

Mission Command

Purpose

This work is a think piece to advance Mission Command and incorporate it into the leadership philosophy of the Marine Corps. As such, it builds on the accepted wisdom of MCDP-1 Warfighting and MCDP-6 Command and Control with insights derived from recent operations and the emerging field of operational design. This paper makes assertions that require institutional validation. The ideas contained herein are additive to our current leadership philosophy and methods. Once accepted, these assertions will be promulgated by articles, incorporated into leadership development and introduced into our DOTMLPF force development process.

Introduction

Mission Command is an evolved term that incorporates decentralized command and control, command by influence, mission tactics and mission orders. There is broad guidance and consensus in doctrinal publications, both in the US Army and Marine Corps that Mission Command is the preferred and optimized leadership philosophy that should guide how we train and fight. MCDP-1 *Warfighting*, widely recognized as the foundation of the Marine Corps philosophy of maneuver warfare, is steeped in the ethos of mission command and provides a solid doctrinal base for integrating this leadership methodology into all aspects of our training, garrison and combat activities. Yet institutional honesty and fidelity to purpose will compel Marines to ask, “Has there ever been a military leadership philosophy that has been so loudly lauded, so convincingly defined, so battle proven and so routinely unapplied as mission command?” For all the lip service the mission command concept garners, there is wide recognition that we can and must do far better in implementing the basic leadership tenets and wisdom of our command philosophy if we are to continue to match current force structure against the broadening array of future threats.

This call for fidelity to our leadership values and methods comes from disparate sources. Unquestionably, the current operational environment compels wide dispersion and decentralization of command to match conventional forces against irregular threats. But the clarion call for more effective garrison leadership is equally echoed in suicide studies, training critiques and command climate surveys. As a service at war, the Marine Corps has been in a hurry to do things right, but in our haste, we may have forgotten to do all the right things. Centralization of training and elevation of authority thresholds may have been pragmatic attempts to shorten timelines and enhance efficiency or safety, but they may come at the expense of “white space” in training schedules for companies and platoons to train together and develop the cohesive bonds so essential for combat effectiveness. The unintended consequences of more centralized training may prove corrosive to cohesion and ultimately inimical to the leadership climate that sustains the maxim “the moral is to the physical as three is to one.”

If the Marine Corps is to reap the many operational benefits of Mission Command, then all leaders must be convinced of the value, understand the tenets, exemplify the principles and consciously cultivate the individual character traits that enable decentralized decision making in both garrison and combat. Mission command underpins our concept of command and control, but it is far more fundamental than functional method, and its influence more pervasive than operational execution. The wisdom and ethos of mission command should define our leadership and inspire our Corps in all endeavors. As leaders, we must understand that the quality of our leadership is rooted in character not method. The moral qualities necessary for establishing the relationships that sustain a climate conducive to mission command place great demands on the nerve and character of leaders. Personal fortitude is the foundation underpinning the relationships that promote unit cohesion and combat effectiveness. Mission command is more than a leadership philosophy; it is about relationships founded in fortitude and nurtured in trust that enable Marines to thrive where others would flounder and prevail over men bounded by lesser mutual expectation and service ethos.

Fundamentally, mission command is dependent upon leaders who have the personal nerve to risk and the moral courage to trust. Mission command thrives where mutual understanding and trust outweigh the sum of all fears.

Why Mission Command?

MCDP-1 *Warfighting* provides convincing reasons for adopting the tenets of maneuver warfare as our theory of war and advocates cultivating a maneuverist mindset in both field and garrison to habituate ourselves to its practice. This paper builds on the assertions of *Warfighting* and MCDP-6, *Command and Control* regarding philosophy of command and details some of the compelling reasons for more fully incorporating the principles of mission command into the leadership habits of Marines.

Mission Command, a form of *command by influence*, is one of several philosophies of command and control. Alternative and competing philosophies, such as *command by direction* (to include the elevation of decision thresholds and authorities) and *command by plan* have proven competent, although command by influence is arguably the most evolved. Most military forces incorporate some elements of mission command into their command and control philosophy and practice, so at issue is not a binary question of mission command or not, but to what degree mission command influences the organizational ethos and consequent capability of the force.

Mission Command is not optimized for all missions and forces, and in some cases may be counterproductive to success. The allowance mission command makes for innovation and risk, and the consequent potential for mistakes, makes it an improbable candidate for nuclear security units where consistency and uniformity are desirable traits. The trust and responsibility our mission command philosophy invests in the presumed competency of individual Marines does not recommend it for recruit and entry level training programs. If the nature of the tactical or organizational problem is structured and well understood, a consistent approach that conforms to approved tactics, techniques or procedures can be

designed and optimized. Conversely, if the problem is inherently complex and emergent involving creative and adaptive wills contesting violently in organized groups, then the adaptive, situationally aware and timely attributes of mission command will offer great advantage. When and how the principles of mission command are employed depends on sound military judgment.

Mission Command's preference for decentralized decision making does not demand rigid adherence to any one C2 methodology. Mission Command is guided by principled pragmatism. Essentially, any ethical means that works is viable, with the most efficacious means being preferred. Mission Command supports the use of the most advantageous means of command--by direction, by plan or by influence—depending on the situation. The guiding Mission Command principle in all cases is to give the widest appropriate latitude to subordinate judgment in execution. This is the classic 'centralized vision and decentralized decision making' of mission orders. However, in the absence of central direction, Mission Command places on subordinate commanders the additional responsibility for initiating planning, integrating assigned combined arms and capabilities, and the execution of continuing action in accord with commander's intent. Commanders who have the fortitude to trust and have cultivated a command climate of professional respect and mutual understanding will be able to reap the full advantages of mission command in both peace and war.

Competing command and control philosophies have their unique virtues and each has evolved from the exigencies of previous eras; however they have battle proven limitations as well. Marines advocate mission command because it best conforms to the requirements of a philosophy of command:

- Mission Command meets the operational demands of the current and anticipated operational environment
- Mission Command conforms to the nature of war
- Mission Command prudently accounts for the vagaries of human nature and promotes cohesion
- Mission Command exploits the cultural strengths of the American people to operational advantage.
- Mission Command supports our warfighting philosophy

Demands of the Joint Operational Environment

What is of critical importance in irregular war is the ability to provide security to the local population with the purpose of denying the enemy the ability to survive among the people, allowing local police and military forces to build up sufficient strength to control their area of responsibility.

2010Joint Operational Environment p.67

The 2010 edition of the Joint Operational Environment is appropriately cautious in predicting the character of future conflict, the JFCOM authors being prudently aware that in war the only certainty is constant change. The identified trends, however, all point to a future where the complexity of irregular warfare and the opportunities for human conflict greatly expand. Lessons relearned in Iraq, Afghanistan and Lebanon confirm that the

inherent chaos and emergent complexity of battle is exacerbated in irregular and hybrid wars. These wars are fought among the people and are visceral conflicts centered in the human dimension. They make relentless demands on large numbers of distributed forces capable of protecting populations and denying the enemy areas of sanctuary. Unable to match our military might and skill, our enemies make persistence their means of demonstrating will, and the protracted nature of these conflicts can exhaust small professional forces over time. Concurrently, the emergence of large near peer competitors with growing economic power, expanding populations, rising economic expectations and competitive interests make the sustainment of core competencies in conventional combined arms operations of continued importance. The growing concentration of the world's population in littoral cities renders millions vulnerable to natural cataclysms that place demands on America's humanitarian impulses and military capabilities. Even as the demand for maneuver forces capable of operating across this varied range of military operations grows, entitlement strains on domestic budgets will necessarily constrict discretionary military expenditures.

Meeting an expanding range of operational requirements across an increasing arc of global instability with current force structure will challenge Marines into the foreseeable future. While doing more with less has long been a point of pride among Marines, future challenges will compel ever higher levels of resource efficiency and operational effectiveness. The continued operational requirement to distribute forces throughout the operational area to protect populations and flush the shadows of insurgent activity may be the immediate driver for force capabilities enhanced by Mission Command, but the wider range of potential threats can all be better met by forces steeped in a Mission Command ethos. Similar operational demands on the joint force will drive expectations for Mission Command to influence the joint operational mindset. Marine leadership must exemplify the way ahead.

