



Sgt. Jon Findley (*right*), 311th Sustainment Command (Expeditionary) intelligence noncommissioned officer, explains how to brief the enemy situation using the Command Post of the Future computer system to Pfc. Arturo Gonzalez during the 311th Sustainment Command (Expeditionary) Command Post Exercise–Functional 19 September 2015 at Camp Parks, California. (Photo by Maj. Gregg Moore, U.S. Army)

Cutting Our Feet to Fit the Shoes

An Analysis of Mission Command in the U.S. Army

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The U.S. Army has sought to integrate mission command over the past decade but has run into resistance in many arenas. Mission command has not taken hold in the Army because it lacks specificity in relation to the Army's conditions and culture. Nor does it align with the contemporary American way of war, which is highlighted by its information and data-obsessed pursuit of efficiency and precision. This article seeks to develop a method of command and control more in line with the praxis of Army methods and principles. It recommends rescinding the doctrinal definition of mission command, while retaining mission command's principles. Army doctrine for command and control should incorporate a continuum that includes both mission command and centralized control, rather than preaching mission command but all too often practicing excess control.

The Army defines mission command 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 in the conduct of unified land operations."¹ The Army assigns the following principles to guide 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

There are two primary theories on mission command, both of which reflect the German concept of *Auftragstaktik*. In mission command, a commander clearly communicates his or her intent in relation to friendly forces, the enemy, and the mission but leaves the decisions on how to complete the mission with the subordinate leaders. The higher echelon commander allows subordinate leaders to develop the "how" based on the situation, the conditions, the terrain, familiarity with their unit, and their equipment.³ This idea, providing latitude in execution, is at the heart of mission command, and its intellectual fountainhead, *Auftragstaktik*. While not explicitly referenced in any doctrinal publication, both concepts serve as the foundational underpinning of the Army's command philosophy of the art of command and the science of control.

The other school of thought treats mission command and command and control as sides of the

same coin. In this line of reasoning, the theory of command and control finds its genesis in the relationship between information flow and decision making. Mission command, or what military theorist Robert Leonhard calls *directive control*, is required when decision making can no longer keep pace with the flow of information.⁴ Command and control, what Leonhard calls *detailed control*, is required when decision making can maintain pace with the flow of information. In this school of thought, both forms of command and control—directive control and detailed control—are acceptable and viable in modern war. The key is to balance information flow with decision-making authority.⁵

However, a more granular examination suggests mission command—Leonhard's directive control—is messy, inefficient, and ambiguous. Mission command is messy because it provides parameters within which one must operate instead of an instructive method of operation. Mission command is inefficient and ambiguous because it relies on imprecise, bottom-up understanding and information instead of perfect, or near-perfect, understanding. Because of this, mission command is slow in relation to higher echelons of command as lower echelons develop the situation, analyze the situation, execute courses of action, and report to higher echelons.

Mission Command in the Army Today

The Army's adoption of mission command has been great for generating discussion about empowering junior leaders and developing mutual trust within formations. In 2016, the Army released several works on mission command, to include *Mission Command in the 21st Century*, *Training for Decisive Action: Stories of Mission Command*, and *16 Cases of Mission Command*.⁶ Additionally, the Army's professional journals and Army-related blogs are continually filled with essays advocating for mission command and the principles it entails.

However, resistance to the ethos of mission command can be found everywhere. For all the success of mission command appears to be having across the Army, there are some critical shortcomings to full application across the force. Today's Army finds itself operating in an environment in which messy,

inefficient, and slow methods of command are unwelcome and counterproductive. Regardless of the method of command and control stated in doctrine, commanders have always and will always evaluate their units and subordinates based on how much they trust them. Then commanders will allocate varying degrees of independent action based upon that trust.

Mission Command in Doctrine

In his seminal work on maneuver warfare theory, *Fighting by Minutes: Time and the Art of War*, Leonhard states that nothing in military doctrine is everlasting, regardless of how strong it is at a given time. Leonhard continues, “Therefore, doctrine has a life span, and its death is certain.”⁷ In analyzing mission command, perhaps it too is approaching its timely demise.

