

# Mission Command and Mental Block: Why the Army Won't Adopt a True Mission-Command Philosophy

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*"Just before I moved on, some staff officer present said, 'Why, your men are not loaded. Why do you not make them load?' I replied, 'Because if we do not do the business with the bayonet, without firing, we shall not be able to do it at all, so I shall not load.' I heard Lord Wellington, who was close by, say, 'Let him alone; let him go his own way.'" -MAJ George Napier, 52<sup>nd</sup> Foot (from his account on the storming of Ciudad Rodrigo, Jan. 19, 1812)<sup>1</sup>*

For two decades, the U.S. Army has attempted and failed to implement effective institutional reform. Although its efforts have seemingly resulted in significant modifications to organization and doctrine, these changes have had minimal, if indeed any, positive impact. Besides the adoption of top-heavy and unsustainable tables of organization and equipment (TO&E), it has done little to cultivate adaptive, flexible leaders or implement a true mission-command philosophy.

This is not surprising given our bureaucratic, managerial mindset, with its pathological fear of uncertainty and squeamish aversion to risk. Rather than cultivating the qualities and virtues that enhance operational effectiveness, we focus on the quantifiable aspects of scientific management, obsessing over administrative minutia and check-the-block procedural methodology. Without significant change to this institutional perspective, the odds of us "transforming" the Army into a **truly** "expeditionary" force – commanded by adaptive and flexible leaders who use mission command to execute decisive action – are, frankly, dismal.

This has particular significance for the Armor/Cavalry Branch. The dispersion and rapid tempo of mounted combined-arms warfare requires a high degree of initiative and independence by subordinates for its effective execution – initiative and independence enabled by a mission-command philosophy. Conversely, a mission-command philosophy requires the cultivation of adaptive and flexible leaders, the development of which is undermined by the demand for adherence to check-the-block procedural methodologies and processes. Finally, in the fiscally austere environment we currently face (caused to a great extent by the TO&E bequeathed to us under modularity), it is our mounted "heavy" forces that are first in line for the chop when Army bureaucrats determine which units to cut.

This article will offer an alternate framing of both the problem and the requisite solutions for resolving this dilemma. First, it will provide an alternate perspective of mission command. Second, it will discuss how scientific management undermines the development of leaders capable of using mission command. Third, it will explain why our current modular, brigade-based structure does not support a mission-command philosophy.

## Mission command

Mission command is the practice of decentralizing decision-making and authority down to the lowest possible echelon, to include cultivating the initiative of the individual Soldier. It permits the immediate execution of decisive action in the event there is no guidance from higher headquarters or that guidance no longer conforms to the situation. It is an outcomes-based philosophy with little use for hard and fast principles or rules of war. "Soldiers must be thoroughly conscious of the fact that only results matter," writes Martin Van Creveld.<sup>2</sup> Rigid adherence to protocols, checklists and processes are anathema to mission command since this stifles the initiative, creativity and innovation of subordinates.

Mission command is also a philosophical contract between the commander and his subordinates based on mutual trust, understanding and confidence. This relationship requires that the commander provide clear and unambiguous guidance while allowing Soldiers the greatest possible latitude in accomplishing the assigned task(s). Notes Van Creveld, as part of this relationship, "[I]imits as to the method of execution within the framework of the higher commander's will are imposed only where essential for coordination with other commands."<sup>3</sup> In turn, the subordinate exercises this latitude within the parameters of his assigned mission unless "it no longer suffices for

the basis for action, or if it is overtaken by events.”<sup>4</sup> In this case, the subordinate who “changes a mission or does not carry it out must report his action immediately and ... assumes responsibility for the consequences.”<sup>5</sup>

Mission command is not a doctrine in the sense that it can be codified in regulations. Neither should it be lumped together with technology or check-the-block procedural methodologies and artificially categorized as a “warfighting function.” Mission command is a personal and organizational mindset that must permeate every aspect of an institution’s existence.

## Army’s perception of mission command

The U.S. Army has a different conception of mission command. According to Army Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (ATTP) publication 5-0.1, *Commander and Staff Officer Guide*, mission command is defined as “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.... It is commander-led and blends the art of command and the **science of control** [emphasis added].”<sup>6</sup>

While mission command is indeed “commander led” and requires “agile and adaptive leaders” for its implementation, the similarities end there. It is **not** a “blend” of art and science, for it functions entirely within the realm of art. It has nothing to do with **control** since the entire concept of mission command is based on the premise that control, under the dispersed and fast-paced conditions of modern warfare, is problematic if not impossible. Finally, it places no caveats on the exercise of initiative.

