The Challenge of Mission Command

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"Eisenhower, the [war] department is filled with able men who analyze their problems well but feel compelled always to bring them to me for final solution. I must have assistants who will solve their own problems and tell me later what they have done."

–General of the Army George C. Marshall in *General of the Army: George C. Marshall, Soldier and Statesman*

As the United States Army wraps up its longest war on record in Afghanistan, we are already preparing for future combat. The lessons of the last decade have taught Army leaders the importance of being adaptive and innovative in order to ensure success. In pursuit of innovation, the Army has turned to the concept of Mission Command, which is defined by United States Army Doctrine as both a warfighting function, and a philosophy of command. Army Doctrinal Publication (ADP) 6-0 *Mission Command* states that all commanders should use the mission command methodology in the "exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander's intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of unified land operations." [1] The purpose of this type of command style is to enable subordinates to "adapt to rapidly changing situations and exploit fleeting opportunities." [2]

Although the benefits of adaptive leadership are one of the lessons-learned from recent wars, the concept is not new to the American Army. In "The Evolution of Mission Command in U.S. Army Doctrine, 1905 to the Present," Col. Clinton Ancker traces mission command philosophy back to Gen. Grant's guidance to Gen. Sherman in 1864.[3] He shows that Mission Command first entered U.S. Army Doctrine in *Field Service Regulations* in 1905.[4] The Mis-sion Command concept is also not unique to the American military. Jörg Muth describes an almost identical concept of command in *Command Culture* from the German side. The German version of the mission command concept, called *Aufstragtaktik* or "mission tactics", goes a step further beyond past mission command's disciplined initiative to allow a subordinate commander to refuse an order if it stands in the way of achieving the mission.[5] Muth concludes the command culture in the German Army leading up to World War II was more tempered towards aggressiveness and innovation than that of the U.S. Army, but that it failed at the highest ranks when the command climate became politicized as part of Nazi Germany.[6] The institutional trend against Mission Command continues today, as there remain strong challenges to the universal adoption of Mission Command philosophy. Though these challenges are many; the most prominent ones fall into three interrelated categories—trust, senior-commander hubris, and risk aversion.

Lack of trust in subordinate commanders is the most corrosive of the challenges to Mission Command and is the foundation for the other two challenges. In order to allow a subordinate the freedom to use disciplined initiative, his superiors must place trust in his judgment.[7] Without this trust, senior commanders are inclined to practice a detailed command philosophy in which they limit their subordinate commanders' actions through control measures. The second category of challenges stems from the belief by senior commanders and staffs that they have better knowledge, understanding, and judgment than their subordinates. This belief springs from the confidence of the senior commander in his own abilities. This confidence is often justified as the higher commander often *does* have better knowledge, understanding, and judgment. It fails, however, in situations on the ground when the

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relative position of commanders places a junior leader in a situation where he has the unique situational awareness needed to make the better decision. The third major challenge occurs in environments where lower level commands and even individual soldiers are perceived as responsible for risks that potentially have strategic impact. Many commanders believe that these risks so far outweigh the potential rewards that they justify strict control. They will not trust subordinate commanders to make judgments based on the commander's intent and their understanding of the operational environment. These challenges are significant and, if not addressed, will tend to undermine the mission command philosophy. The theory of mission command must be examined fully in light of these challenges.

Mission Command in Theory

In addition to the authority of doctrine, it is useful to consider the theoretical validity of Mission Command, which simply, is the most efficient means of command. If we consider that each decision takes time for analysis and thought, then it is more efficient to distribute decision-making evenly throughout the multiple levels of command. If we consider an example of a brigade that withholds approximately half of its decisions from company and battalion levels, we see very quickly the lack of practicality in this result. Decisions take time to proceed through multiple staffs and get approval. The result is an organization that is ponderous, slow, and often held up by its own policy and staff limitations. If the company and battalion commanders in our hypothetical brigade were empowered however, they would make decisions more rapidly and efficiently. Thus, even when we take out the concept of adaptability, mission command is still the most

efficient structure for command since it allows multiple decision cycles within the command to be actively working towards a unified goal.

