkers and Villagers, 1500–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 69, 70; Derek McKay, *The Great Elector: Frederick William of Brandenburg-Prussia* (London: Routledge, 2001), details the "Great Elector's" forging of the Prussian state, especially pages 49–72, 108–96; Otto Buesch, *Military System and Social Life in Old Regime Prussia, 1713–1807: The Beginnings of the Social Militarization of Prusso-German Society* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1997), carries on the analysis of the militarized Prussian state from the reign of the "Soldier King," Frederick William I (1713–1740); his son "Der Alte Fritz," Frederick II (r. 1740–1786); and concludes with the 1806 disasters at Jena-Auerstädt during the reign of Frederick William III (r. 1797–1840); Wilson, *German Armies*, 244. For the larger process of European state formation, and how war made the state, and the state made war, see Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1992* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990).

28. Junker political beliefs are examined in Robert M. Berdahl, *The Politics of the Prussian Nobility: The Development of a Conservative Ideology, 1770–1848* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); see Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1966), on the processes of primary and secondary socialization.

29. Citino, *The German Way of War*, 32, 152, 170, 308.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., 32.

32. Recent scholarship points to the continuance of Auftragstaktik throughout World War II but also to politicized elements within the officer corps; see Robert M. Citino, *The Wehrmacht's Last Stand: The German Campaigns of 1944–1945* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017); David Stahel, *Retreat from Moscow: A New History of Germany's Winter Campaign, 1941–1942* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2019); David K. Yelton, "Older German Officers and National Socialist Activism: Evidence from the German Volkssturm," *Journal of Military History* 83, no. 2 (April 2019): 455–85; Miguel A. López, "The Survival of Auftragstaktik during the Soviet Counterattack in the Battle for Moscow, December 1941 to January 1942," *Journal of Military History* 84, no. 1 (January 2020): 187–212.

33. Eric Dorn Brose, *The Kaiser's Army: The Politics of Military Technology in Germany during the Machine Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 20, 61, 90, 124, 150, 153–54,



190, 200; Geoffrey Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Conquest of France in 1870–1871* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 54, 59, 62.

34. Echevarria, *After Clausewitz*, 33, 38.

35. R. R. Davis, "Helmuth von Moltke and the Prussian-German Development of a Decentralised Style of Command: Metz and Sedan 1870," *Defence Studies* 5, no. 1 (March 2005): 90–91, 94.

36. Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War*, 108, 110–11, 119; Citino, *The German Way of War*, 152, 170, 308; see also Geoffrey Wawro, *The Austro-Prussian War: Austria's War with Prussia and Italy in 1866* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

37. Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War*, 164, 172–73, 184, 194, 302; Dennis Showalter, "Army and Society in Imperial Germany," 585, 588; Arthur T. Coumbe, "Operational Command in the Franco-Prussian War," *Parameters* 21, no. 1 (Summer 1991): 94–95; Harry Bell, trans., *St. Privat: German Sources* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Staff College Press, 1914), is a useful collection of reminiscences regarding the battle of Saint Privat. As with all reminiscences, however, care must be taken in their reading and analysis. Too often, memory is conflated with history.

38. Gerhard P. Gross, *The Myth and Reality of German Warfare: Operational Thinking from Moltke the Elder to Heusinger*, ed. David T. Zabecki (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016), 38, 60, 78, 305.

39. See Skelton, *An American Profession of Arms*; Wooster, *The United States Army and the Making of America*; Watson, *Jackson's Sword*; Watson, *Peacekeepers and Conquerors*; Ball, *Army Regulars on the Western Frontier*.

40. Michael A. Bonura, *Under the Shadow of Napoleon* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

41. Dennis Hart Mahan, *An Elementary Treatise on Advanced-guard, Out-post, and Detachment Service of Troops*, new ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1861), 33.

42. Dennis Hart Mahan, *Advanced-guard, Out-post, and Detachment Service of Troops, with the Essential Principles of Strategy, and Grand Tactics for the Use of Officers of the Militia and Volunteers*, new ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1870), 185.

43. *Ibid.*, 186.

