



Disunity of Command: THE DECISIVE ELEMENT!

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Unity of Command: For every objective, ensure unity of effort under one responsible commander.

—Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*

IN THE MINDS OF MANY, unity of command, one of the nine principles of war, is an unassailable way of conducting military operations. The need for “unity of effort under one responsible commander” is not simply desirable; it is imperative. When viewed in this context, the ongoing operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan have a serious and perhaps fatal flaw. In Iraq, U.S. commanders must tolerate the inefficiency of sharing command with Iraqi Security Forces. In Afghanistan disunity of command so hopelessly hamstring NATO that it raises serious questions of whether success is even possible.

However, it is a mistake to treat any principle of war, including unity of command, as an end in itself. The true end of any military operation is to achieve victory, however that may be defined. The true measure of a principle of war’s value is its contribution towards that end. The Army’s Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*, cautions that the principles of war are “not a checklist,” but rather “powerful tools of analysis” for military professionals. Thus, it is not enough for a critic to simply point out that a principle of war is not being applied; he must go further to show how this contributes to or detracts from achieving victory.

The problem is even clearer when considering how two supposedly “sacred” guidelines can actually work in opposition. In FM 3-0, an appendix highlighting the nine principles of war adds an additional three guidelines from joint doctrine called “joint principles of operations.” One of these is legitimacy. The extract below indicates how this principle can conflict with the unity of command.

Legitimacy

Develop and maintain the will necessary to attain the national strategic end state. . . . The campaign or operation should develop or reinforce the authority and acceptance for the host-nation government by both the

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PHOTO: Colonel Jemal, Commander, 2/9 Armor Brigade (IA), with his partner unit commander, LTC Dave Thompson, 7-10 Cavalry Squadron. (courtesy of author)

governed and the international community. This last factor is frequently the decisive element.

—FM 3-0, *Operations*

To gain legitimacy, the host-nation government must have real authority and shoulder substantive responsibilities. Thus, a military commander who hoards authority and responsibility under the guise of preserving unity of command will certainly undermine the decisive element of legitimacy.

This conflict of principles becomes most clear in the context of stability operations. Field Manual 3-0 states that one of the doctrinal purposes of stability operations is to “gain support for the host government.” This includes finding ways to strengthen the credibility of local security forces. Indigenous commanders regarded as their American masters’ lackeys or puppets do not advance this purpose. Deployed commanders from the strategic to the tactical level must keep this in mind when making choices about how to share authority with host-nation partners. Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) illustrates the approach of *advancing legitimacy by dividing command*. More specifically, as stability operations increasingly dominate OIF, efforts to bolster the legitimacy of Iraqi security forces through power-sharing arrangements increase in importance.

When historians tell the story of OIF, it is quite possible they will judge it as one of very few successful counterinsurgencies orchestrated by an external power. However, it is already clear that this apparent victory has required several fundamental shifts in thinking by those in charge.

The decisive shift occurred in early 2005 when General George Casey, the then-commander of Multi-National Force Iraq, recognized that a focus on U.S.-led operations was not working. U.S. military success and even American progress in rebuilding infrastructure and the economy did not seem to have inhibited the enemy. In his briefing to new transition team members in the summer

of 2005, General Casey assured his audience that Americans would not win this war. The Iraqis themselves would have to do that, he said, and probably long after the U.S. presence was over. He emphasized that the adviser mission was essential to the main effort of placing Iraqis in the lead. Casey was not able to implement this vision immediately; resistance to this fundamental change was too great. However, once he made the course correction, perseverance was required to ensure victory.

In the Multi-National Division Baghdad area of operations, the actual turning point toward success occurred in January 2006 with the transfer of authority from Operation Iraqi Freedom III to IV. This is when the main effort of placing Iraqis in the lead became a reality in both word and deed. At Camp Taji, this change was evident in the stark difference between the vision and actions of the incoming and outgoing brigade and battalion level leaders.