Army mission command doctrine is, in effect, being applied in a prescriptive manner. The Army dictates the primacy of mission command instead of providing commanders and staffs with options for directing action within their commands. Leaders are forced into a dilemma: do they faithfully follow doctrine—potentially at the expense of what is the smart decision—or do they deviate from doctrine based upon their understanding of their organization and its leaders?

This dynamic highlights the need for the Army to shelve the notion that mission command is a singular, unquestionable approach. Instead, the Army should encourage a more flexible approach that encourages leaders to consider options based on their understanding of their unit and their subordinate leaders in relation to the unit’s operational environment.

The Operating Environment’s Influence on Command and Control

Today’s operational environments often place Army units in situations in which their actions must be deliberate and restrained. In many cases, the U.S. government uses the Army as a tool to shape the strategic environment. Where national interests are at stake but limited objectives do not warrant large-scale combat operations, Army units must operate with finesse, in a manner not necessarily compatible with mission command. Concepts such as the “strategic corporal” highlight the limits of mission command—the

independent actions of a single soldier on the battlefield can have strategic impact.⁸ If soldiers’ actions are not carefully controlled, the consequences could affect national security. However, that notion stands in stark contrast to the principles of mission command, which allow soldiers to choose their actions in accordance with commander’s intent and vision, disciplined initiative, shared understanding, and mutual trust. Command and control methods are influenced not only by strategic mission constraints but also are strongly influenced by technological developments.

The proliferation of communications technology, information collection systems, and precision weaponry led the Army to over-engineer battlefield solutions. The thinking was that near-perfect situational understanding could be achieved, enabled by using precision weapons to kill without closing with the enemy while greatly minimizing collateral damage. Though these ideas are virtuous, they erode the principles of mission command and are largely unachievable.

In many cases, technological advancement has been geared toward providing commanders better situational awareness and improved ability to communicate, as with digital systems such as Blue Force Tracker, Command Post of the Future, and unmanned aircraft systems. In the past, commanders relied on reports from the field to populate friendly positions on maps. Today, Blue Force Tracker and Command Post of the Future allow commanders to see their formations down to the individual vehicle on high-resolution digital maps in near-real time. The employment of unmanned aircraft systems in conjunction with battle-tracking systems allows commanders a relatively high degree of understanding. A high degree of understanding, coupled with ubiquitous communications systems, has led to an environment similar to that of Vietnam, where commanders at multiple echelons were directing the actions of platoons and squads on the ground.⁹

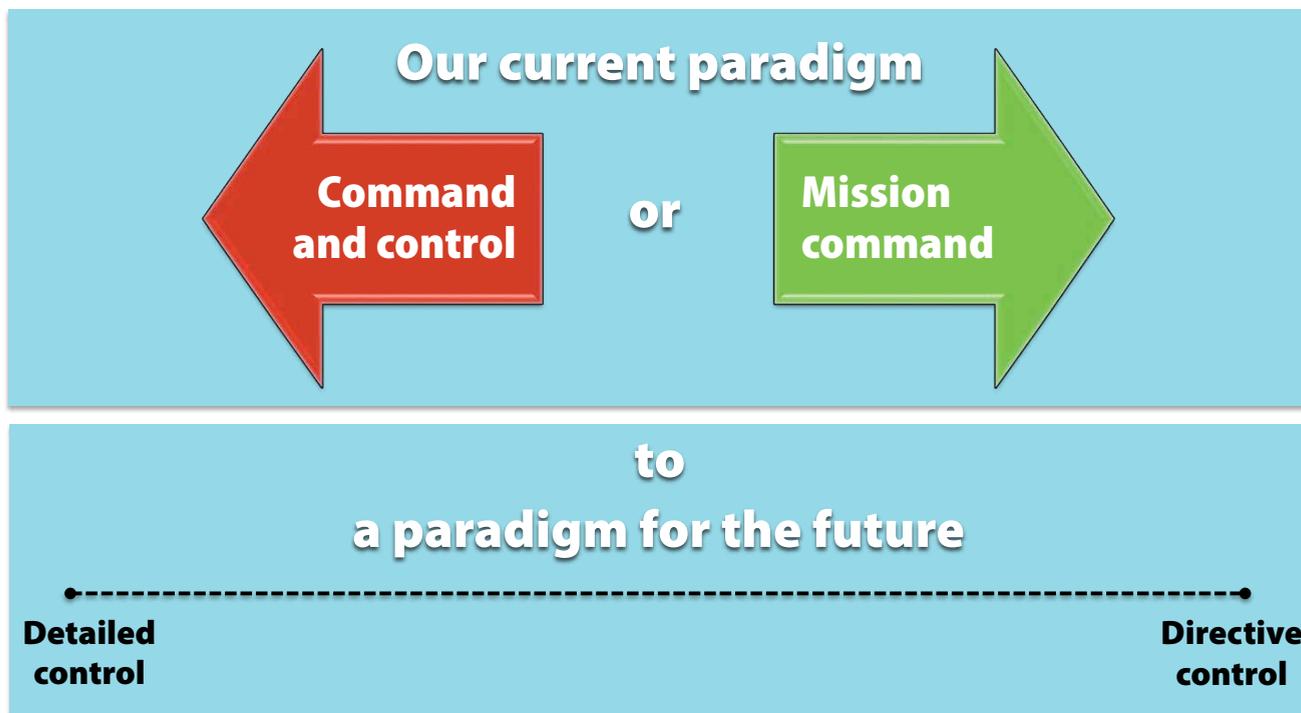
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Successful Innovation and Mission Command

