Curbing the "Helicopter Commander"

Overcoming Risk Aversion and Fostering Disciplined Initiative in the U.S. Army

Maj. Lynn Marie Breckenridge, PhD

Mission command is an approach to decentralized leadership that emphasizes the exercise of local initiative to accomplish tasks within the framework of a commander's guidance and intent. Mission command is guided by several principles, including "exercising disciplined initiative" and "accepting prudent risk."[1] The former is ordered of the subordinate leader, while the latter is required of the senior leader. A delicate relationship exists between the two variables, one that is rarely discussed in detail. Without the senior leader's willingness to accept prudent risk, the junior leader will never feel empowered to exercise disciplined initiative. Conversely, if the junior leader does not exhibit competence to exercise disciplined initiative, the senior leader will assess the level of risk as too high to allow the junior leader freedom of action.

In some cases, the commander's low assessment of the junior leader's level of proficiency may be accurate, and a certain degree of oversight and professional development must occur before mission command can be successful. However, there are several factors that might lead a commander to abandon mission command and opt for micromanagement as a leadership style. These interrelated factors include a "zero defect" work environment, risk aversion, poor leader development, and lack of mutual trust in a cohesive team.

Army leadership doctrine describes six principles for successful mission command: build cohesive teams through mutual trust, create shared understanding, provide a clear commander's intent, exercise disciplined initiative, use mission orders, and accept prudent risk.[2] A recent *Military Review* article by Robert Scaife and Packard Mills suggested other factors that must be present in order for mission command to be successful: trust, initiative, dialogue, and freedom of action within intent.[3] In addition, by tracing mission command back to its German origins in *Auftragstaktik* (mission-type tactics), it is apparent that certain factors have always been recognized as crucial to its success: obedience, proficiency, independence of action, and self-esteem.[4] However, despite all these "recipes for success," commanders continue to find difficulty with decentralized leadership. One area of particular trouble for leaders is the ability to let subordinates struggle and fail before finding their own way.

Most Army leaders agree that, in theory, subordinates must be allowed to learn from failure if they are to become agile and adaptive leaders who can execute complex tasks in unfamiliar and uncertain environments.[5] Putting

theory into practice is an altogether different thing. Indeed, commanders are not alone in their hesitancy to let their subordinates fail. A large body of literature suggests that American culture has shifted toward risk aversion. This is particularly evidenced by what has been coined as "helicopter parenting." Like micromanaging commanders, helicopter parents lack faith in their children's ability to solve problems on their own, and they allow risk aversion to govern their parenting style. Their moniker comes from their tendency to hover above their children, waiting to swoop in at the first sign of trouble. It is the postulate of this essay that the U.S. Army is experiencing an era of "helicopter commanders," brought on by improved communication technology and a perception of increased stakes. They behave in similar ways as helicopter parents, hovering above subordinates, ready to offer increased direction at every turn.

The term "helicopter commander" might appear tongue-in-cheek, but the problem is of serious concern. Over time, the result of helicopter commanding is less competent leaders who are less prone to initiative-taking and are incapable of agile and adaptive leadership. Helicopter commanding is often done with good intentions, but it is a disservice to the U.S. Army and the Nation we serve.

Conceptualizing micromanagement as helicopter commanding serves as a way to examine the factors that impact the execution of mission command, highlight similarities from psychological research in the field of helicopter parenting, and suggest how commanders might apply this knowledge to develop more agile, adaptive leaders.

The Need for Mission Command

In July 2015, Vice Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. Daniel Allyn stood before an Association of the United States Army conference and highlighted the current operational status of the U.S. Army: over 140,000 Total Force soldiers forward-stationed or deployed in over 150 locations around the world. Many of these committed soldiers operate in small units led by entrusted professionals in decentralized command structures. With our force so dispersed, he noted, mission command is more important than ever. Allyn went on to recognize that current operations "place an enormous premium on the quality, breadth and depth of our leader development efforts at every echelon."[6] Military leaders will have to continually evolve and diversify to meet these challenges to the Nation's defense, and will have to do it with fewer personnel and limited resources due to the drawdown of forces.