Mission Command is not a panacea. Nor is the formal adoption of a 'policy' of Mission Command sufficient to make a quick difference in operational capability. The leadership habits of Mission Command cannot be 'trained' into a force, but must be more subtly 'imbued' by the words and example of confident leaders. Mission Command is the fruit of a cultivated climate of professional respect, mutual understanding and implicit trust. The long history of human conflict is punctuated with exceptionally capable forces sustained beyond mortal limits by leaders and warriors welded in purpose by the principles that comprise Mission Command. Anticipating the demand for future operational effectiveness compels resolute effort toward a deepened Marine Corps ethos of Mission Command today. Meeting the inevitable demands to "do more with less" will remain in the realm of military alchemy. Mission Command enables us to do "better with better" --better leadership, better command relationships and better results because it is a leadership philosophy that most closely conforms to the immutable nature of war and the character of the free American people who reluctantly wage it.

The Nature of War

A military action is not the monolithic execution of a single decision by a single entity but necessarily involves near-countless independent but interrelated decisions and actions being taken

simultaneously throughout the organization. Efforts to fully centralize military operations and to exert complete control by a single decision maker are inconsistent with the intrinsically complex and distributed nature of war. -MCDP 1, pg 13

Americans don't like war. This aversion is not only because of the many horrors war inflicts upon humanity, but more fundamentally because they do not like how it has been defined by both its leading philosophers and historical experience. Clausewitz tells us that war is a "violent conflict of human will" where physical violence and bloodshed become the coercive forces that compel compliance among competing wills. Should that definition not instill sufficient pessimism about such a dark and resurgent human activity, Clausewitz goes on to note that uncertainty, friction, danger, fear, risk, chance and death are intrinsic characteristics of war and that the passion and foibles of the human condition make its episodic reappearance inevitable.

As a technologically adept and advanced people, Americans may be lured to redefine the nature of war as a coercive battle between competing technologies that provide 'solutions' to war's inherent problems. Current operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have revealed the high hubris of recent DoD publications that promised robust technical means could "clear the fog of war" and assure "full spectrum dominance" through a "comprehensive understanding of the battlespace." Such flagrant techno-centrism reveals human propensity for optimism even in war, despite the pragmatic lessons of history that remind us that hope is not a method. Our aversion to war's horrors render us susceptible to utopian visions and concepts that hold promise of surmounting the inherent attributes of war or solving the human condition from which war springs. These idealistic enthusiasms are usually short lived triumphs of hope over experience, but by befuddling our understanding of the nature of war they can cause us to forgo genuine opportunity in illusory quests that misplace emphasis on technical means over the more fundamental qualities of human will.

The radical technical mismatch we have over some of our potential enemies must be leveraged to advantage, but in doing so we must now allow ourselves to hope that technology alone will coerce the will of a determined foe. Enemies will not enter the arena of war without hope of success. Should they be lacking in one means, they will avoid that space and exploit another. To the degree that technology is a shield against risk it preserves the force, but Clausewitz was remarkably insightful on his description of war as a contest of human will. The metrics by which people measure competitive will are risk, sacrifice and the commitment of time and resources. By accepting great risk, our adversaries display great will, and to the degree that technology protects our force, it has the unintended effect of blunting our display of resolution. This is but one of the many ways that war defies 'solutions' and serves as the first of several illustrations that will form a major theme of this paper—war necessitates trade-offs and *critical to military judgment is the ability to make effective and timely trade-offs* between many militarily relevant variables *to gain advantage*.

Despite our ambitions, we cannot bend the nature of war by technical means. Consequently, we must establish a system of command and control that will provide us advantage over adversaries attempting to grapple with the same challenges that war

presents us. Most of the problems associated with war are rooted in the human condition, so our philosophy of command and control must account for human nature under the conditions of uncertainty, violence, and friction that characterize the nature of war. Our approach must not avoid what we know from the physical sciences or fail to leverage technical means, but it must not be based primarily upon them. The industrial age saw great strides and advantages from new and innovative weapons systems, but the application of the same leadership principles that gave advantage in manufacturing was sub-optimized for the raising, training and employment of armies. Experience has proven that the greatest variable on the battlefield is the actual performance of forces, and consequently the greatest opportunity to generate advantage exists within the hearts and minds of the warriors themselves.

Human Nature

The great variability that exists among people complicates our ability to arrive at any single definition that will effectively describe our common human nature in any but biological terms. The long history of human experience with war indicates a wide range of behaviors of men under the stress of combat, and serves to illuminate their potential for collective action or paralysis in the clutch of adversity. History is also replete with amazing examples of the extraordinary ends to which a people will go to compel enemies to bend to their national will, and the remarkable physical effort and technical ends the need for self preservation and mission accomplishment will drive military forces.

It is the collective human will of a nation and the forces it fields which ultimately determines the degree of success in war. Consequently, the preservation and expression of coherent human will in the presence of the violence, chaos and uncertainty of war is the essential aspect of human nature that must inform our approach to a philosophy of command and control. Violence and privation can have a very corrosive effect on human will, but the ability of some forces and nations to absorb great violence and retain *coherence* in intent and *cohesion* in action serves to exemplify the critical importance of moral qualities in war. Cohesion is the moral force that is common to our otherwise diverse human nature that enables collective action in the face of great adversity and danger. It is the stated object of maneuver warfare to “shatter the enemy’s cohesion” and thereby reduce his aggressive will and ability to take coherent and effective collective action.

We will define and discuss cohesion in greater detail elsewhere, but it is important to note here the essential role of cohesion in the maintenance of collective human will in conflict, and the preeminent place that human will rightly holds as the arbiter of success in war.

Long human history with war leads us to conclude that *human nature is constrained*. Human nature is *constrained* by a variety of forces that preclude us from becoming the people or force we might envision or wish to become. In addition to physical and cognitive limitations, we all have personal foibles and inherent self interests which can be debilitated or accentuated under the adversity of war. Advances in technology can be confused with advances in human nature, but human vices and virtues have proven far

more durable, and technology has enabled both. While our individual nature is somewhat elastic and individuals can temporarily suppress their own will for the common good, the stress of deferring self interest ultimately fatigues the individual and can erode collective will for action. Utopian theorists subscribe to visions of societies where people have cast off their inherent self interest and associated human needs for a collective commitment to the will of the many. These theories are utopian rather than pragmatic because they stand in defiance rather than accord with human nature. Ambitions to create the “New Soviet Man” or an androgynous society, or combinations thereof like the short lived and failed Kibbutz system are illustrative. Likewise, any theory of war, or philosophy of command and control that is predicated on solving the human condition, rather than acknowledging and making prudent allocation for our human constraints and foibles is inherently flawed.

To acknowledge the constraints of our nature is not to despair of improving our capability to raise the human qualities that characterize our force. Rather, in full understanding of what history teaches us about forces acting in the stress of combat we must make prudent trade-offs that account for our proclivities and enable our strengths. While we exercise caution not to act on idealistic impulses that exceed human capability, we must strive to fully exploit human potential in prudent, ethical and pragmatic fashion.

Entrepreneurship and Nature of Our People

While a valid theory of warfighting and associated philosophy of command and control must abide within the constraints imposed by the nature of war and our own human nature, it should also vary to accommodate and leverage the character and attributes of the people it serves and be tailored to advantage the forces they field. Properly leveraged, cultural differences can provide unique and relatively enduring military advantages. Napoleon channeled popular enthusiasm for novel Republican ideals into the unstoppable surge of the *levee en mass*, and British competency at seamanship enabled a vast and productive empire. Some of the most unique aspects of Western and American culture that have enabled our rapid ascendancy to a position of economic and international leadership have yet to be harnessed into our military ethos to full advantage. The huge difference in productivity and innovation between the Soviet centralized hierarchical planned economies and the entrepreneurship of decentralized American capitalism demonstrates the significant advantage applied philosophy makes in economics, and serves as an apt metaphor for questioning our military approach to command and control. Does our current military C2 system better approximate Soviet centralized hierarchical planning, or classic American entrepreneurship characterized by personal responsibility, prudent risk and individual initiative to develop and exploit opportunity?