Historian Williamson Murray defined four critical factors of successful military innovation: specificity; a reflective, honest military culture; proper use of history; and cognitive openness.¹⁰ Murray's

about fighting. Based on Murray's factors of successful military innovation, it is time for the Army's approach to mission command to evolve.

Further exacerbating the command and control confusion is that mission command does not provide specificity to the Army in relation to the



(Graphic by author)

Figure 1. Continuum of Command and Control to Mission Command

thoughts on innovation are important to mission command because they suggest that philosophies and operational methods must be derived from the culture they are intended to support. In attempting to shoehorn mission command into Army doctrine, some could argue that the Army is improperly using history and ignoring specificity to justify the incorporation of the concept based solely on theoretical preference, or that the Army is cutting its feet to fit the shoes. Joint doctrine's retention of command and control instead of wholesale adoption of mission command could be seen as an acknowledgement of this idea. The Army's mission command doctrine lacks specificity of the environments in which the U.S. Army finds itself, the nature in which technology has influenced how the Army operates, and how the information age has shaped the Army's thinking

contemporary American way of war. The Germans' *Auftragstaktik* was an evolutionary innovation specific to the tactical, doctrinal, and cultural needs of the German army.¹¹ The conditions that allowed the concept of *Auftragstaktik* to develop organically over time and flourish in the German military are not found in today's U.S. Army operations.