The Parallel between the Zero Defect Army and Twenty-First Century Parenting

It must be noted that while the challenges posed by the emerging complex operating environment make mission command more important than ever, a resurgent zero defect mentality poses a threat to the Army's ability to embrace mission command.[7] We are experiencing the second era of the "zero defect Army." The first occurred from the end of the Cold War in 1989 until combat operations began in 2001. Several
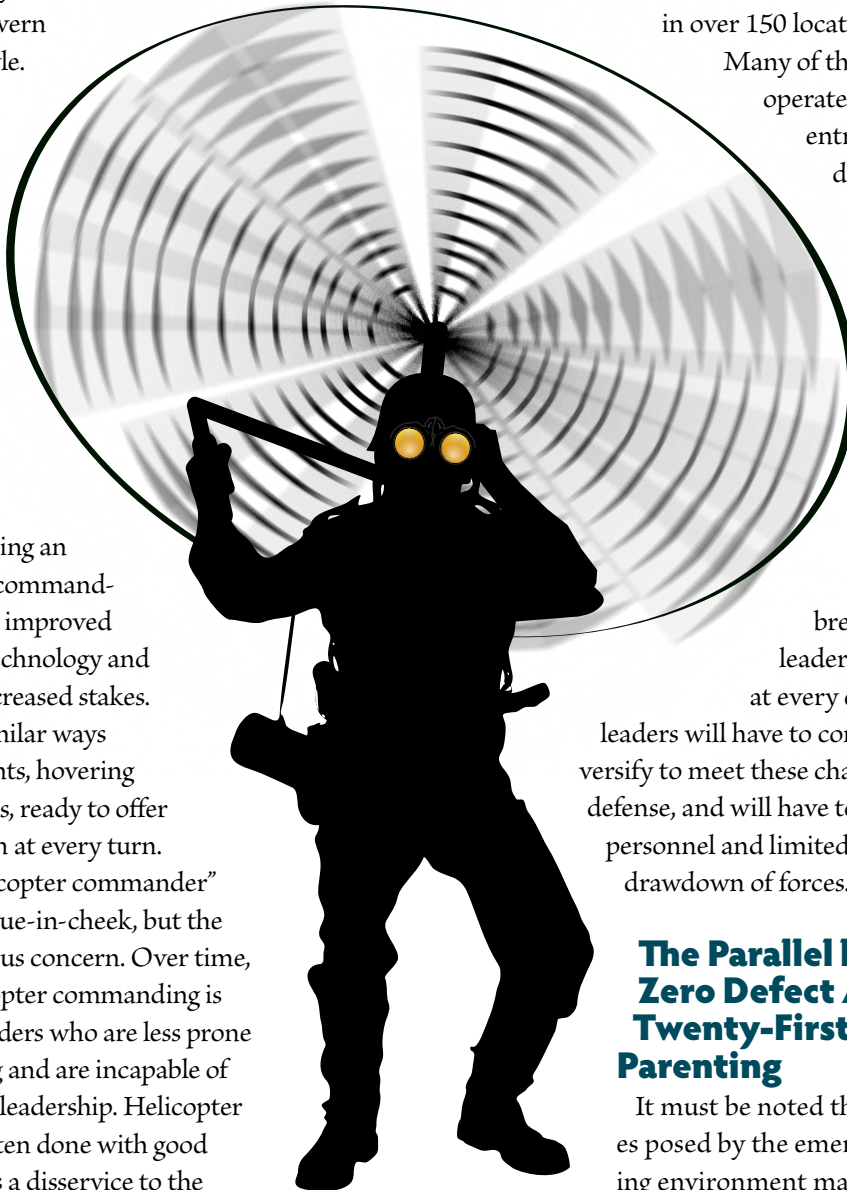
articles have been published about the deleterious effects it had on officers' ability to exercise decentralized command. Characteristically, when downsizing has occurred, commanders have engaged in certain thought processes and actions, both overt and suggestive, in an attempt to ensure that there are absolutely no defects, mistakes, or flaws under their leadership. As a result, decisions have been centralized at a higher level than they needed to be, and leaders minimized or overshadowed subordinates' control.[8]