Mission Command challenges us to adopt a *spirit of entrepreneurship* focused on developing advantage and exploiting tactical and operational opportunity, as differentiated from a management mindset that seeks to enhance effectiveness and efficiency. By emphasizing a spirit of entrepreneurship over more traditional military management skills, Mission Command elevates the roll of vision, personal will, dynamic creativity, initiative, intuition, risk acceptance and pragmatism as enabling leadership competencies over the necessary but more passive competencies of the managerial

mindset which deals with creating order and efficiency through controlling, evaluating and administrative practices. This shift is not subtle and can be discomfoting to those long accustomed to guiding linear processes to more effective ends, but promoting entrepreneurship establishes the expectation of dynamic leadership necessary to the maneuverist philosophy. Entrepreneurial qualities are essential to gain advantage in complex and uncertain operational environments. Most importantly, *Mission Command leverages the entrepreneurial character of the American people, who are habituated by our culture to decentralized decision making and risk appraisal.*

Warfighting Philosophy and Mission Command

MCDP-1 *Warfighting* describes rather than defines the Marine Corps philosophy of command, and indicates what command and leadership qualities are required to support our maneuverist approach. Key ideas include: decentralized decision making to accelerate tempo and gain initiative; mission tactics; a human approach centered on exploiting “human traits such as boldness, initiative, personality, strength of will and imagination;” implicit communications through mutual understanding, shared philosophy and experience; commanders forward and especially at the point of decision; shared danger and privation; professional trust; familiar relationships and the ability to thrive in an environment of chaos, uncertainty and friction. The term Mission Command is meant to encompass this broad maneuverist description, but ultimately we will be pressed for a definition that succinctly captures the essential purpose of mission command, even if in being concise it omits a more holistic description.

Defining Mission Command

Mission Command is the evolved term designed to encompass the several core ideas supporting the maneuver warfare philosophy of command as described in MCDP-1 *Warfighting* and MCDP-6 *Command and Control*. It is a fortuitous choice of words, as the Army and Marine Corps have both chosen the term ‘Mission Command’ to represent the preferred method of command and control that guides their converging leadership and warfighting philosophies. Marines steeped in the wisdom of *Warfighting* will read the new *Army Capstone Concept* with appreciation and the DRAFT TRADOC pamphlet *Mission Command Army Functional Concept* expands on our common understanding of the nature of war and combat leadership.

The current Army FM 6-0 definition of mission command is “The conduct of military operations through decentralized execution based on mission orders for effective mission accomplishment. Successful mission command results from subordinate leaders at all echelons exercising disciplined initiative within the commander’s intent to accomplish missions. It requires an environment of trust and mutual understanding.” In light of renewed emphasis on decentralized operations and the *Army Capstone Concept* call for operational adaptability the DRAFT revised definition in *MC AFC* is in step with the tenets of MCDP-1 *Warfighting* and incorporates key ideas from design theory: “The art and science of integrating the warfighting functions and synchronizing forces to understand, visualize, design, describe, lead, assess, and adapt decentralized operations to

accomplish the mission within the broad purpose of higher commanders' intent. Mission command includes empowering the lowest possible echelon with the combined arms capabilities, competency, and authority to seize, retain, and exploit the initiative.”

Aside from the longstanding Marine preference to coordinate vice synchronize, we find no reason to disagree with either definition. Together they accurately capture the purpose of Mission Command, and serve to illuminate important aspects of Mission Command as a command methodology and incorporate considerations from design theory and task organization.

The pedigree of Mission Command can be readily traced to the German concept of *Auftragstaktik*, which variously translates as ‘mission orders’ or ‘mission oriented command system’ (Fighting Power p. 36). The original concept has been subsequently validated and matured in the crucible of battle and codified for Marines in our foundational doctrinal publication *Warfighting*.

Our philosophy of warfighting and command and control must be mutually supporting and both must be relevant to gaining tactical and operational advantage in the current and anticipated operational environment, conform to the nature of war, prudently account for and exploit human nature and leverage the distinct character of the American people. As discussed previously, Clausewitz appropriately tagged human will as the arbiter of battle, succinctly summarized as *a force is not beaten until it thinks it is*. Combat is the violent application of force to coerce, bend, break or destroy an opposing will. Because war is a collective and not an individual activity, the collective will is dependent on the coherence of common purpose and the cohesion of the relationships that unite the force. The violence, danger, fear, uncertainty and shock of combat are corrosive to cohesion and have the potential to fracture the will to resist. Consequently, our maneuver warfighting philosophy seeks not only to capture military significant objectives and destroy the enemy force and material, but to simultaneously “shatter the enemy’s cohesion through a variety of rapid, focused, and unexpected actions which create a turbulent and rapidly deteriorating situation with which the enemy cannot cope.”

Appropriate to a warfighting philosophy, the focus of maneuver warfare is on the enemy. Aware that an adversary need not be physically destroyed for his collective will to collapse, maneuver warfare targets the unit cohesion that underpins human will. The brilliance of maneuver warfare is that irrespective of METT-T considerations, our common human nature makes cohesion a universal vulnerability—or an asset—depending on the *character* of the force. The essential advantage of Mission Command is that it not only enables the high relative tempo of decision and action required to place enemy cohesion at risk, but simultaneously advocates the broad empowerment of decision makers throughout the force that strengthens critical leader relationships and insulates friendly cohesion from enemy action. Understood in relation to cohesion and the crux role of human will on the battlefield, *Mission Command is both the sword and shield of combat leadership, attacking the cohesion of the enemy even as it strengthens and preserves our own*.

The “force multiplier” benefits of Mission Command do not arise spontaneously from sound battlefield leadership. While a deficiency of leadership can compromise the trust relationships that support the Mission Command ethos, the more refined benefits of Mission Command are long cultivated by institutional habits and leadership development that begin at induction and permeate organizational culture. The critical character traits of professional respect, trust and mutual understanding that enable mission command are established as expectations and competencies long before deployment. How professional leadership bonds are formed will determine how well they will respond to operational heat and combat stress; some will harden and weld tight in the crucible of battle, while others will fray and crumple. To serve our intended ends in combat, a complete definition of mission command must encompass the institutional conditions that enable mission command to thrive and develop and the personal leadership and character traits that serve to promote cohesion within the force, while simultaneously generating the force multipliers necessary to wilt enemy will. Acknowledging the leadership traits that support mission command are rooted deep in organizational culture, the Marine Corps chooses to define Mission Command in broader terms than philosophy and method, and incorporate the tenets of Mission Command into our Service ethos.

Mission Command is the leadership philosophy defined by reciprocal trust based relationships that complements and supports the maneuver warfare philosophy of the Marine Corps. Rooted in service culture and fundamental to our warrior spirit, Mission Command is a cultivated leadership ethos that empowers decentralized leaders with decision authority to pursue advantage in accord with commander’s intent. Mission Command guides the character development of Marines in garrison and combat, promotes an entrepreneurial mindset and enables the strong relationships of trust and mutual understanding necessary for decentralized decision making and the tempo of operations required to seize the initiative, degrade enemy cohesion and strengthen our own cohesive relationships in the crucible of combat.

Characteristics of Mission Command

DECENTRALIZED DECISIONMAKING

Duty is the most sublime word in the English language. You can do no more, dare do no less.

--Robert E. Lee

The central characteristic of mission command is *decentralized decision makers acting in accord with commander intent*. Commanders assign trusted subordinates relatively specific *missions* in support of a broader *purpose* or intent. To the degree practical, commanders give subordinates wide latitude to accomplish their missions, enabling them to pragmatically and creatively adapt the capabilities and talents at their disposal to the task at hand. Subordinates are expected to exercise *dutiful initiative* and tailor the actions of their unit to conform with and assist in achieving the senior’s wider purpose.

Decentralized decision making is based on the understanding that speed, fidelity and dexterity of action depend heavily upon the relative *situational awareness* of the decision

maker directing the effort. The myriad factors that stress forces in a combined arms environment (or in the complexity of COIN operations) and the many opportunities they create make close situational awareness the dominant requirement for effective action.

Gaining the Initiative

Speed of decision is essential to gaining and maintaining the *initiative*. Initiative enables the force that holds it to dictate the context of battle on terms it deems most favorable to itself and its ends. By generating a higher operational tempo through superior speed of decision, a smaller and quantitatively inferior force can wrest the initiative from an otherwise dominant adversary and dictate the terms of engagement. All speed in war is 'relative' to that of the enemy, so to stress enemy cohesion tempo need only be faster than the adversary can cope.

Decentralized decision making at the tactical edge is inherently faster and more dexterous than that of remote centralized decision authorities, especially in geographically dispersed and complex environments. By virtue of maintaining constant observation and longer orientation in proximity to the enemy or COIN problem, the on scene tactical decision maker is capable of more intuitive and rapid decisions than a remote senior, and is closer to the directed action to observe any variance from the intended result. Consequently, not only speed, but fidelity of action and adaptation to circumstance is enhanced by proximity of decision. The awareness to adapt subsequent actions to immediate and hard earned lessons further enables greater tactical dexterity. Decentralized decisions can be faster when speed is imperative for the retention of the initiative. However, with more time the same decision maker can provide a significantly more localized, tailored, textured and nuanced action, meeting the increasing demand for adaptation and dexterity required in COIN operations.