44. See Chandler, *Campaigns of Napoleon*, for a classic account of the Napoleonic Wars. More recent studies include Michael V. Leggiere, ed., *Napoleon and the Operational Art of War*; Alexander Mikaberidze, *The Napoleonic Wars: A Global History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

45. See William P. Craighill, *The Army Officer's Pocket Companion: Principally Designed for Staff Officers in the Field* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1862), 46. Executing an order according to its "spirit and [commander's] intent" were vital; Craighill translated Philippe Brunot de Rouvre, *Aide-memoire de l'officier d'état-major principalement nc e qui concerne le service en campagne* (Paris: J. Dumaine, 1859).

46. Philip H. Sheridan, *Personal Memoirs of Philip Henry Sheridan, General United States Army: With an Account of His Life from 1871 to His Death, in 1888*, ed. Michael V. Sheridan, vol. 2, new & enl. (New York: D. Appleton, 1902), 447.

47. *Ibid.*, 448, 451.

48. *Ibid.*, 451.

49. *Ibid.*, 448.

50. *Ibid.*, 451–52.

51. *Ibid.*, 448.

52. *Ibid.*

53. David J. Fitzpatrick, *Emory Upton: Misunderstood Reformer* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017), 217; see especially chapters 6–8.

54. Emory Upton, *The Military Policy of the United States* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1912), xiv.

55. "Upton to James H. Wilson, 21 August 1870," quoted in Fitzpatrick, *Emory Upton*, 144; Emory Upton, "The Prussian Company Column," *International Review* 2, no. 3 (May 1875): 303.

56. Fitzpatrick, *Emory Upton*, 144.

57. Brian McAllister Lin, *The Echo of Battle: The Army's Way of War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 50, 75.

58. Upton, "The Prussian Company Column," 316.

59. Arthur L. Wagner, *The Campaign of Königgrätz, a Study of the Austro-Prussian War in Light of the American Civil War*, 2nd ed. (Kansas City, MO: Hudson-Kimberly, 1899), 11, 90–91.

60. *Ibid.*, 102.

61. *Infantry Drill Regulations. United States Army. Adopted Oct. 3, 1891* (New York: D. Appleton, 1898), 186–87.

62. *Ibid.*, 194–95, 211, 213.

63. *Ibid.*, 219–20.

64. *Ibid.*, 219.

65. *Ibid.*, 227–29.

66. Perry D. Jamieson, *Crossing the Deadly Ground: United States Army Tactics, 1865–1899* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994), 110.

67. War Department, *Field Service Regulations, United States Army: Prepared by the General Staff, Under the Direction of the Chief of Staff, U.S. Army* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1905).

68. *Ibid.*, 15.

69. *Ibid.*

70. J. M. Gawne and Spenser Wilkinson, trans., *The Order of Field Service of the German Army* (London: Edward Stanford for the Manchester Tactical Society, 1893), 4, 22–23; Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Felddienst-Ordnung* (Berlin: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1887).

71. War Department, *Field Service Regulations*, 29.

72. *Ibid.*

73. *Ibid.*; Gawne and Wilkinson, *The Order of Field Service of the German Army*, 22.

74. War Department, *Field Service Regulations*, 30.

75. *Ibid.*

76. *Ibid.*; Gawne and Wilkinson, *The Order of Field Service of the German Army*, 23.

77. Upton, "The Prussian Company Column," 302.

78. FM 100-5, *Operations* (1982). For a brief overview of the debate over the German and Soviet origins of AirLand Battle, see Curry, "From Blitzkrieg to Airland Battle," 18–25. For English translations of leading Soviet theoretical works on deep battle, see Georgii Samoilovich Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, trans. Bruce W. Menning (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2013); Aleksandr A. Svechin, *Strategy*, ed. Kent D. Lee (Minneapolis: Eastview Information Services, 1992); and V. K. Triandafilov, *The Nature of the Operations of Modern Armies*, ed. Jacob W. Kipp, trans. William A. Burhans (New York: Routledge, 1994). See also David M. Glantz, *Soviet Military Operational Art: In Pursuit of Deep Battle* (New York: Frank Cass, 1991).

79. ADP 6-0, *Mission Command*, vii.