In 1997, in an effort to change the "zero defects" cultural mindset, the Army began masking all junior officer evaluation reports in their official military personnel files once they were promoted to the rank of captain or chief warrant officer three. Masking junior officers' ratings conveyed the message that junior officers are expected to take risks, and that senior leaders are more forgiving of failures during those learning years.[9]

However, in 2015, the Army began reinstating those reports—evidence of a return to the zero-defect Army.[10] With the ultimate reduction of more than 189,000 personnel, leaders are feeling the same scrutiny that was present during the previous drawdown of forces.[11] They perceive that any "strike" (in terms of a visible failure by self or subordinate) may be enough to end their careers. After more than a decade at war, most successful leaders are comfortable operating with unparalleled authority, flexibility, and resources. However, as we transition from combat operations to garrison administration, the Army faces additional oversight from external stakeholders, including Congress and veterans' organizations. Leaders are increasingly criticized regarding their use of resources, and they are expected to be more attentive to the health, welfare, physical, and mental well-being of soldiers.[12] The confluence of these factors is causing leaders to reconsider whether to allow junior leaders flexibility, or to micromanage and constrain them to avoid failure.

While the zero-defect Army drives officers' fear of not "making the cut," helicopter parenting is driven by *fear of not doing enough*. Helicopter parents fear that something catastrophic will happen if they do not take every possible precaution to keep their children safe and to ensure their success. Much like micromanaging commanders, they lack the faith that their children have the ability to keep themselves safe and to find their own way to success.
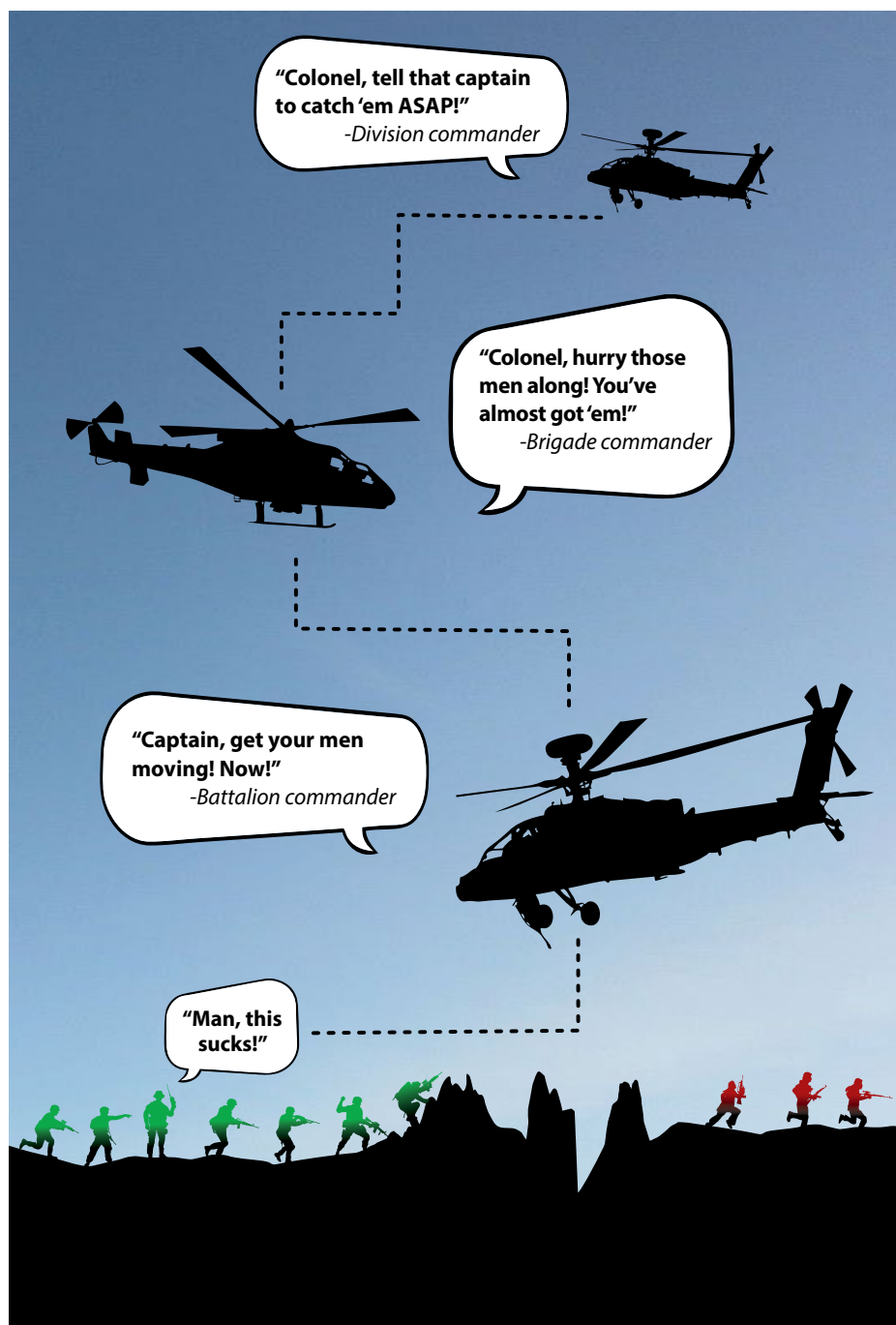
Influenced by media programs designed to create awareness for missing children and criminals at large, and sentiments that American children were falling behind academically, "baby boomers" were the first generation recognized for their helicopter parenting, but they certainly were not the first parents to hover. In 1899, Gen. Douglas MacArthur's mother moved to West Point with him. She lived in a nearby hotel overlooking the school, and watched him through a telescope to make sure that he was studying.[13] Like present-day commanders, parents feel pressure to be highly involved, overly directive, aware of, and accountable for every move their children make. Commanders fear Army Regulation 15-6 investigations for allowing a second lieutenant to act independently; parents fear Child Protective Services inquiries if they allow their nine-year-old to go to the playground alone.[14] It is a trend that begs intervention.