Centralized adversaries will each develop a decision cycle or "battle rhythm" that can be modeled on Boyd's classic "Observe Orient Decide and Act Loop." This rhythm will harmonize into a pattern of consistency and tempo that can be anticipated. In contrast, a more decentralized adversary will multiply decision cycles consistent with the number of decision makers. This less unitary decision model will also develop a rhythm, but it will be significantly less pronounced as the seeming cacophony of decisions will be more asynchronous and render tactical and operational patterns more difficult to discern. The apparent inconsistency in pattern among decentralized decision makers will mask intention and be more conducive to generating tactical and operational *surprise*.

The decentralized decision making advocated by Mission Command directly enables the "rapid, focused and unexpected actions" called for by our Maneuver Warfare concept. Enhanced speed of decision and action "create a turbulent and rapidly deteriorating situation with which the enemy cannot cope." The resulting loss of initiative and inability to cope causes the enemy to lose coherence of purpose and cohesion in action, his internal friction increases and his reactions become slower and less effective.

There are necessary trade-offs between speed of decision and fidelity of action. Even with the benefit of continuous observation by a decentralized force, greater speed of

decision allows for less time to reflect and plan before subsequent action. Retention of the initiative may be well worth the loss in coordination and the resulting frictions required to maintain tempo in high intensity combat. In COIN operations this trade-off might be reversed, with greater time spent focused on developing close and continuous relationships with the populace. Depending on the nature of the operation, decision makers may willingly trade time for greater focus in decision and dexterity in action. In all cases, the closer proximity, continuous observation and developed orientation of on scene tactical leaders provide objectively better and timelier decisions. Proximity also enables closer observation of variance between action and intention that becomes valuable ‘feedback’ up the command decision chain.

The Primacy of Proximity

Fundamental to the assumptions that underlie Mission Command is appreciation of the considerable advantage situational awareness provides to decision makers. While education and experience greatly contribute to speed and fidelity of decision, there are few instances where an on scene commander of adequate competency will make a decision inferior to a brilliant and experienced officer at a remote location. The many variables of modern combat and the complexity of COIN operations make situational awareness of primary importance in determining who is best qualified to make tactical decisions.

Entrepreneurial societies are meritocracies that habitually promote and value educated and experienced decision makers. The down side of this otherwise beneficial societal habit is a reflexive preference for knowledge and experience to illuminate our decision process—even over *situational awareness*—which is by far a more important factor in immediate and time sensitive decision making. A senior and experienced squadron commander can fly a plane with great agility, but he can fly only one at a time and must command the others by intent, relying on the skills and judgment of less experienced and knowledgeable subordinate pilots to make innumerable apt and more timely decisions to accomplish the mission. Specific direction is usually not only unwise, it is often counterproductive. The *primacy of proximity* in tactical decision making is a core tenet of Mission Command.

Clausewitz cautioned that war is not like a chess game. Not only do combat decision makers not take ‘turns,’ they also lack the omniscience of seeing all the relevant pieces on a uniform board. However, his caution has not precluded subsequent generations of warriors from attempting to replicate the complexity of battle on two dimensional boards, either on the Chateau General’s table or the contemporary Blue Force Tracker. The elusive quest for the ‘common operational picture’ can obscure the greater importance of decision making with timely local relevant information. Like the blind man and the elephant, each decentralized tactical decision maker has a distinct and unique piece of the wider operational problem. Often, what is significant is not what is common, but what is unique and relevant to specific problems and circumstances. Decentralized decision making based on the superior situational awareness of empowered subordinates enables much greater operational dexterity.

Grappling With Uncertainty

Each method of command grapples with uncertainty in its own way. In the absence of uncertainty, the act of command would be a simple one, if not irrelevant. But a commander's work is virtually always complicated by uncertainty, and the three styles of command address that uncertainty in different ways. Generally, the directing commander attempts to *prioritize* uncertainty, the command-by-plan commander seeks to *centralize* uncertainty, and the influencing commander prefers to *distribute* uncertainty.

Cerwinski p.131

Uncertainty is an inherent characteristic of war. An abundance of uncertainty surrounds decision makers in war, arising not only from a deficiency in the quantity of available information, but from lack of assurance of its quality and the inability to have appropriate information in the hands of the right decision maker at the right time. Much of what makes war a unique human endeavor is its inherent uncertainty, further exacerbated by what Clausewitz calls chance and friction. Unlike a complex *structured* problem, such as building the Brooklyn Bridge, which lends itself to resolution through detailed analysis and planning within definable parameters toward specific ends, war is a complex and *emergent* problem where competing human wills, composed of many stakeholders with innumerable equities interact in unpredictable ways to generate unforeseeable results. Because interaction in war is intrinsically emergent, war is an inherently unpredictable human venture where uncertainty abounds amid complexity.

Command includes the authority to initiate action and make decisions. Fidelity of decision, speed of response and effectiveness of action are all tied, in various measures to the relative degree of uncertainty the decision maker can accept before he decides that risk of action in the face of uncertainty becomes unwarranted. Consequently, there is a relentless pursuit of information by commanders and decision makers, in the hope that their decisions will be more timely, accurate, advantageous and risk worthy. There is an inverse relationship between time and uncertainty; with more time we have greater hope of gathering more information to reduce uncertainty. Likewise, there is a clear link between time and opportunity, as enemy mistakes and friendly action generate fleeting opportunity that requires expeditious action for exploitation.

In *Command in War*, Martin Van Creveld reflects on the two alternative methods by which commanders attempt to deal with uncertainty:

“Confronted with a task, and having less information available than is needed to perform the task, an organization may react in either of two ways. One is to increase its information-processing capacity, the other is to design the organization, and indeed the task itself, in such a way as to enable it to operate on the basis of less information. These approaches are exhaustive; no others are conceivable. A failure to adopt one or the other will automatically result in a drop in the level of performance. It is a central theme ... that through every change ... [and] technological development that ... one will remain superior ... in virtually every case.”

- Martin Van Creveld, *Command in War*

Gathering and disseminating useful information can reduce the degree of uncertainty, and *pattern recognition* can help us bound the range of variability in enemy response and even anticipate or estimate a probability of enemy action. However, nothing can ‘solve’ the inherently uncertain nature of war. How we choose to deal with the abundance of uncertainty is a principle driver of our philosophy of command. As Van Creveld indicates, it is a relatively binary choice. We can centralize uncertainty and attempt to deal with it holistically, or we disaggregate the wider problem into smaller, and more discrete and resolvable parts. While these smaller component “tactical” problems will share the emergent nature of the operational problems, their complexity will be proportionately reduced by a diminished number of stakeholders in a smaller geographic area. By distributing, rather than centralizing uncertainty, patterns of enemy action (or in the case of COIN, stakeholder interest) will become apparent sooner, sequentially reducing the opaqueness of one piece of the overall operational puzzle at a time. By decentralizing the decision making process and increasing the number of decision makers grappling with the operational problem we simultaneously distribute uncertainty into more manageable and resolvable parts.

Control as “Feedback”

In MCDP-6 *Command and Control* the Marine Corps takes license with the English language to describe “control” as a ‘feedback loop.’ Our understanding of command and control incorporates an iterative *decision -- action* relationship between senior and subordinate commanders who enjoy reciprocal influence. The senior commander initiates and directs action, the subordinate takes action and provides feedback—“the continuous flow of information about the unfolding situation returning to the commander—which allows the commander to adjust and modify command action as needed.” Our understanding of control is not a condition imposed by seniors on subordinates, but the continuous communications flow from the senior commander and staff to the subordinate and back that provides the information necessary for senior commanders to appropriately modify subsequent action to achieve advantage or exploit opportunity, enabling the entire system to come under ‘control.’ By this definition of control, a significant shift in perspective occurs away from the more traditional, centralized and autocratic understanding of command and control as unidirectional from senior to subordinate. The emphasis on reciprocal influence highlights the mutual dependency that exists between good guidance and timely and insightful feedback. Our traditional definition of mission orders rightly places emphasis on the unity of effort that commander’s intent provides to decentralized decision makers, but *timely action in response to feedback* is an equally important tenet of Mission Command.