In wartime, we face an adaptive enemy and, usually, a changing environment. The latter is especially true during offensive operations. This causes units at all levels to encounter new conditions on a regular basis. Under these conditions, we would expect that units that adapted more rapidly to the changing conditions would perform more highly than others. Adaptation occurs successfully when a beneficial innovation is accepted and established in the unit. When a new problem arises, an innovative solution to it is proposed, tested, and proven successful. Unit leaders share the successful tactic, technique, or procedure with other leaders and it is incorporated into training and rehearsals. A unit is well adapted when it is prepared for current combat conditions. However, a unit, which was well adapted, may no longer be as conditions change.

Efficient adaptation follows the same flow as an efficient decision making process. Expansion of the innovative process to all levels allows more minds to attempt to solve problems at once. Sharing success stories allows the most effective innovations to spread, increasing the adaptive nature of the organization. When controls are implemented on operations, however, this limits the ability of innovators to attempt new ideas as new circumstances arise. Although this may seem to limit risk, it does so at the cost of limiting the number of potential innovators. This cost is too high in the long term. For mitigating risk, mission command offers the use of a commander's intent instead of specific control measures or approval processes.

The use of a well-written commander's intent with a clear, concise and compelling vision within a well-communicated operation-

al context will instead allow the subordinate leaders to make sound decisions, even if these decisions are not identical to what a higher-level commander would have done in that situation. As positive results are gained, trust is increased and buy-in is established. Superiors learn to trust their subordinates, who feel empowered by their superior. For this reason, a senior flag officer states in "Mission Command and Cross-Domain Synergy" that "one of the myths of Mission Command is that it equals less or little control…" I would offer that universal understanding of Commander's Intent is a very powerful method of control." [8] Because Mission Command philosophy can be used as a powerful method of control while allowing more aggressive, innovative decision-making and initiative at the lower levels, it is preferable to detailed command whenever applied properly. This results in an adaptive, flexible formation that would be very difficult to defeat.

The Issue of Trust

Mission command's greatest challenge, underlying all others, is overcoming a lack of trust between senior and subordinate commanders. ADP 6-0 states, "The exercise of Mission Command is based on mutual trust, shared understanding, and purpose." [9] What doctrine does not address is how to apply this philosophy during situations when trust has not already developed. Yet this seems a serious oversight to the commander who has deployed only to find he or she is task-organized under a higher-level headquarters with whom he or she has never worked in the past. In the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is normal for a brigade to be under a division headquarters that they have never worked with before, and it is not uncommon for battalions and companies to be task-organized outside of their parent unit. Al-

though training allows more opportunities for communication between commanders, few opportunities exist to judge how they will perform under combat conditions, creating justification for risk-adversity even in parent units.

In these circumstances, creating opportunities to build mutual trust under high-risk situations seem like large risks themselves. If the stakes dictate some level of risk-adversity, control mechanisms such as detailed orders, approval requirements, and detailed reporting may seem more justified. Mistakes by a subordinate commander may seem much less understandable. Implementing control mechanisms will undermine the initiative of subordinate commanders and inhibit the development of trust. Trust simply cannot develop without testing how the subordinate commanders would act without the control mechanisms. The control mechanisms become organizationally entrenched into all levels of staff and are thereafter seen as the standard. Trust never develops and initiative remains dormant.

Having a single decision maker employing a "father-knows-best" attitude will greatly decrease the population and originality of ideas. Commanders who become rigid about what has worked in the past will balk at any proposal that he would not have readily tried himself. This lack of originality has the side effects of stifling innovation and leading to a high degree of unit predictability. This same attitude may also cause the senior commander to give instructions, either directly or through his staff, on how he wants the subordinate commander to achieve his mission.

It would be impractical to assume that future conflicts will allow units to deploy without employing task organization adjustments that place units away from their parent headquarters. These situations help to create one of

the most significant challenges to the mission command philosophy since the mutual trust created during training is lost with the changing headquarters. In order to apply the mission command philosophy effectively in these situations, commanders and their staff must begin by trusting rather than requiring trust to be earned. Although this appears to be a great risk, like all risks it can be managed effectively.