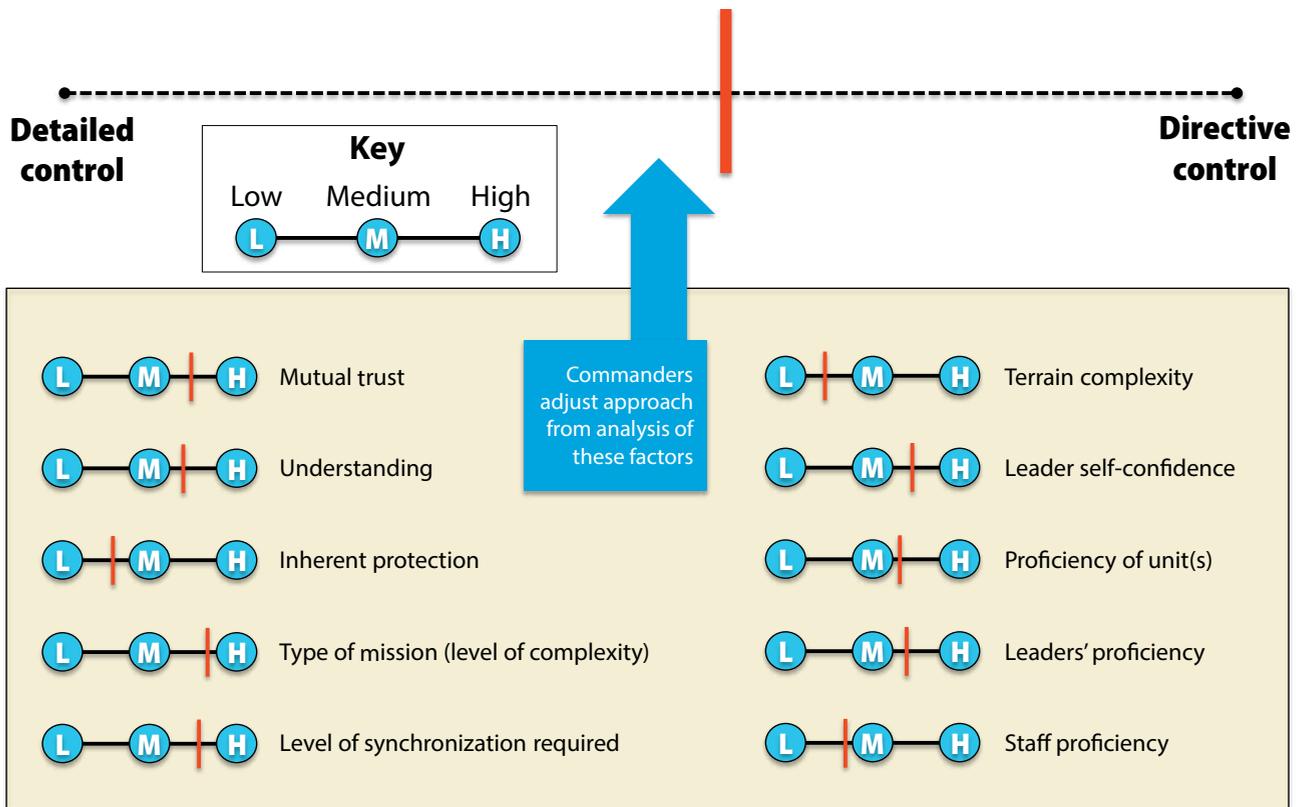
The theoretical underpinnings of *Auftragstaktik* were products of vast battlefields in which large field armies were dispersed across great distances, generally operating against opponents similar in style and organization. However, in twenty-first century Army operations, conditions have changed.

The United States traditionally fought according to what many have called the "Western way of war." Historian Geoffrey Parker suggests that it is characterized by a focus on seeking a quick, decisive victory

through annihilation. Furthermore, according to Parker, it is built on finance, technology, diversity, and overwhelming firepower.¹²

However, the conditions changed as information-age technological advancement occurred and the Soviet Union, with its large military force, disintegrated. These factors, coupled with the effects of globalism, have given rise to a relatively new theory on how the U.S. now fights.

individual soldiers can cause strategic problems is at the heart of hypercontrol. To remove the risk of subordinate leaders making, or accidentally allowing, their subordinates to make strategic mistakes, constraints are emplaced, observation is ubiquitous, and heuristics such as the strategic corporal are developed to mitigate risk. The reduction of collateral damage and killing without closing with the enemy by employing precision munitions and precision forces, controlling



(Graphic by author)

Figure 2. Factors Determining Method of Control

Military theorist Antulio Echevarria suggests that U.S. forces “shy away from thinking about the complicated process of turning military triumphs ... into strategic successes.”¹³ He agrees with Russell Weigley and Max Boot that this lack of clear thinking stems from an emphasis on destroying the opponent, rather than taking into consideration the results of tactical victory.¹⁴ In this construct, “control-mania,” or a method of command and control that seeks to supersede risk and battlefield error through detailed control, appears to be a major byproduct of the information-age-fueled American way of war. The fact that

narratives, and seeking perfect understanding all fly in the face of the less controlled mission command approach that focuses on individual initiative, trust, and accepting prudent risk. Mission command reinforces the American focus on warfare (operational and tactical victory in battle) rather than war (strategic and political victory) due to the concept being derived from a German operational concept for winning quick battles of annihilation.