Mission Command builds on the reciprocal nature of command relationships to deepen the contract between senior and subordinate leaders. The collaborative nature of the command relationship includes greater responsibility on the part of subordinates to not only report the information required by the commander’s critical information requirements, but to the degree practical to synthesize information forward and provide actionable insights that bear on the commander’s operational problem. Organizational

changes like the Company Level Intelligence Cell reflect this responsibility. Unburdened of narrow tactical minutia, the senior has wider attention to meet his operational responsibility and staff requirements to capture, analyze and discern the enemy's operational pattern and take timely and appropriate action to gain and maintain the initiative.

Feedback from subordinate leaders informs the orientation of the commander to the operational problem. Our objective is to 'understand' the operational problem to the degree practical, *but understanding is an aspirational ideal*. The likelihood of achieving anything approximating genuine understanding for any duration when opposed by thinking, reactive and adaptive adversaries is exceptionally small. A more practical expectation is to glean useful insights from *continuous discernment* and *pattern recognition*.

An unhelpful shift in our perception of technical intelligence gathering capabilities and an exaggeration of their potential to reduce uncertainty has led to a generalized belief that we will tend to fight 'with' information more than 'for' it. While every technical means should always be fully exploited, an overly optimistic view of information gathering has the potential to confuse volume of data with enhancement in intelligence and encourage commanders to delay decision until refined intelligence indicates clear options. The acme of the art of decision making in a time compressed combat environment is to be the first to discern the enemy's intention based on pattern recognition with the *least* amount of information and take effective action first. The 'understanding' we seek is *sufficient* situational awareness to discern critical enemy vulnerabilities, anticipate his intended action and foresee to the degree practical the *probable* emergent consequences of friendly and enemy action.

Combat Stresses Adaptive Learning

Time is a competitive component of combat, so speed of decision is critical to gaining and retaining the initiative. However, since war involves great danger and grave risk to human life and material resources, leaders instinctively seek the highest level of situational awareness practical before making crux decisions. There is a grave tension between the competing demands for faster decisions and the time required to reduce risk born of uncertainty. The tension reflects the trade-off between timeliness and fidelity of action. (Footnote: The term fidelity of action is meant to encompass the quality of a decision in terms of its optimization, appropriateness and expenditure of resources proportionate to the resistance encountered and objectives achieved.) This tension is exacerbated by an adaptive and creative enemy who is determined on success and survival and will work tirelessly to dissemble and confound our situational understanding at every turn. The chaos and disorder of battle also contributes to uncertainty, fear, anxiety and a sense of dislocation. Consequently, decisions in war make great demands on the moral strength of leaders to make timely decisions that will lead to advantageous action in conditions of uncertainty, fear, chaos and death. While technical and numerical overmatch can reduce the influences of uncertainty, resurgent chance and friction are sure

to preclude any battlefield from becoming a “safe” environment, and combat will remain unpredictable and risky.

The greatest contribution to uncertainty and unpredictability is enemy action. Because a thinking adaptive and reactive adversary will devise creative responses to both success and failure, his action and reaction will defy prediction. Based on his past actions, known character, and assumed circumstances we may deceive and lure him into disadvantageous situations, but his response cannot be scripted and we are equally susceptible to his ruses. At best, we can work, plan, and deceive enemy forces to achieve a greater *probably* of success. The calculations that contribute to our risk assessment are based on incomplete information, and consequently, our own actions may not always be in accord with our best interest and may place our force at disproportionate risk and danger. In short, our best decision makers will ultimately make mistakes, and the more decisions made, the greater the opportunity for some proportionate increase in mistakes.

While the nature of war remains constant, the character of war changes with every age and place and is constantly evolving in the immediacy of conflict, as creative adversaries adapt to each other’s strengths. The nature of war can be studied, but the character of war must be experienced as a complex and emergent environment that requires continuous observation and adaptation to remain competitive. Consequently, *combat must be understood as a heuristic environment where probability of success and survival are elevated, but not assured, by timely action informed by **calculated risk** and **adaptive learning**.*

Understanding that combat is an adaptive learning environment has several significant implications for our Mission Command philosophy.

First, our very best leaders are prone to make mistakes in combat. No matter how hard we work to ‘calculate risk,’ reality often defies probability in hostile, complex and emergent endeavors. *Experienced* and *intuitive* decision makers will make fewer mistakes, but only those who are compulsively risk adverse will make none. Absence of mistakes is a deceptive metric for judging and selecting leaders. What is far more significant is the potential for leaders to learn and adapt from mistakes and the ability to discern and avoid the patterns that led to failure. Leaders who have not made mistakes have not demonstrated the ability to recover and adapt. Some leaders have the ability to grasp the opportunity in adversity and distinguish temporary setback from ultimate failure. Others are susceptible to panic when plans are compromised by enemy action. (Grant at Shiloh vs. Hooker at Chancellorsville) Our service ethos must cultivate a climate of risk acceptance. Our leader development process should offer opportunities to refine judgment in the face of risk, with wide potential for failure in training to identify and develop resilient leaders capable of coping with setbacks.

Second, the leadership concept of the ‘decision window’ pertains in time competitive environments. Before making crux decisions, every leader wants to know “how much time do I have to gain additional information and situational awareness before I begin to lose opportunity or risk the initiative?” The informed answer to that question defines the

“decision window” and is a key leadership consideration when framing alternatives. Leaders who have the aptitude and judgment to hit the sweet spot in competitive decision making understand the requirement to dictate and control tempo. This intangible skill is related to judgment and developed through experience. The decision window lies between ‘rash’ decisions made with intuition unleavened by information, and ‘indecision’ which allows opportunity to evaporate without action for fear of risk. While the propensity to risk may be personality and character dependent, the ability for calculated and effective risk taking is shaped by experience.

The maneuverist seeks to overwhelm the enemy with a near simultaneous array of pressing decisions with increasingly time compressed windows. Mission Command enables his effort by greatly expanding the number of subordinate decision makers empowered to exercise unique initiative in accord with common purpose. Their many unpredictable and perhaps seemingly discordant actions executed with speed and violence can induce cognitive overload, panic and systemic shock that crack the coherence of enemy response. When receiving enemy action, a decentralization of authority in accord with Mission Command distributes the decision process among a wider array of decision makers who can suffer a similar flurry of action with comparative aplomb. This asymmetry in decision authority has been played out innumerable times on different battlefields with consistent and proven result, but the human proclivity to hoard authority and centralize decision making in the face of risk and uncertainty is resurgent.

Like a bridge that has been sold by hucksters many times, the illusory promise of some technical means that will make centralized authorities better informed and more agile than the direct observation and action of many on scene commanders continues to pander to the invincible hubris of our nature. Perhaps it is counterintuitive, but commanders who distribute their authority multiply their capability, perhaps exponentially, while those who hoard decision authority reject the potential of the massed cognition of the talented subordinates they fail to engage. Such leaders may have the potential for great singular effort, but lack the nerve to trust. The failure is not in method, but in character.

There is a familiar pattern of aggressive and success oriented individuals who when placed in positions of weighty leadership ‘attempt control’ as operational entropy edges on chaos and begins to degrade success. Life experience with managing linear process has taught them that their personal skill sets can solve any problem, so they reflexively forsake the opportunity to command the wider effort in order to ‘regain control’ over a particular problem. Sensing the potential for failure, they begin to exercise the long screwdriver of authority without deference to the superior awareness of subordinate proximity. The sharp, but remote tool of knowledgeable experience is blunt and delayed in response to more proximate and agile enemy actions that benefit from slowed reaction of distant decision makers to spawn new problems that further degrade the situation. The attempt to achieve greater fidelity of action through better decisions has cost the initiative, which can only be gained and retained by timely action. With the enemy dictating tempo, disorder displaces coherence of action, even as the demonstrated lack of trust in subordinate judgment corrodes cohesion. Sometimes these misplaced efforts at control seem to arrest immediate failure, but often at the expense of trust relationships

and long term unit success. This all too common response is as intuitive as it is wrong. Mission Command advocates forward leadership, *especially at the point of decision*, but it is to support the on scene commander with additional assets and gain a direct appreciation for his circumstances, not displace his superior orientation to the tactical situation without reason.