Considering that MacArthur finished first in his class at West Point, one could argue that high levels of parental involvement can be beneficial.[15] In the common

Cadet Douglas MacArthur and his mother, Mary Pinkney Hardy MacArthur, pose for a photo at West Point in 1899, the year he entered the military academy. To ensure her son's dedication to his studies, his mother took up a two-year residence in the West Point Hotel so she could personally monitor her son's activities. (Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress)

capabilities to organize and execute actions required to manage and achieve desired situations, a necessary trait for an Army leader.[16]

Though there is a paucity of documented evidence to prove the detrimental effects of micromanaging Army leaders, there is substantial evidence that this is true in helicopter parenting. Studies have found that students with helicopter parents were less open to new ideas or ways of behaving, and were more anxious, vulnerable, self-conscious, and depressed.[17] Helicopter-parented students were excellent at test-taking and concrete assignments but became anxious when it came to independent decision making and projects that did not involve specific instructions.[18] It is easy to understand how similar results could be disastrous in the military.

Mission Command from History to Current Context

The roots of today's mission command philosophy can be traced back to at least 1806. Prussian officers began to rethink their approach to command after observing Napoleon's ability to achieve a high-operational tempo through rapid communication

(Graphic by Arin Burgess, *Military Review*)

The View from 5,000 Feet Is Always Perfect

terminology of the Army, helicopter parenting *gets results*. However, these are just short-term gains. By robbing children or subordinates of the opportunity to try new things and fail, parents and commanders ruin the chance of developing a crucial psychological trait, self-efficacy. Albert Bandura described self-efficacy as the belief in one's own

of orders and intent, tolerance for initiative by junior officers, and a shared understanding of basic doctrine.[19] From its beginnings, Prussian officers had difficulty with the concept of enabling junior leaders to have greater freedom in making decisions. Through rigorous, strenuous debate and the advisement of Helmuth von Moltke the

Sgt. 1st Class Darren Toedt (*center*) yells out commands 12 June 2015 as his platoon consolidates and reorganizes following an attack live-fire exercise at Fort Hunter Liggett, California. Toedt is a platoon sergeant assigned to Company C, 1st Battalion, 160th Infantry Regiment. Professional development can only happen when soldiers and their officers are given the freedom and authority to make decisions during training events like this that may result in honest mistakes without the prejudice of a "zero defect" command environment. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

Elder, "bounded initiative" was developed. Central to the philosophy was the belief that mistakes were preferable to hesitancy, and that the commander's role was only to steer bold action in the right direction.[20] Notably, Moltke's bounded initiative and its successor, Auftragstaktik, assumed a significant investment in the development of junior officers so there could be faith that they would act appropriately when given only basic orders.