At this point, it is instructive to harken back to Leonhard’s theory of command and control to understand how information-age technology encourages

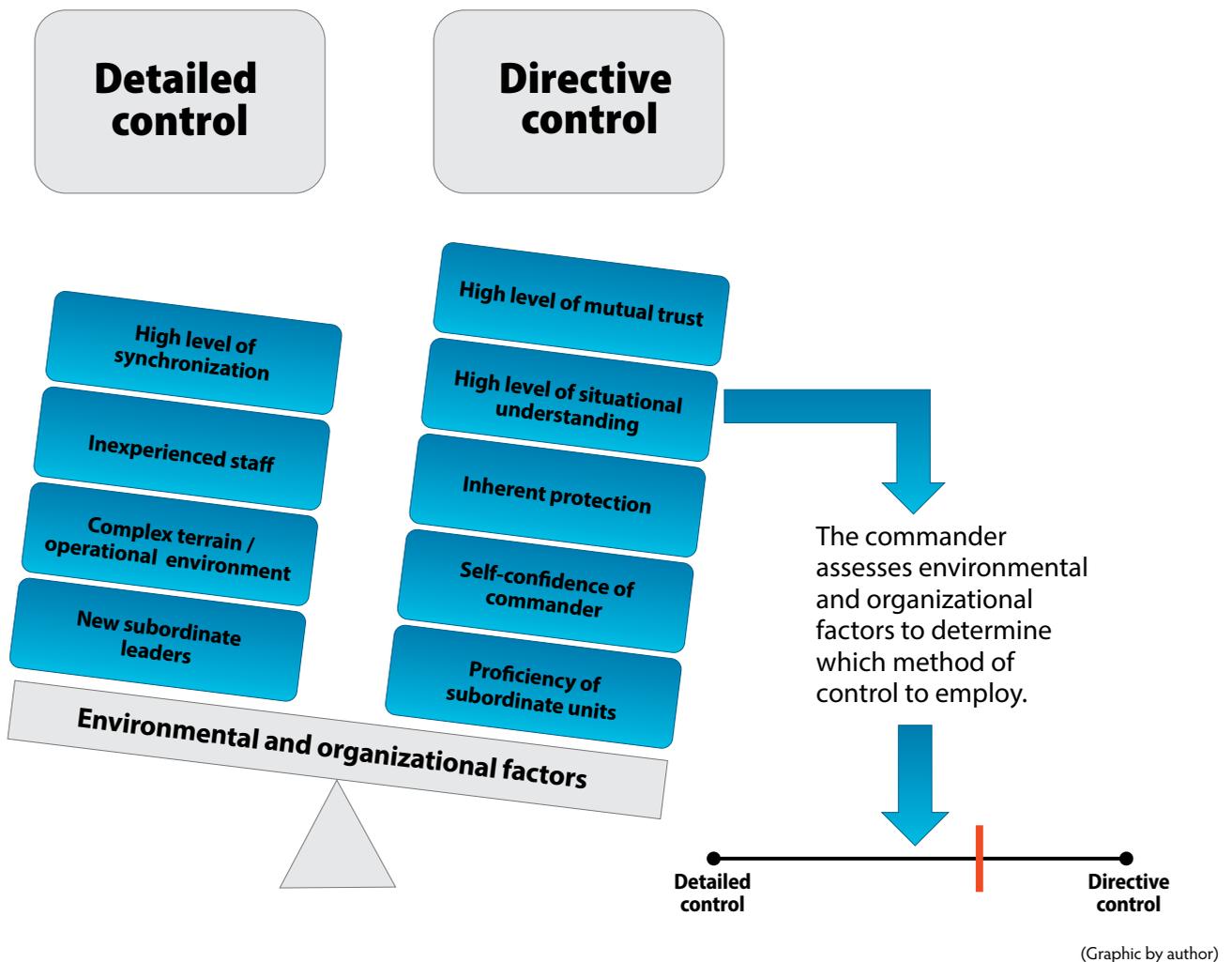


Figure 3. Conditions Warranting More Detailed Control

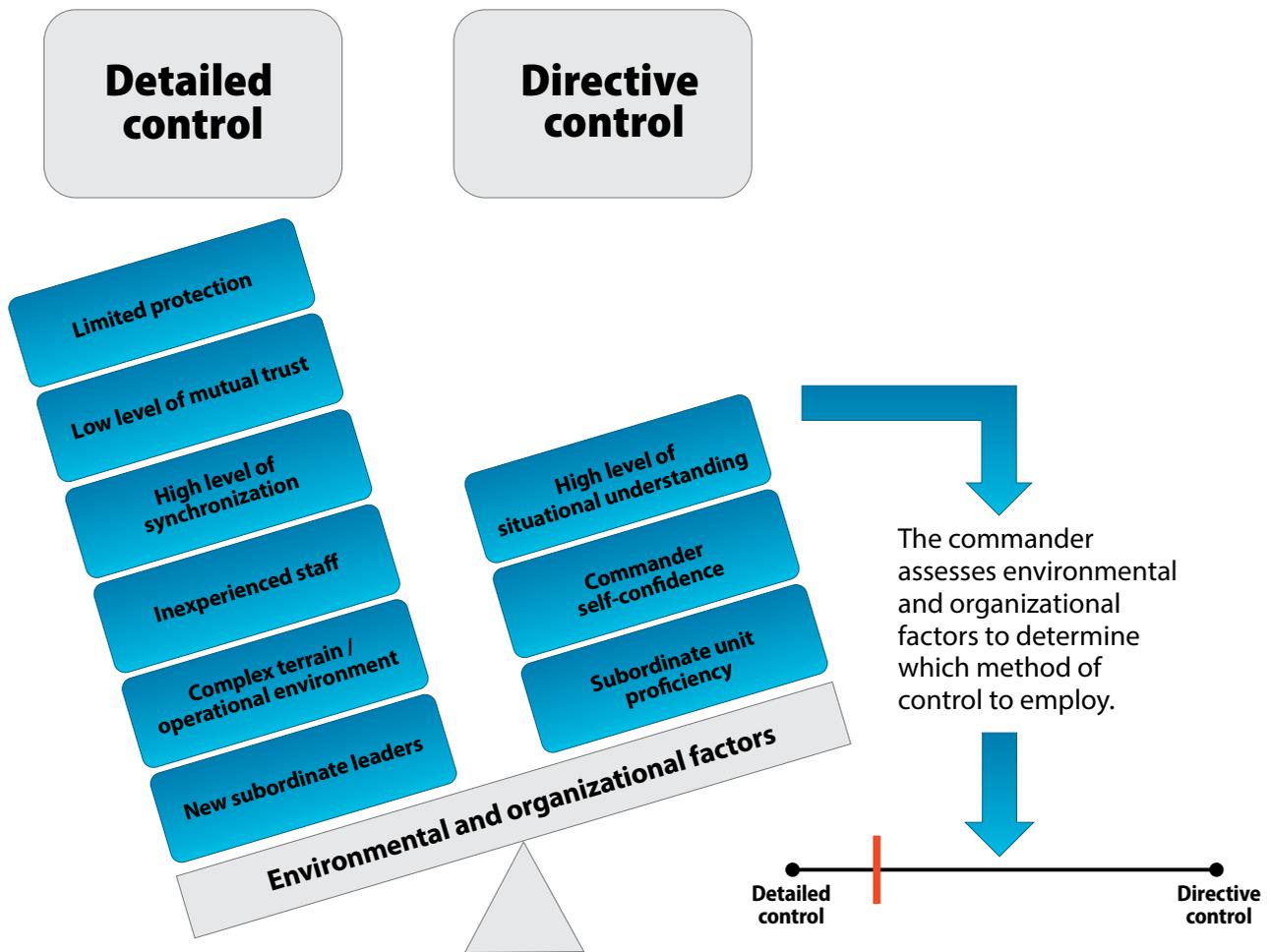
practices at odds with mission command. Leaders and staffs now command an amazing array of tools that allow them to visualize the battlefield and the operational environment, which in turn allows them to feel as though they are using information flow to guide decision making. Leaders, in their minds, are not micromanaging the mission; they are making decisions and directing action consistent with what they are capable of understanding.

