



# The Double Edged Sword — An Empowered NCO Corps

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**A**s we move toward the end of combat operations in Afghanistan, it is fitting to examine the effects of nearly 12 years of combat on our Noncommissioned Officer Corps. I submit that the greatest single effect is that at no time in our military's history has the NCO Corps been more empowered.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were and are counterinsurgency fights. COIN is characterized by decentralized command and control and small unit tactics. For these two reasons, NCOs were given more responsibility and authority. You only have to watch the 2010 documentary *Restrepo* to see this empowerment in action. The reasons for NCO empowerment become even more obvious when you add the complexity of joint and coalition forces.

If we reflect on the successes on the battlefield of the last decade, it is due in large part to our NCOs. They have been magnificent at executing commanders' guid-

ance and intent in complex operational environments. Deployment after deployment, our NCOs have led troops in offensive action, stability operations, facilitation of governance, security force assistance, civil-military operations and a myriad of other missions. They have been truly remarkable at integrating joint-force and interagency capabilities.

How do we as a joint force preserve this trait as we transition out of combat in a time of fiscal uncertainty and force reductions? An empowered NCO Corps is essential to achieving the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff's Joint Force 2020 and "Mission Command" principles. In order to preserve our empowerment we — the NCOs — must understand and, more importantly, appreciate where it comes from.

Leaders at the organizational level, both commissioned and noncommissioned officers, must educate subordinates that NCO empowerment is a delegation of

command authority and supported by the Uniform Code of Military Justice. It is not an inherent right gained by mission or responsibility. This simple fact has been lost in the noise of repetitive deployments where NCO roles and responsibilities have become standardized through tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) and standard operating procedures. I feel that this has created a strong sense of entitlement in our NCOs, a sense that can foment a negative outcome of arrogance, hubris and perhaps officer and NCO friction.

Without an appreciation and understanding of where this empowerment comes from, we — the NCOs — are in jeopardy of being disempowered. Under U.S. Code Title 10, officers are legally responsible and accountable for the personnel, missions and resources assigned to them. They are ultimately accountable for their service members' conduct. If we violate that trust, why shouldn't it be rescinded?

Should we be empowered if we allow a lack of adherence to the core principles and values of our Profession of Arms that leads to either specific or general misconduct? We will only ensure a perpetuation of this new dynamic through the exercise of trusted conduct in adherence to command authority and responsibility. To put it in, perhaps, simpler terms, I often hear from NCOs who state, "My officer does not empower me," as though it is the result of bad leadership on the officer's part. My response to them is, "Look yourself in the mirror and ask what you have done to earn or deserve it."

While the tenet that trust is earned and not given may be an old adage, I fear it has been relegated to being simply trite and that the expectation on behalf of NCOs is the opposite. In the CJCS mission command paper, the chairman, Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, clearly states the trust is a key attribute. "Mission command for Joint Force 2020 requires trust at every echelon of the force," he writes. "Building trust with subordinates and partners may be

the most important action a commander will perform. Given our projected need for superior speed in competitive cycles of decision-making, it is clear that in Joint Force 2020, operations will move at the speed of trust."

Maintaining the current officer-NCO relationship is critical as we integrate a new generation that has not experienced combat operations. Without an understanding of delegation of command authority on behalf of the officer and the responsibility of delegated authority by the NCOs, we could, and likely will, see this trend reverse.

As we look across our military today, we can see the beginnings of the erosion of our empowerment. Whether we look at sexual harassment and assault, suicides, alcohol and substance abuse, or other discipline issues, it all boils down to leadership. I submit that the greatest failure of leadership is at the NCO level, and that begs us to examine why. I believe it is because of the negative edge of the sword — the hubris that comes with believing our empowerment is a right. From that belief stems a disdain for our leaders as we move to correct these problems. A final extension of this disdain is turning a blind eye to many of the behaviors that lead to bad conduct and create an environment that does not prevent, but instead fosters, misconduct and indiscipline.

This forces commanders to be more draconian in their approaches and disenfranchises NCOs. The potential for draconian measures does not simply exist within the Department of Defense. Congress may very well enact legislation regarding sexual harassment and assault investigations and prosecution that will deny commanders their current authority. The role we NCOs have in helping to preserve these authorities is self-evident.

The sword is double-edged. One side of the blade is critical to Joint Force 2020 and mission command. That edge has been forged in blood and the necessity of 12 years of war. The other edge — marred by hubris and entitlement — exists only to dull the first. ■

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