Third, *by distributing decision making we distribute risk* as well as uncertainty. There is greater likelihood that mistakes will occur because more decisions are being made by more empowered leaders, but decisions made well forward correspond to a lower threshold of risk. A decentralized decision or action that incurs risk may imperil part of the force, but it is far less likely to risk the entire force, and the lesson learned by the smaller unit may serve to inoculate adjacent and larger formations from the same surprise. This is the principle that guides the classic use of advanced and rear guard formations. By lowering the threshold of decision and pushing initial decisions to the tactical edge, we increase the total number of more granular decisions. As a consequence, some proportionally greater number of mistakes may occur, although the enhanced situational awareness and proximity of the decision maker may preclude omissions less obvious to a remote senior and take advantage of opportunity that might otherwise go unexploited.

Fourth, we must come to institutionally value the importance of inoculatory mistakes in leader development. The decision making skills necessary to calculate risk and appraise opportunity are cultivated in an environment where failure is possible and sometimes experienced. Character becomes more evident when personalities are stressed. The potential for failure refines focus for learning and the experience of failure renders observable how individuals respond and recover, accept responsibility, learn from mistakes and strengthen themselves to preclude future recurrence.

Lastly, the time competitive nature of warfare and war's inherent uncertainty make risk unavoidable. *Risk is the handmaiden of uncertainty and consequently inherent to war.* Risk acceptance is action in the face of uncertainty. *Rashness* is action in the face of improbability or the failure to make a prudent cost benefit calculation of risk versus result. *Calculated* or *prudent* risk acknowledges the possibility of chance and friction to disrupt the intended action, but strives for advantage by timely exploitation or creation of favorable opportunity. *Boldness* is the moral quality of leadership that embraces risk mindful of the importance of tempo and aggressively presses unanticipated action in the face of uncertainty. *Risk acceptance is a moral quality essential to the practice of Mission Command.* Risk tolerance is a reflection of character and indicative of a leader's nerve.

Risk

Risk is a military virtue. This fundamental fact should not require elaboration among military professionals, but a generation has matured in a social milieu of increasing risk avoidance with a cultural bias to extensive risk mitigation measures. It is important to distinguish the requirement to prudently mitigate risk to promote safety in training and

non-combat military endeavors and the essential moral responsibility to accept risk and *decide* in war. The many benefits of Operational Risk Management (ORM) in maximizing safety has had unintended bleed over into operational considerations where discussions of risk would lead observers to conclude that risk is now understood to be a largely resolvable condition, vice an inherent attribute of war. Of course, a reckless disregard of risk is not consistent with good leadership or tactics, and prudent consideration and action for force preservation is an enduring requirement, but ultimately war is a dangerous business. As with uncertainty, risk can be minimized with time by a more dominant force, and in many cases the delay is prudent relative to the objective and cost in blood and treasure. However, if the enemy strategy is protraction, the time expenditure contributes to his success.

In this milieu of risk and uncertainty combat leaders are compelled to determine a ‘probability’ of enemy action, or the likelihood of success of friendly initiatives, based on intuition leveraged by military judgment and experience, pattern recognition and elements of incomplete information. Then leaders must decide and act, or decide not to, which is itself a decision. This largely intuitive estimate of situational opportunity and probability, supported as appropriate by analysis of relevant facts, make combat decisions a more ‘calculated’ risk. Yet calculation is not assurance, and however well we stack the deck in our favor, the caprice of chance will ensure that the best decision makers will sometimes make mistakes. These mistakes are as inevitable as they are regrettable, but mistakes made at lower levels are usually more survivable than those made further up the command chain, and each mistake produces burnt fingers and painful experiences that if appropriately distilled can yield enduring lessons that place leaders on a learning curve that minimizes the danger of repetition and enables them to recognize different but similar perils.

The extent to which risk and attendant fear, danger and destruction debilitate individual and collective will is a function of *character*. Strong will can sustain purpose and endure risk and adversity in both intensity and duration. Will reflects both individual and collective character at both tactical and strategic levels. When national will is tenuous, military endeavors will be less risk accepting, tentative and irresolute, enticing us to reduce intensity of action while increasing the duration of conflict. When vital national interests are not at stake, risk calculation rightly favors the expenditure of time and resources to preclude loss of life, but a force conditioned to avoid even prudent risk develops habits that may leave it disadvantaged against an opportunistic, willful and risk accepting adversary driving operational tempo to his advantage. *Risk acceptance is essential to exercise opportunistic will.*

The relationship between time, risk and fidelity of action can be metaphorically illustrated by the relationship between temperature, pressure and volume in the ideal gas law. We can reduce decision time by speeding planning and preparation for action and accepting greater uncertainty and risk. Or we can expend time to plan and organize our actions, opening the risk of enemy counter preparations and the potential loss of initiative. Our actions are timely enough if they gain and retain the initiative. Since all competitive time decisions are relative to the enemy, deciding ever faster is not always

desired once we outpace the adversary decision cycle. Once we can dictate tempo we can begin to focus on achieving greater fidelity in planning and dexterity in execution. Directing the trade-offs between the expenditure of time, reduction of risk and refinement of action to achieve advantage is a crux responsibility of combat command that demands sound military judgment and places great strain on the leader's nerve. Subordinates must be attentive to the greater latitude confident commanders will give to competent subordinates and the expected degree of risk and risk acceptance associated with the mission at hand. Aggressive subordinates will strain the leash of commander nerve and staff cognizance to accomplish their assigned tasks, the strain reflecting the moral qualities of both commanders to accept risk.

Nerve

Nerve is a visceral term that aptly conveys the moral strength, emotional resiliency and predatory calculation that steels resolve and tempers impatience. It is the ability to absorb great pressure with conspicuous equanimity and to master emotion with composed judgment. Nerve is a quality of character that enables other leadership traits to thrive amid danger and violence under the weight of command. It steadies leader confidence and distinguishes those self assured enough to invite criticism, listen to subordinates, learn from all and eschew arrogance. *Nerve is a passive form of moral courage in senior leaders that inspires and sustains a bias for action in subordinates.*

Nerve is decisive in the face of uncertainty, tolerant in the wake of mistakes, and calculating in the pursuit of opportunity and advantage. Nerve enables self mastery and thwarts panic. Most significantly from the standpoint of mission command, nerve is the crux leadership trait essential to both promoting cohesion amid the risk and uncertainty of battle and the timely decisions and difficult trade-offs necessary to achieve advantage.

Just as Mission Command must imbue our culture in both garrison and combat, so too the moral qualities of Mission Command must be exercised and exemplified in both peace and war. In garrison training events, leader nerve combines with *restraint* to unleash subordinates to train to failure, make mistakes and develop their decision making skills. Consequently, we assert that *the traditional leadership traits expected of all Marines, must be augmented by trust, nerve and restraint in senior leaders.* While trust has long been recognized as a prerequisite of mission orders, it is nerve, characterized by practiced restraint confronting the pressures of combat command that makes Mission Command more dependent on the moral character of the leaders themselves than a mere leadership method. Nerve embraces risk, vice merely tolerating it. Risk guards the portal to opportunity.

Audacity

Audacity augments courage; hesitation, fear.

Publius Syrus

If nerve is the passive form of moral courage that enables leadership development and cultivates subordinate decision making, audacity is the active predatory form. Audacity

has several components that together enable surprise and speed decision. First, *audacity is willful*. The audacious commander *willfully* changes the established context of conflict or the enemy's paradigm of the battlespace and *invalidates commonly held assumptions* to achieve exploitable advantage. He lures or coerces the enemy to accept battle on disadvantageous terms. The audacious leader *regards risk as the wellspring of surprise* and understands the debilitating nature of surprise on enemy coherence of action. Surprise is a morally corrosive force that disproportionately contributes to panic. The audacious commander *fights in both the physical and cognitive domains* and cunningly induces surprise to weight the benefits of operational art. Clearly understanding that the will of the enemy commander and the cohesion of his forces is the objective that can yield the most disproportionate results, he selects objectives for both operational and psychological impact. Lastly, *he dictates tempo to gain the initiative*, and relies upon personal example to inspire audacious subordinates to maintain it.

Audacity is episodic. In many cases audacity precipitates rapid decision following a calculated building of conditions or exploitation of anomalies or circumstances that invalidate enemy assumptions and generate surprise. (MacArthur at Inchon) *Boldness* is a more sustainable posture that strives to consistently advantage the force through calculated risks focused on achieving incremental and cumulative advantage. Boldness takes many forms, but it enables continuous opportunity for surprise and unbalanced response. The consistently bold commander conditions the enemy to hesitate as he anticipates new surprise, or invites his adversary to self imbalance through untimely over-reaction.