Thus, technology's proliferation continues to dramatically influence how U.S. commanders exercise command and control. In World War I, trench warfare led to detailed command and control, but in the twenty-first century, technology has had a similar effect, leading to commanders falling too heavily into the detailed control side of the command and

control spectrum.¹⁵ It has undercut mission command. The byproduct of technology is faith in the ability to obtain perfect, or near-perfect, information before launching precision weapons to destroy a specific target. Seeking perfect information in order to precisely kill a target in a way that minimizes the chances of collateral damage creates an environment of control-mania, the antithesis of mission command. Army commanders do not accept prudent risk but instead tend to minimize risk by setting stringently exacting conditions before servicing a target or committing forces.

Recommendations

The principles of mission command should not be exclusive to mission command but should be



(Graphic by author)

Figure 4. Conditions Warranting More Directive Control

principles adhered to in any modern, democratic army. Mutual trust, shared understanding, thinking subordinate leaders who exercise initiative, accepting prudent risk—these are not sacred rights bestowed upon junior leaders by an enlightened commander; rather, these are principles vital to success on the modern battlefield. The speed of the information age demands these principles be intrinsic qualities for any army that wants to succeed. The principles should serve as the foundation of the operations process, the art of command, and the science of control in all the Army does. However, the manner in which commanders lead their organizations and their subordinates cannot be standardized.

Instead, the Army must acknowledge that successful commanders adjust their approach to command methodology by continually assessing a variety of factors to

determine how much to tighten or loosen their grip on the reins of control. Commanders must determine their approaches based upon understanding derived from individual assessment of each subordinate and organization. The Army should not dictate one approach (i.e., mission command or command and control) over another. Instead, doctrine should define the art of command and the science of control as occurring in proportional amounts along a continuum, with directive control and detailed control as the bookends (see figure 1, page 52).¹⁶ The decision on the method of control should then rest with the commander, based upon his or her understanding of any number of factors (see figure 2, page 53).

Doctrine should list the types of factors that commanders should consider when determining the method of control they will employ. However, doctrine should articulate that these factors are only examples to

stimulate thought, not a definitive list. Commanders should assess factors such as the following when determining their method of control:

- degree of mutual trust between leaders in the unit
- degree of situational understanding
- degree of complexity associated with the mission (i.e., is the problem simple, complicated, complex, or chaotic?)
- degree of protection inherent to the organization¹⁷
- degree of synchronization required for the mission or subordinate missions
- complexity and type of terrain
- self-confidence of the commander
- proficiency of the organization and its subordinate units
- proficiency of subordinate leaders
- proficiency of the staff

Commanders will likely gravitate toward detailed control in areas with low degrees of proficiency or high levels of complexity and complicated problems (see figure 3, page 54). Conversely, commanders will likely slide toward more directive control in areas with moderate to high degrees of proficiency and little complexity or complicated problems (see figure 4, page 55).

Furthermore, commanders must understand that the method of command and control is not static. Commanders must adjust their method of control based upon the continually evolving conditions. Another consideration is that organizations have multiple units. A commander may have a cavalry formation forward developing the situation on the ground, while the maneuver units are conducting a complicated, highly synchronized operation such as a wet-gap crossing. The commander would likely employ directive control with the cavalry formation, while retaining more detailed control for the part of the mission requiring highly synchronized operations. Upon completion of the complicated mission, the commander could revert to directive control.

The primary benefit of this approach is that it formally acknowledges the cognitive process a commander undergoes when thinking about how to command and control operations. Commanders and leaders at all levels conduct inventory of their

subordinates and their organization before deciding how to approach commanding each person and unit. Subordinates and units requiring more oversight get more oversight. Conversely, those that can be trusted to operate more independently are often provided more latitude.

Moreover, while addressing the contemporary American way of war, this approach provides flexibility to the commander by not dictating a specific approach for commanding and controlling operations. If the Army adjusts the manner in which doctrine is written and adopts the idea of the directive and detailed control continuum, it will better address the realities of war, pulling doctrine from the theoretical into the tangible.