The implications are obvious; subordinate leaders cannot be trusted to act responsibly (disciplined initiative) outside the direct supervision (control) of higher headquarters. Conformance is to be imposed upon subordinates rather than relying on innate professionalism and conscientiousness to guide their actions. Such thinking is antithetical to a mission-command philosophy: “It is no less important to educate the soldier to think and act for himself. His self-reliance and sense of honor will then induce him to do his duty **even when he is no longer under the eye of his commanding officer** [emphasis added].”<sup>7</sup>

The compulsion to overmanage subordinates reflects a tendency within the U.S. Army to “try and foresee situations and lay down modes of behavior in great detail.”<sup>8</sup> This was noted by former German officers convened in the 1950s to comment on a revised Field Manual 100-5. In contrast to the hesitance exhibited by the U.S. Army to unleash its subordinate leaders, these gentlemen noted:

“The task of regulations – besides transmitting basic information and points of view concerning command and battle – is to educate. The main goal of this education should be to inculcate:

- A high degree of independence of all grades of command;
- The need for mission-oriented discipline -- **i.e., the inner duty always to handle in accordance with the mission given** [emphasis added];
- Free creativity; and
- Making ‘whole’ (i.e., clear and unambiguous decisions) and carrying them out by concentrating all forces.”<sup>9</sup>

Note that “mission-oriented discipline” places no caveats on the exercise of initiative, nor does it promote external supervisory **control** over the actions of subordinates. It also unequivocally asserts that art, not science, is the essential element of mission command. The U.S. Army’s inability or refusal to make similar explicit assertions makes its endorsement of mission command – and, by extension, the empowerment of “agile and adaptive leaders” – meaningless.

Of all the Army’s assertions regarding mission command, “science of control” is the **least** applicable description. Mission command is a response to the dispersed and fast-paced nature of modern warfare. This dispersion and speed makes it difficult, if not impossible, to “control” subordinate units in the chaos of combat. Even if control were feasible however, it is still not desirable: “The emptiness of the battlefield requires soldiers who can think and act independently, who can make calculated, decisive and daring use of every situation.”<sup>10</sup> Only if events go excessively awry or circumstances change drastically will intervention by higher headquarters be justified.

The willingness to allow subordinates the requisite level of freedom to attain decisive results – the essence of mission command – is exemplified by the operations order written by Hans von Seeckt for the Gorlice Offensive in

May 1915. It provides eloquent testimony to the difference between an operationally oriented army and a managerial, bureaucratically inclined and risk-averse organization: "The attack ... must be pushed forward at a rapid pace. ... Thus the Army cannot assign the attacking corps and divisions objectives for each day, lest by fixing them the possibility of further progress may be obstructed. ... Any portion of the attacking troops which is successful in pushing on will expose itself to the danger of envelopment. Thus, the troops that least deserve it may meet with disaster as a result of their own rapid advance. Consideration of this possibility makes it necessary for the Army to fix certain lines, which should be reached by the force as a whole, and if possible simultaneously. Any progress beyond these lines will be thankfully welcomed by the Army and made use of."<sup>11</sup>

Note the contrast with the extremely detailed orders typical of the U.S. Army, which sets "maximum, not minimum, lines of advance and insists on an exact alignment of advancing troops as well as strict timetables."<sup>12</sup> Von Seeckt's order is the embodiment of mission command, encouraging subordinate leaders to exercise genius and "exploit each situation in a thoughtful, determined and bold way."<sup>13</sup>

The compulsion to micromanage extends beyond the tight control of subordinates. It also encompasses the unrealistic desire to impose order on the chaos of combat itself rather than accept the inevitability of its tumult, turmoil and confusion. Under these conditions, "[i]ncalculable elements often have the decisive influence. One's own will is pitted against the independent will of the enemy. Friction and errors are daily occurrences."<sup>14</sup> The Army would rather implement "scientific" management methods, procedures and planning processes (in other words, military decision-making process (MDMP), joint operation-planning process and operational design) than develop leaders and cohesive organizations that thrive in and exploit these conditions.

## **MDMP and genius suppression**

The most troubling aspect of the Army's bureaucratic mindset is the relegation of commanders from the role of leader to manager/administrator-in-chief. The cause of this is multifold, not the least of which is the Army's latent assumption that administrative exactitude is the penultimate expression of military virtue. It is also the result of "scientific" management methods and planning processes – and the oversized staffs that support them.

Commanders have primary responsibility for operational planning, not the staff! While delegating detailed planning and supervision in specific functional areas, they must assume hands-on involvement in planning and refinement of the scheme of maneuver. Simply tossing "guidance" to the staff, then picking and choosing a course of action based on their analysis and conclusions is not the proper exercise of leadership or command and is anathema to the concept of mission command.