Common to both audacity and boldness is the commander's competitive focus on adversary capabilities and intentions and the resolution to willfully generate advantage and exploit opportunity. Since victory cannot be predicted by a quantitative measure of the correlation of forces, the bold commander attempts to leverage operational art, leadership and intangible moral factors to disproportionately contribute to decision. Audacity and boldness are fruits of an opportunistic will and entrepreneurial spirit. The resolve and personality of the commander are multiplied by similarly willful subordinates exercising tactical cunning and initiative in accord with his intent and example.

Operational Art and the Art of Command

Operational Art: The conception and execution, by military forces, of operations to attain strategic objectives, through such actions as apportioning resources to tactical units, or coordinating the logistics requirements of an operation. Operational art forms a bridge between strategy, with which the political aims of a war are defined, and tactics, with which the battles of a war are fought.

--US Military Dictionary

Viewed from the vantage of entrepreneurship, the official definition of operational art appears sterile. Although apportioning resources and coordination of requirements are foundational professional competencies, the dispassionate execution of operations to attain objectives does not capture the predatory resolve that characterizes the creative cunning critical to the artful conduct of combat command. The entrepreneurial spirit that animates Mission Command promotes an opportunistic will bent on generating specific

advantages and exploiting broad opportunity in an attempt to achieve cumulative advantage with the potential for disproportionate result. This aggressive versus administrative mindset greatly influences the Mission Command approach to *operational art* and the *art of command*. These distinct concepts are approached together because of the manner in which Mission Command seeks to go beyond the integration and application of functional capabilities in defining operational art. Mission Command views operational art as a holistic effort to engage an adversary on advantageous terms. This effort is artful in that it transcends attempts to achieve mere material overmatch by the deliberate leveraging of moral forces and the recognition of the relationship—adversarial though it may be—that exists between the competing wills of engaged combatants. Operational art is most sublime when it induces the enemy to become complicit in his own demise, often by convincing him of the great wisdom of his own plan, or luring him toward an illusory weakness.

Mission Command does not alter the inherent authority or traditional responsibilities of command, nor does Mission Command democratize command functions. However, Mission Command changes the *quality* of the command relationships from hierarchical, subservient and overtly directive to reciprocal and implicitly collaborative. Collaborative does not imply naive egalitarianism, but a relationship of mutual respect and close coordination that involves and engages subordinate decision makers, who as a consequence of intimate involvement, are much more invested in the result. Decentralization of command does not dilute the authority of the commander—rather it multiplies his authority by the number of very attentive and engaged subordinates who exercise timely initiative and come to judge their own performance by the degree to which their actions accord with commander’s intent. Mission Command should replace perceptions of seniors exercising passive and proscriptive oversight with examples of their active support for subordinate initiative.

Mission Command embraces the competitive nature of war. The interaction of competing opportunistic wills demands that operational art leaven the application of military force with guile, surprise, deception and boldness to gain and sustain advantage. In this way the flexibility, adaptability and initiative gained through Mission Command compliments and interlaces with operational art to ‘grapple’ with competing enemy forces in a holistic manner. The conduct of the grappling can take many forms and will be simultaneous at the tactical and operational level, with numerous subordinates providing the sinew, guile and resolve to lend tangible power and action to achieve the commander’s intangible intent. Exercising their initiative independently or in concert, subordinates should have the authority and communications means to self organize and coordinate their efforts in immediate response to the tactical situation.

Adaptable Command Relationships

Mission Command extols the ability of subordinates to act on their own initiative within the context of their mission orders, and to exercise *dutiful initiative* in the absence of orders. Whether maneuvering in concert with other units and directly supported by centralized fires, or operating more independently, the latitude provided by mission

orders enables more agile maneuver, faster response and more dexterous action. Concentrated or distributed, within or beyond the range of mutual support, centrally synchronized or self coordinated, the tenets of Mission Command allow for pragmatic flexibility in command responsibility and relationships to best serve mission accomplishment. Although our discussion of Mission Command thus far has focused on senior subordinate relationships, the ability and responsibility of decentralized decision makers to coordinate in all directions, both in terms of contiguous battle-space and organizational relationships is critical to preparing for opportunity. *Lateral self coordination authority forward between and among maneuver and supporting forces can enable the timely, agile and effective action necessary to exploit fleeting opportunity.*

Trust and Mutual Understanding

Dutiful subordinates 'share the burden of command' when mutual understanding enables them to empathize with the senior commander's military situation, comprehend his operational vision, and anticipate the trade-offs he must make. Common joint and Marine Corps doctrine and shared educational and training experiences provide a basis for a common approach to combat challenges. Professional discussions in informal settings establish common expectations among commanders, while training, exercises and combat experiences give subordinates the chance to demonstrate common and unique competencies. Shared challenges provided insight on character. Training activities contribute to mutual trust, professional respect and high standards of personal and unit expectation. These cohesive qualities provide the moral strength that sustains the relationships and develops the *implicit understanding* that enables coherent action amid the turbulence of battle.

Dutiful subordinates, acting as collaborative military professionals can do more than conduct directed tactical actions with unique initiative. They are capable of developing operational level opportunities and envisioning how senior commanders can exploit them with concerted action. When Jackson approached Lee at Chancellorsville with niche information on how to gain the Union flank, he clearly understood Lee's operational problem and recognized the potential of the information he offered. More significantly, he formulated and proposed a means to exploit that information. Lee, unquestionably the senior and fully in command, acknowledge the value of the flanking opportunity and asked Jackson how he proposed to exploit it. Recognizing the risk and audacity of dividing his already smaller force in the face of the enemy, Lee bought into Jackson's operational vision to achieve surprise. Trust, respect, mutual and implicit understanding, reciprocal relationships and the ability to recognize and exploit fleeting opportunity all contributed to surprise and set the conditions for disproportionate success.

OPERATIONAL DESIGN AND PLANNING

Plans are of little importance, but planning is essential – Winston Churchill

Plans are nothing; planning is everything. – Dwight D. Eisenhower

No battle plan survives contact with the enemy. – Helmuth von Moltke the Elder

A good plan, violently executed now, is better than a perfect plan next week. – George S. Patton

The study and application of war is never a static endeavor. Every era has added to the body of thought on warfare in both theory and practice. In his day, Clausewitz relied upon the then cutting edge Newtonian scientific principles to provide apt metaphors to illustrate his theories. Words like friction, center of gravity and mass are rooted in Newtonian physics and were incorporated by Clausewitz into *Von Krieg*. Like many other disciplines of his day, Clausewitz sought to apply the principles of scientific method to military ends. However, he was aware that the linear logic of the scientific method could not account for the complex nature of war, nor significantly reduce its fundamental uncertainty. Lacking adequate metaphors to describe his intuitive understanding of the emergent nature of war, Clausewitz never completed *Von Krieg*, and it is only published posthumously. Some argue that if Clausewitz had access to the concepts associated with complexity theory he would have had the terminology and metaphors necessary to succinctly articulate his intuitive insights. (See Thomas J. Czerwinski, *Coping With the Bounds*, CCRP 1998) Mission Command incorporates the emerging insights of complexity and design theory into the classic wisdom of Clauswitzian and maneuverist thought to arrive at new assertions concerning the design and planning process.

Complexity theory provides new definitions, metaphors and techniques to discern the nature and distinguish the characteristics of complex problems. Combat operations are complex and emergent problems where the competing wills and forces of adaptive and creative adversaries grapple in unique and unpredictable ways. Operational Design theory offers a method of coping with complexity and initiating effective action despite the inherent uncertainty and difficulties of complex and emergent operations. The Marine Corps Planning Process incorporates design principles into the operational planning process as a method to assist decision making in complex and emergent situations. The emphasis that Mission Command places on the reciprocal command relationship and information flow between senior and subordinate leaders supports this planning enhancement.

An inquiry into the incorporation of complexity and design theory into the military planning process is beyond the scope of this paper, as it is more appropriately detailed in DRAFT 5-1 *Marine Corps Planning Process*. Nevertheless, there are specific aspects of our Mission Command philosophy that compliment the design and planning process and are worthy of discussing as part of our philosophy of command, since they offer insights into leadership development. There are several significant ways that Mission Command supports and interacts with elements of design to enable effective planning and action.