Bounded initiative required an assumption that has recently been called into question in popular psychology literature. All forms of decentralized command are based on the premise that young officers can and will take the initiative, given the right tools. However, recent studies have suggested that many young adults from the "millennial" generation are having difficulty with taking initiative, possibly as a result of helicopter parenting. Many employers have raised concerns that adults born between approximately 1980 and 2000 have more difficulty with independence and initiative taking than do previous generations.[21] Given that approximately 57 percent of active-duty Army officers and 86 percent of enlisted members are millennials, this assertion is of significant concern.[22]

By virtue of joining the military, service members disprove many of the millennial stereotypes, which include aimlessness in career choices, prolonged transition to adulthood, and increased need for emotional and tangible support from parents.[23] However, anecdotally, commanders' complaints about junior leaders are often similar to what is characteristic of over-parented millennials: ambivalence; high expectations in terms of guidance, "hand-holding," and explanation; and a lack of problem solving and initiative. Research has shown that when a child is used to being given the answers, when they are never forced to struggle, they grow to be less engaged, less autonomous, less confident, and less independent.[24]

Consider the over-parented millennial recruited into the military and placed in a leadership position: he or she exhibits the qualities listed above, and therefore does not gain the confidence in his or her commander. The commander does not trust the junior leader's decision-making skills, and therefore does not empower him or her to exercise disciplined initiative. By hovering above the junior leader, refusing to allow failure to occur, the commander denies the subordinate the opportunity to grow into a confident, agile, adaptive leader. The cycle needs to be broken.

What Needs to Change

To overcome the tendency to helicopter command, commanders must learn to be less risk averse, emphasize professional development of their subordinates, and foster an atmosphere of trust in a cohesive team.

Risk aversion. In his essay about the first era of the zero defect Army, Lt. Col. Robert Kissel defined risk avoidance as the result of centralized command, when "the subordinate, realizing or perceiving a cost (penalty) for making a mistake, avoids risk taking by either doing nothing or deliberately abdicating the majority of his decisions to his superior."[25] Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 7-0, *Training Units and Developing Leaders,* cautions commanders to avoid this, stating that "learning comes from experiencing both success and failure. An environment that allows subordinate leaders to make honest—as opposed to repeated or careless—mistakes without prejudice is essential to leader development and personal growth."[26]

One of the Army leadership competencies is "lead by example."[27] Risk-averse senior leaders produce risk-averse junior leaders. Parenting research supports this. Having risk-averse parents was a significant predictor of risk-averse children, and children reported that their biggest fear in making mistakes was their parent's response.[28]

Assuming that this is also often the case for officers, there is an important conjecture that could be made: by responding harshly to risk taking or mistakes, a commander teaches junior officers to make decisions based on the probability of the commander's negative response, not on the probability of a success or by assessment of benefit to the organization. A junior leader with a risk-averse commander is likely to avoid action simply because of the possibility that the commander will not like the action.

Professional development. Leaders who micromanage to get immediate results rather than professionally develop subordinate leaders are doing so at the long-term expense of our Army and our nation. Every leader is responsible for the professional development of his or her subordinate leaders. Leader development is an investment; it requires time and resources but can pay out exponentially in the long term. When a subordinate leader is trained, proficient, and trustworthy, the commander is able to delegate authority and responsibility, thereby allowing for more efficient execution of mission orders.

ADP 7-0 states that "growth occurs when subordinates are provided opportunities to overcome obstacles and make difficult decisions. They improve their ability to adapt through exposure to—and the intuition gained from—multiple, complex, and unexpected situations in challenging, unfamiliar, and uncomfortable conditions."[29] This is consistent with parenting research literature. However, there is more to be learned from challenging, unexpected situations: initiative taking. Commanders should be aware that the current generation of officers may be lacking in initiative-taking skills and incorporate challenges that foster initiative into any professional development program.