This approach not only marginalizes the participation of commanders in the planning process, it encourages microanalysis, microplanning and micromanagement by the staff, thus suppressing the exercise of genius at all echelons. It should be noted that by genius we are not referring to an individual possessing extraordinary abilities but to the capacity for every Soldier to apply creative and inspirational solutions to battlefield problems. Because MDMP (etc.) revolves around the accumulation and analysis of quantifiable facts and data rather than the intangible aspects of combat, it is unlikely to produce similar results since "[o]ften it is precisely those factors that cannot be measured that are of the greatest importance."<sup>15</sup> Staff-centric planning and MDMP produce "safe" plans; creative genius attains decisive results.

While effective leaders invite recommendations and incorporate good ideas from the staff, it is ultimately the commander's ability to plan and act decisively that matters. No procedural methodology or bureaucratically oriented decision-making process can change this: "[I]t is simply not possible to construct a model for the art of war that can serve as a scaffolding on which the commander can rely on for support at any time. Whenever he has to fall back on his innate talent, he will find himself outside the model and in conflict with it; no matter how versatile the code. Talent and genius operate outside the rules, and theory conflicts with practice."<sup>16</sup>

## **Streamlining bureaucracy**

While the Army acknowledges the advantages of operating within the decision cycle of our opponents, its current staff-centric doctrine inhibits rapid decision-making by following check-the-block procedural planning methodologies. Regardless of its concession that intuitive decision-making and abbreviated MDMP are acceptable alternatives to the full-blown process – albeit on a limited basis – the fact remains that the Army's staff training,

exercises and evaluations are based on the ability to adhere to process and doctrine rather than attain rapid and decisive results.

This has led to oversized staff sizes at battalion level and above, a situation exacerbated by the acquisition of Command Post of the Future and the massive infrastructure and plethora of technicians required to support the system. Aside from the unsustainable expense this adds to the Army's budget, there is no evidence to indicate that larger staffs or technological infrastructure adds to efficiency – their size and complexity actually impede the planning and decision-making process. "There can be no doubt that there exists a point beyond which the expansion of headquarters no longer contributes to efficiency and may indeed reduce it," notes Van Creveld.<sup>17</sup>

This is illustrated by contrasting current U.S. Army staff sizes with those of the German army during World War II. For example, a panzer division's command staff contained seven officers (three majors and four captains)<sup>18</sup> with the staff company as a whole totaling only 19 officers, 12 warrant officers, 29 noncommissioned officers and 67 enlisted personnel.<sup>19</sup> This reflected at lower echelons as well. Panzer-regiment command staffs operated with five officers;<sup>20</sup> panzer battalions functioned with four.<sup>21</sup> Even if we accept the notion that modern conflict is so much more sophisticated that it requires considerably larger staffs (we don't), it is doubtful whether it justifies the massive expansion represented by current U.S. Army headquarters.

It is notable that "German staffs at all levels were operational and tactical organs above all ... devoting the minimum effort possible to all other tasks."<sup>22</sup> This emphasis on operations is reinforced by the manner in which the army as a whole viewed administration: "[T]he General Staff was reluctant to increase the burden of paperwork resting on the troops and to turn them into collecting agencies for data that would benefit the Army as a whole but not them directly. ... Thus, the organization department did not demand daily reports on actual strength, casualties and the need for replacements; instead, it used establishment strength and losses, reported every [10] days, to make its own calculations. ... The system consciously attempted to minimize the amount of paperwork and was quite prepared to take the resulting inaccuracies in stride."<sup>23</sup>

While this approach has been criticized for not placing enough emphasis on logistics, such assertions are debatable (although beyond our scope of our discussion). Nevertheless, there is no reason why an operationally focused organization cannot be proficient in the areas of supply and logistics as well.

## **BCT and mission command**

There are three problems with the Army's brigade-based structure and the brigade combat team (BCT) concept itself. One is the failure to recognize the advantages of cohesion provided by a regimental structure and how this facilitates the exercise of mission command. Two is the BCT's bloated organization and massive infrastructure – designed more for static operations than tactical and operational maneuver. Three is the dispersal of low-density military-occupation specialty (MOS) positions across the BCT, complicating equipment fielding and training within the brigade as well as distracting it from its core function as a fighting organization.

Unit cohesion is an essential element of mission command because it fosters trust, faith and familiarity among the members of a unit. This allows an organization to maintain unity of effort and purpose despite the friction, chaos and stress of combat. The Germans thought that "[u]nits that are only superficially held together ... easily fail in moments of grave danger and under the pressure of unexpected events."<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, the adoption of a brigade system was intended to facilitate task-organization by loosening the ties that existed within the regiment. Not only was this counterproductive, it was unnecessary.

The Germans, masters in the use of the task-force concept, felt no compunction to eliminate the regiment as an operational entity, using it as a core element in the formation of its "kampfgruppen" during World War II. Following experiments that led to the adoption of the pentomic reorganization in the 1950s, MG George E. Lynch noted that the regimental combat team was just as suitable for the formation of task forces as the armored divisions' combat commands (i.e., brigades).