Notwithstanding, it is useful to observe that either method of command or combination thereof is largely dependent on the quality of soldiers tasked to perform the missions. Gen. George S. Patton Jr. articulated this requirement over seventy years ago when he wrote, “To be a good soldier a man must have discipline, self-respect, pride in his unit and his country, a high sense of duty and obligation to his comrades and his superiors, and self-confidence born of demonstrated proficiency.”¹⁸

Conclusion

In summation, mission command needs to be overhauled. The concept fails to provide specificity and therefore is at conflict with the Army’s culture and the new American way of war. The Army must harken back to its own history to define what it wants from each end of the continuum while not forgetting the praxis of the American way of war and the influence of the information age. Doctrine must not dictate one way or one end of the continuum over the other but must describe instead how commanders continually assess themselves, their units, their subordinates, their environment, and the threat or enemy when determining which approach to employ. The approach must be appropriate to each subordinate leader in their organization. By adopting a continuum of control, the Army will develop an approach that is at harmony with the Army’s culture and the manner in which it has long preferred to fight. ■

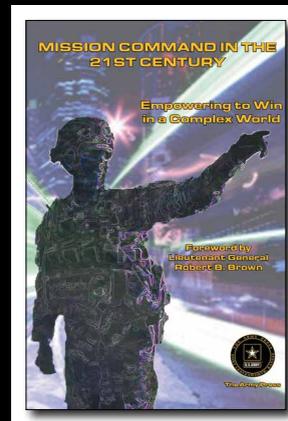
Notes

1. Army Doctrine Publication 6-0, *Mission Command* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 2015).
2. Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-0, *Mission Command* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2012), 2-1.
3. Robert Leonhard, *The Art of Maneuver: Maneuver-Warfare Theory and AirLand Battle* (New York: Presidio Books, 1991), 113.
4. Robert Leonhard, *Fighting by Minutes: Time and the Art of War* (Westport, CT: Praeger Press, 1994), 111–19.
5. Ibid.
6. Nathan K. Finney and Jonathan P. Klug, eds., *Mission Command in the 21st Century: Empowering to Win in a Complex World* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Army Press, 2016); Operations Group, U.S. Army National Training Center, *Training for Decisive Action: Stories of Mission Command* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2014); Donald P. Wright, ed., *16 Cases of Mission Command* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2013).
7. Leonhard, *Fighting by Minutes*, xxii.
8. Charles C. Krulak, "The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War," *Marines Corps Gazette* 83, no. 1 (January 1999).
9. Department of the Army, *Division-Level Communications, 1962-1973* (Washington, DC: Center for Military History, 1982), 40–41.
10. Williamson Murray, "Innovation: Past and Future," in *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*, eds. Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 308–23.
11. Ibid., 308; Donald E. Vandergriff, "Misinterpretation and Confusion: What is Mission Command and Can the U.S. Army Make it Work?" *The Land Warfare Papers*, no. 94 (June 2013), 2–4.
12. Geoffrey Parker, "The Western Way of War," in *The Cambridge History of Warfare*, ed. Geoffrey Parker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2.
13. Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Toward an American Way of War* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2004), vi.
14. Ibid., v–vi.
15. This process is a mental exercise; the supporting figures are only used to illustrate the process—they are not intended to be prescriptive tools for leaders to assess their situation.
16. Leonhard, *Fighting by Minutes*, 114.
17. The assumption is that inherent protection will increase the likelihood of the commander's choosing to be more directive because there is a bit less worry about physical security.
18. George S. Patton Jr., *War as I Knew It* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1947), 335.

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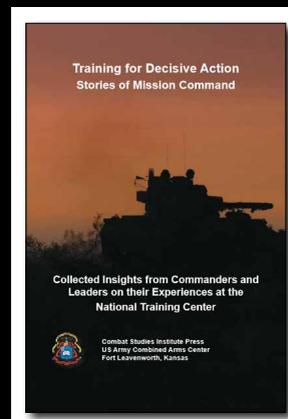
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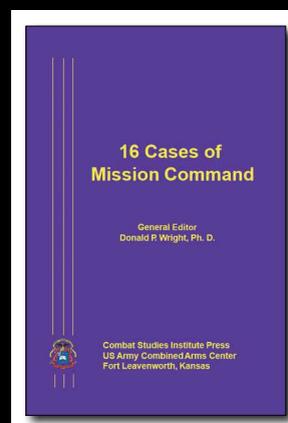
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To view this publication, please visit: <http://armypress.dodlive.mil/files/2016/04/mission-command-in-the-21st-century.pdf>.



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