Adolescent psychology expert Reed Larson suggests that in order for an adolescent to learn initiative, three elements must be present: intrinsic motivation, in association with concerted engagement in the environment, over time.[30] Larson believes that in order to learn initiative, adolescents must exert "constructive attention on a field of action involving the types of constraints, rules, challenge, and complexity that characterize external reality."[31] He indicates that despite

Maj. Lynn Breckenridge is a U.S. Army clinical psychologist and the director of the Intensive Outpatient Program at Madigan Army Medical Center, Joint-Base Lewis McChord. She holds a BSEd from Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania, an MS in medical and clinical psychology from the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Bethesda, Maryland, and a PhD in clinical psychology from the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences. Before becoming a psychologist, she served as an intelligence analyst and a medical services healthcare administration officer. This article won first place in the 2016 General Douglas MacArthur Military Leadership Writing Competition.

its name, initiative is more than just the ability to start an action. It involves a temporal arc of effort that will likely include setbacks, reevaluations, and adjustment of strategy. Students must be taught that initiative is "the cumulative effort over time to achieve a goal" without being deterred by obstacles.[32] Leaders should strive to incorporate these principles in a professional development program, both expressly and in practice.

Lack of trust in a cohesive team. In order for subordinates to feel comfortable showing disciplined initiative and taking prudent risks, they must trust that the commander will show support and respond in predictable, reasonable ways. In order for commanders to assume risk and empower initiative, they must trust their subordinates.

Charles Allen and William Braun suggest that there are four components of trust: credibility of competence, benevolence of motives, integrity with the sense of common and greater good, and predictability of behavior.[33] When commanders engage subordinates in high-quality professional development, they simultaneously create a cohesive team based on these components. Scaife and Mills suggest that units must have a "foundation of confidence, trust, and dialogue, through a robust professional development program."[34]

Helicopter commanding is a way of managing lack of trust, and reciprocally, it is not necessary once trust is built. Commanders must consciously make a decision to trust, and to foster trust amongst their subordinates. Mission command cannot exist without it.[35]

Further, adolescent studies indicate that there is a positive correlation between autonomy giving, parent-child communication, and adolescent's trust in parents, and a negative correlation between parental control and adolescent's trust in parents.[36] If this also applies to command team relationships, it would suggest that commanders who allow their subordinates freedom of action and engage in dialog with them have better trust relationships, and that commanders who micromanage have poor trust relationships. While causation cannot be proven, it appears that open dialogue, trust, and willingness to allow initiative are all significant, interrelated factors in establishing positive relationships.

Conclusion

Given current force reductions, leaders are more likely to be risk averse and engage in helicopter commanding as an alternative to mission command. Leaders must strive to develop trust with their subordinates in order to foster disciplined initiative and prudent risk taking. By incorporating research about overcoming helicopter parenting, leaders can improve upon their professional development programs. Leader development should be challenging, complex, and realistic, and should allow subordinates opportunities to fail and overcome obstacles without intervention. Doing so is crucial to the development of agile, adaptive, competent leaders. ■

Notes

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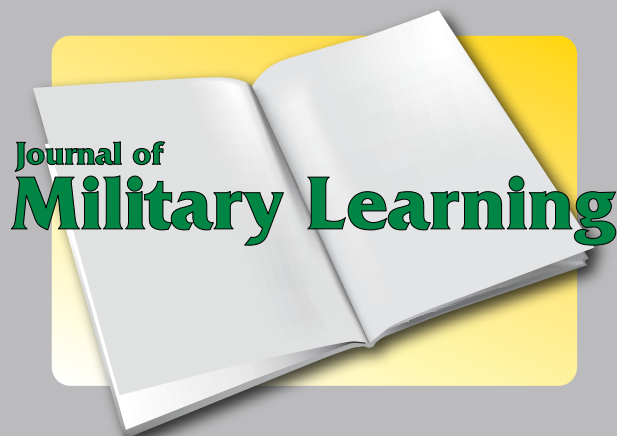12. Heyward, *Embedding Mission Command,* 5–7.

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