Lynch concluded that the Army should return to the traditional division organization with three regimental combat teams, which, he believed, were as flexible as combat commands. Furthermore, Lynch thought regimental organization **fostered morale; encouraged teamwork** between subordinate and superior

commanders, as well as their staffs; provided knowledge about capabilities and weaknesses of units and their leaders; and **stimulated cooperative working methods** [emphasis added].<sup>25</sup>

The brigade provides no such benefits, its amorphous organization failing to provide the same sense of corporate identity as the regiment. Further invalidating this system is the fact that brigades have assumed the same level of administrative and logistical responsibilities as the regiments they replaced. The adoption of a combined-arms organization below brigade-level (the combined-arms battalion) has also eliminated the need for the type of task-organization envisioned by the brigade system.

The BCT is also a product of the same mindset, which threatened the development of a sustainable and expeditionary Army during World War II. Referred to as "empire building" by Leslie McNair, it reflected a desire to organize units "so they could handle every contingency, not just the ones most likely to occur."<sup>26</sup> There was also a tendency to burden units with "comforts, conveniences, gadgets, technicians, 'experts,' special services and complex command-control systems."<sup>27</sup> As in the case of the BCT, "once these additions got started, they multiplied exponentially."<sup>28</sup>

As the head of Army Ground Forces, McNair sought to counter these trends by stripping modified TO&Es of anything not directly contributing to an organization's core function. By streamlining sustainment and headquarters elements and pooling special purpose and support assets at higher echelons, McNair believed the Army could economize on resources and reduce shipping space for moving units overseas. Yet he retained combat power by leaving maneuver elements essentially untouched by these economies.

While the Army rejected the concept of pooling after World War II, ostensibly on the basis of improving cohesion, in the case of low-density MOS positions this approach is essential. Not only does it facilitate the equipping and training of these personnel by consolidating them into special-purpose organizations, it avoids the expense of making them organic to every maneuver formation despite the fact that their services do not contribute directly to the conduct of combat operations. Most of all, it frees maneuver units to focus on their core functions rather than managing a complex variety of non-combat-oriented component elements.

## Conclusion

The U.S. Army's failure to institute comprehensive reform, specifically in the area of mission command, can be attributed to its bureaucratic, managerial culture. This culture, addicted to check-the-block procedural methodology and processes, fosters a pathological fear of uncertainty and a squeamish aversion to risk, each of which is anathema to a true mission-command philosophy. It has also failed to introduce streamlined, cohesive TO&Es that facilitate mission command and has offered little substantive support for the cultivation of adaptive, flexible leaders. Only by a massive reorientation away from its preference for scientific management and bureaucratic routine will it achieve its proclaimed goal of creating an expeditionary force led by adaptive, flexible leaders using mission command to execute decisive action.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Michael Glover, *The Peninsula War, 1807-1814*, London: Penguin Books, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Van Creveld, *Fighting Power, German and U.S. Army Performance, 1939-1945*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Condell and David T. Zabecki, editors, *On the German Art of War: Truppenführung German Manual for Unit Command in World War II*, Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Department of the Army, ATP 5-0.1, *Commander and Staff Officer Guide*, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, September 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce I. Gudmundsson, *Stormtroop Tactics: Innovation in the German Army 1914-1918*, Westport: Praeger, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Van Creveld.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Condell and Zabecki.

<sup>11</sup> James S. Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg*, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Van Creveld.

<sup>14</sup> Condell and Zabecki.

<sup>15</sup> Van Creveld.

<sup>16</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1993.

<sup>17</sup> Van Creveld.

<sup>18</sup> William Schneck, *Breaching the Devil's Garden: The 6<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Brigade in Operation Lightfoot (The Second Battle of El Alamein)*, Fort Belvoir, VA: Night Vision and Electronic Sensors Directorate, Countermine Division, January 2005.

<sup>19</sup> <http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/CGSC/CARL/nafziger/942GFGU.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> <http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/CGSC/CARL/nafziger/944GQCT.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> <http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/CGSC/CARL/nafziger/944GQDA.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup> Van Creveld.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Condell and Zabecki.

<sup>25</sup> John B. Wilson, *Maneuver and Firepower: The Evolution of Divisions and Separate Brigades*, Army Lineage Series, Washington DC: Center for Military History, 1998.

<sup>26</sup> John Sayen, *U.S. Army Infantry Divisions 1944-45*, Oxford: Osprey Publishing Ltd, 2007.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

## Acronym Quick-Scan

**ATTP** – Army tactics, techniques and procedures (publication)

**BCT** – brigade combat team

**MDMP** – military decision-making process

**MOS** – military-occupation specialty

**TO&E** – table of organization and equipment