Commander's intent and open, two-way communication channels are the tools of Mission Command as a warfighting function. Direct communication of the operational context and the commander's intent two levels down is essential to success. Battlefield circulation is important to supervise subordinate headquarters, establish open communications, and engage in two-way discourse to understand the operational context and reach a shared approach to future operations. Wherever possible, training events should be established to allow soldiers on the ground or preparing to deploy to conduct realistic training, replicating conditions from the operational context in order to ensure that the commander's intent is understood and that they know how to manage high-level risks all the way down to the lowest level.

An opponent to the mission command philosophy sometimes emerges in large staffs with organizationally entrenched procedures. As retired Army Gen. Gary Luck points out in his article, "staffs may not understand or be comfortable in operating within a Mission Command construct of trust, shared understanding, intent, and empowerment." [10] If left without clear guidelines and without an understanding of the Mission Command philosophy, "staffs may be inclined to over rely on the 'science of control' relative to the art of command." [11] For Mission Command to be successful, commanders will have to place clear limitations on the power of their staffs to institute bureaucratic controls and approval procedures. Staffs should exist to empower their commander and his subordinate commanders, not as bureaucratic decision-making authorities or control mechanisms. Commanders will have to place stress on establishing clear command-support relationships and establishing unity of command at all levels to prevent from having to constantly intervene as the approval authority for all missions, ultimately hampering decision-making and decreasing initiative.

Mitigating Strategic Risks

The existence of what is perceived as a strategic risk at the tactical level, could be argued to nullify part of the Mission Command philosophy—risks just appear too important to leave in the hands of subordinate commanders without strict guidance. Potential risks range from civilian casualties to law of war violations. The "strategic private" is often considered to be a new concept; however, most of these possible risks are not especially modern. War crimes, civilian casualties, and treatment of prisoners in particular have been a cause of international contention for over a century. [12] Nevertheless, strong emphasis on these issues by civilian authorities and the highest-ranking general officers may appear to justify strong control by high-level commanders.

Yet this is not a problem that can be solved by any particular method of command. No number of regulations and staff procedures can solve the problem that senior leaders are simply not on the ground when these problems occur. In fact, prevention of strategically adverse actions at low levels is most compatible with organizations with strong junior leaders. The open communication structure of Mission Command is the best structured to address these issues. It is the command structure that most emphasizes strong, empowered junior leaders.

When the Senior Commander Knows Best

In a world of a complex operational context, it is not unusual for a higher-level commander or members of his staff to believe that they understand the operational environment, the mission, and how to employ soldiers better than the subordinate units. In most cases, this seems justified—the commander probably has already successfully led men at his subordinate commander's level. In peacetime, he is responsible for the training of his subordinates. When a high-risk situation, such as combat, arrives, it seems only natural that he would be highly involved in ensuring the success of his subordinates. In modern warfare, a large part of the belief that the higher-level headquarters can effectively manage tactical matters on the ground stems from the development of Information Age technology that gives unprecedented knowledge of the battlefield. Gen. Luck notes that this information environment can lead to incidents of information overload, as "commanders attempt to process all information before making decisions." [12] As reliance at all levels on technology increases, commanders and their staffs alike may begin to believe they have a strong enough picture of operations to allow them to control tactical operations as they see fit. Such centralized control becomes easy to justify within the headquarters when it is built on an already existing belief in their superior abilities. Tools such as video feeds from Unmanned Aerial Vehicle, icons on the Blue Force Tracker, and volumes of detailed intelligence give personnel in the headquarters unprecedented information of operations on the ground. The desire to use these tools may easily cause the headquarters in a static Tactical Operations Center, particularly during low-intensity operations, to try to give orders to personnel on the ground based on their information. As this technology improves and expands, it is likely that this challenge will only grow in the future.