The outgoing brigade commander had directed and supervised a U.S. operation that treated Iraqi forces as another subordinate unit. He preserved unity of command by directing and approving Iraqi operations in his area of responsibility, all the while emphasizing his role as the singly responsible commander. When a new Iraqi infantry battalion requested permission to begin operations, he emphasized that “if we want Iraqi units to play in our battlespace, they had better be ready.” An Iraqi major general arrived at Taji to take command of the new mechanized division, but this had no effect on the U.S. brigade commander’s steadfast claim to unified command. Even in relatively minor matters, he chose to make his supreme authority clear. In one instance, the Iraqi general asked to use an uncommitted company to participate in a ceremony celebrating a large NATO donation. The brigade commander refused. After this, the Iraqi division commander had difficulty issuing any kind of directive to his units, because they always had to “check with the Americans” for a final decision. Throughout this period, it was abundantly clear that an American was in charge at Taji Camp.

This approach to the mission is understandable and even laudable when we place a high value on unity of command. The fact that this was counterproductive to a higher purpose was not necessarily obvious at the tactical level. The brigade commander was applying the principles of war

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with vigor, and his battalions conducted military operations with great efficiency. He did not expect much from his Iraqi brothers in arms, and they performed to his expectations, making it even less attractive to spend time and resources developing an Iraqi capability. When the new Iraqi armored brigade required more American advisers, the U.S. commander refused to provide them. This resulted in slower growth for the Iraqi unit. However, it kept U.S. Soldiers under U.S. commanders where they worked most efficiently.

The transfer of authority to a new brigade commander in January 2006 changed this situation dramatically. A new mind-set appeared at all leadership levels, one that focused on strengthening the Iraqi chain of command and reinforcing its command authority. The first clue of this change came when the incoming cavalry squadron commander arrived at Taji to consult with the advisers to the new Iraqi armored brigade. His message was one of robust and effective support for the adviser team. This was not a halting offer restrained by second thoughts about how it would affect U.S. operations. This squadron commander was ready to provide 80 qualified troopers to triple the size of the adviser teams. With the infusion of this new and precious resource, the Iraqi brigade entered into a phase of rapid growth.

However, more important than manpower was the new brigade commander's explicit and meaningful deference to the Iraqi leaders. When the brigade commander visited the Iraqi side of the base, he came as a U.S. officer consulting with the Iraqi division commander, not as an American colonel giving orders to an Iraqi general. His meetings with the Iraqi general were frequent and were an exchange of useful information designed to enhance cooperation between coequal commanders. It became clear that there were two credible centers of power in Taji Camp.

One of the first great tests of the new culture of placing Iraqis in the lead came in February 2006 when terrorists bombed the Golden Mosque in Samarra. The citizens of Iraq had just elected a new parliament in December, and the new government had not yet formed. The only armored brigade in Iraq had less than 50 percent of its officers and was in the process of completing a limited gunnery training exercise, but the fledgling government wanted to deploy this incomplete brigade to Baghdad to quell

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violence spinning out of control there. The American commanders and advisers initially balked at the idea of the deployment, preferring instead to send a more experienced unit. However, when the Iraqi division commander joined his new government in choosing the armored brigade for the mission, the American chain of command accepted this decision. The brigade performed admirably, Iraqi tanks emblazoned with Iraqi flags soon became symbols of hope for those in the capital city, and the Iraqi leaders were justifiably proud to have taken a leading role in dealing with the crisis.

The experience at Taji Camp contains important lessons about how to achieve victory when the legitimacy of the host nation and its security forces is important. In such situations, who gets the job done is often more important than actually doing it. The Army's mission is to cede authority and responsibility to the local security forces receiving its support. Effective power sharing allows indigenous forces to grow as it shields them from catastrophic failure. In contrast, an external force that intervenes but insists on supreme authority undermines legitimacy. For this reason, mission success in stability operations necessitates a devaluation of unity of command.

Wise commanders have long recognized the need to adapt their means to the ends. Operation Iraqi Freedom is succeeding largely because our strategic thinkers made a critical course correction to *enhance legitimacy at the expense of efficiency*. This was not an easy choice. It required the compromise of a time-honored principle of war.

The high-intensity combat of the 20th century required a special emphasis on the efficiency that comes from unity of effort under one responsible commander. Future conflicts will not be so well served by an uncritical emphasis on unity of command. Instead, commanders must be open minded enough to accept the messiness that comes with disunity of command because our ultimate mission is to win our Nation's wars. **MR**