This, however, leads to a coordination problem. Although the senior commander may indeed be able to make a better decision on any single problem than any one of his subordinate commanders, he cannot make better decisions than all of them all at once. This paradox stems from two problems—specialized knowledge and time constraints. Although the senior commander may have better overall situational awareness, the subordinate commander has a better situational awareness of his unique position. No video feed can cover the level of sensual immersion one receives on the ground. A commander who tries to manipulate another force on the ground must therefore receive reports, make a decision, and communicate the decision to the unit. This leads to issues. First, it would be false to assume that the communication could be perfect; even a small percentage of imperfect communications could lead to misunderstood information and defective actions on the ground. Second, this process would be highly inefficient. Simply too many opportunities would be lost because of the time lag necessary for the communication and decision making process. The decision, once received, may no longer even be relevant if the situation has changed. Finally, even if we were able to use an ideal technology that is able to overcome any information deficiency, a commander would still only be able to control of one unit at a time. This leaves him with a choice—to focus on commanding a subordinate commander's unit or his own.

The Future of Mission Command

As the United States Army nears the end of its longest war and begins to determine how it will train and develop leaders for future wars, we must structure training and leader development methodology to establish good mission command techniques. Wars in the 21st century are likely to continue to be complex. ADP 3-0 *Unified Land Operations* states: "Operational environments are not static. Within an operational environment, an Army leader may conduct major combat, military engagement and humanitarian assistance simultaneously."[13] The flexibility of a formation to move quickly from combined arms maneuver to wide area security or to conduct them simultaneously can only be achieved through an adaptive, flexible force.

Training this force must emphasize building the trust required to allow mission command philosophy to flourish.

There is no doubt that Mission Command is the "book answer" to the question of how leaders should command. As this article has demonstrated, there is good reason for this: it is not only the most efficient and effective means of command, but it is also the style of command that creates the kind of flexibility and innovation, which will help the United States to prevail in future conflicts. Nevertheless, mission command is not the status quo command philosophy of the United States Army. In spite of our doctrine, the Army continues to combine detailed command with bureaucratic systems, allowing only some of the mission command methodology to filter through.

The challenges to Mission Command are severe, and we must develop all commanders so they can stare these challenges in the face and implement mission command in spite of them. This requires an institutional and career-long norm of continuous leader development. Commanders who are more comfortable as managers will inevitably fall back on the "science of control" and use bureaucratic management techniques that limit the risks that their subordinates are allowed to take. In his book *On Becoming a Leader*, Warren Bennis tell us that "the manager relies on control; the leader inspires trust."[14] Mission command philosophy demands that commanders be leaders and not managers. This does not mean that they will never perform management tasks, but that they go beyond management and lead their unit. Commanders have to be satisfied with the lack of conformity which mission command allows as people find different solutions to the same age-old problems.

In the average command in the United States Army, staffs forge the way towards the routine, instituting training meetings, briefings, approvals processes, and other methods of control. Control does not have to be relinquished, but it must be reformed into commander's intent. Commanders must be willing to trust their subordinates even when doing so appears to be accepting a great risk. A risk-adverse formation may have fewer incidents during peacetime, but they will lack the aggressive leaders and flexible, adaptive soldiers needed during war. We must decide what kind of formation we truly want: one that is ready for peace or one that is ready for war. ■

NOTES

1. *Army Doctrine Publication 6-0: Mission Command*, (Washington: Headquarters, United States Army, May 2012), 1.

2. Ibid, 2.

3. Colonel Clinton J. Ancker, III, "The Evolution of Mission Command in U.S. Army Doctrine, 1905 to the Present," Military Review March-April (2013): 42-43.

4. Ibid.

5. Jörg Muth, *Command Culture*, (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2011), 173.

6. Ibid, 202-203.

7. ADP 6-0, 2-3.

8. GEN (Ret.) Gary Luck, "Mission Command and Cross-Domain Synergy," Deployable Training Division, Joint Staff JS7, March 2013: 1.

9. ADP 6-0, 2.

10. Luck, 3.

11. Ibid.

12. Lassa Francis Oppenheim, *International Law: A Treatise,* Vol II (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1912), Kindle Edition, Part III, Chapter I, Section III.

13. *Army Doctrine Publication 3-0: Unified Land Operations,* (Washington: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2011), 2-3.

14. Warren Bennis, *On Becoming a Leader*, (Philadelphia: Basic Books, 2009), 42.