Traditional ‘mission orders’ focus attention on the senior commander’s intent down to subordinate commanders, which remains a critical aspect of Mission Command. However, *Mission Command seeks to better balance the reciprocal command relationship by placing equal emphasis on the ‘feedback’ up from subordinate commanders that allows seniors to ‘reframe’ the problem as they better discern its nature and iteratively refine and reshape their guidance for successive efforts.*

Mission Command nests with MCDP 5-1 and supports a more nuanced understanding of intent. The broad term ‘intent’ can be decomposed to reflect the will of the commander at various times during operational planning and throughout execution. In addition to the Initial Planning Guidance and the formal statement of Intent included in the mission order, Mission Command emphasizes the informal but critical commander activities that help shape and disseminate commander’s intent and promote greater force agility. These activities cannot be check-listed or overly formalized without losing the discretion necessary to commander’s judgment. As MCDP 5-1 notes, activities are often concurrent and the design and planning processes are continuous. The process of *problem framing* calls for enhancing our understanding of both strategic and operational context.

Strategic Context: (MCDP 5-1 Understanding the Operational Environment) Every operational commander would like to have a good appreciation of the overall strategic context before planning and execution. For example, by 1945 US Marines had conducted several amphibious landings that advanced the American line of operations toward Japan, and General Holland Smith had a good understanding of the strategic situation he was operating within when planning to capture Iwo Jima. For the most part, he was able to focus on the operational problem at hand. In contrast, Marines ordered to defend the airfield at Danang, Vietnam in 1965 understood their tactical mission, but the commander’s appreciation of the overall strategic context for that and subsequent missions was murky. It would be years before the national command authorities would begin to comprehend the nature of that conflict.

In an ideal world, we would gain a holistic understanding of the strategic context and operational problem before initiating action. This would not only insure that our actions were optimally effective, but would preclude unintended effects. However, the need to take immediate action, to defend an airfield in Vietnam, stop the dying in Somalia or assist the survivors in Haiti often prohibits anything more than rudimentary understanding of the overarching context at the outset of operations. This uncertainty does not preclude action, but it places an additional requirement on the operational commander to help begin to discern the strategic context, even as he strives to develop and execute a coherent operational plan. While higher commands and national agencies will continue to develop and inform strategic context from afar, the many engagements by tactical units in the operations area will more quickly discern the nature of the enemy and the conflict (or humanitarian problem) by interaction. The feedback the operational commander provides up to theater and national command authorities enables them to more quickly adjust their vision to meet the realities of the situation. Initial assumptions are often based on sketchy information that only engagement can confirm or deny. Operational adaptability is dependent on the iterative adaptation and refinement of purpose, intent and action to actual circumstances.

Operational Context: (MCDP 5-1 Understanding the Problem) The constant interaction and innovation of adaptive adversaries makes war an ever changing environment. The dynamic complexity of counter insurgency and humanitarian operations help illustrate the sometimes difficult requirement to discern the operational context. The fall of Baghdad in 2003 ended the Saddam Regime without the anticipated

end to conflict. A new post Saddam conflict commenced between new stakeholders with different equities and divergent interests. Once again American forces found themselves fighting a war where both the strategic context and appropriate operational objectives were opaque. Likewise, Marines dispatched to Somalia in 1992 as part of Operation Restore Hope were confronted with a confusing array of local warlords, NGOs, and tribes that had conflicting loyalties, equities and interests. While the mission was a relatively straightforward directive to stop the dying and feed the hungry, it was imperative for the Marines to immediately begin to understand the ‘human terrain’ environment they were operating in and to adapt operations and methods to account for local realities. As their appreciation for the nature of the problem and the people increased, they modified their operational plans and adapted methods—while remaining in accord with the ultimate mission of saving human life.

‘No plan survives contact with the enemy’ is a well known aphorism that bows to the inevitable deviations from planned actions that enable commanders to take advantage of enemy mistakes and avoid enemy preparations for our undoing. In addition to enemy action, our own lack of understanding of numerous METT-T factors, and the unpredictability of their interaction, necessitates an iterative and adaptive ‘reframing’ of the operational problem that changes the initial plan and updates commander’s intent. The dynamics of the unfolding situation compel a persistent effort to discern both the strategic and operational context. The fruits of this continuous discernment effort are reflected in the commander’s orientation, initial planning guidance, formal statement of intent, guidance for developing courses of action and his constant reappraisal and appreciation of the situation that he shares with subordinates and staff.

What is important to our philosophy of command is the recognition that success is not dependent upon how well our actions conform to the initial plan, but how well and quickly we can successively reframe our appreciation for the tactical or operational problem and adapt the plan and iterative action as appropriate. This reframing process is heavily dependent on timely and insightful *feedback* from engaged units.

Initial Planning Guidance: This a formal part of the planning process as described in MCDP 5-1 where the commander shares his understanding to date of the strategic context and operational problem and provides elementary guidance on how he envisions gaining or exploiting advantage over the enemy to accomplish the assigned mission.

Appreciation of the situation (vision): The iterative nature of design and planning is predicated on commander’s intent informing the action and initiative of subordinates, and subordinate ‘feedback’ on the results of their efforts informing the senior commander’s subsequent intent and guidance. As the senior commander makes his battlefield circulation he gains more refined appreciation for the tactical situation his subordinate commander’s are facing. Dutiful subordinates are each wrestling with a different portion of the operational elephant in different ways. They exchange information laterally to enhance their situational understanding, and inform their commander of tactical circumstances and exploitable anomalies in their area of operations. The senior commander and his staff digest these many insights and points of information to discern

operational patterns and glean opportunities to wrest the initiative and exploit advantage. Coincident with battlefield circulation and other means of disseminating intent, the commander discusses with subordinates his growing and continuously developing appreciation of the situation. He discusses relative strengths and weaknesses, reflects on the dynamics of the operational problem and deepens his subordinate's insight into both the operational situation and his thoughts for how he can gain and maintain the initiative. These conversations allow him to articulate his expectation, instill his determination, and project the force of his personality to subordinates. He shares with them his predatory instincts on how to achieve advantage and solicits their thoughts on developing cunning and creative solutions to tactical and operational problems. In all cases he incorporates his appreciation of enemy intentions, capabilities and vulnerabilities and articulates his operational approach concerning how to engage the enemy force to advantage. This reciprocal and collaborative process contributes significantly to the development of mutual understanding and enables subordinates to act with conspicuous initiative in the assurance that their actions are in accord with the commanders overarching intent.

Intent Statement: The commander's statement of intent is personally written as a part of the formal mission order. It is a clear, concise statement of the purpose of the operation. As stated in MCDP 5-1, this expression of intent can be reviewed and revised as required, but it is a relatively enduring statement reflecting the operational purpose. It promotes *coherence of action* among decentralized decision makers, even in degraded communications environments, by identifying operational purpose.

Aside from each unit's particular mission, the intent statement is arguably the most important single piece of communication the commander provides to his command. The primacy of the commander's formal intent makes it an apt point of engagement for his strategic communications message. Classic statements of intent focused on achieving objectives and the tangible results of operational engagements. Counter insurgency operations, wars fought among the people for the protection and support of the people, often have more nuanced and less tangible objectives. As we learned from the 1968 Tet Offensive, it is entirely possible to decisively defeat the enemy in battle, achieve all tactical and operational objectives and still lose the "battle of the narrative." The difference between how events actually unfold and how events are understood and contextualized can be radically different. During Tet, US forces decisively defeated the VC and they never recovered, but the optics of a firefight in the middle of the US Embassy in Saigon had strategic repercussions that ultimately crushed American will. The 'battle of the narrative' is recognition of the Clauswitzian dictum that war is a violent conflict of human will, and will is the ultimate arbiter of victory. Will is a potent but intangible force that resides in the cognitive domain. The expression 'battle of the narrative' conveys recognition that the cognitive domain is a contestable space. It is where the moral high ground lies. While physical actions influence the cognitive domain, we must address it directly if we are to win the "hearts and minds" of the people—both at home and abroad. COIN operations in particular require that we become agile contenders in the 'battle of the narrative.'

To account for the need to engage in both the physical and cognitive domains, our Mission Command philosophy introduces the concept of the aspirational narrative. The *'aspirational narrative'* is the formal means by which the commander conveys his intentions and frames the message and meaning that he hopes the actions of his force will convey to the enemy, the local populace and the American people. The aspirational narrative is the message with which we hope to fill the competitive space that will be occupied by the force that can convince the populace it best serves their interests. Since actions speak louder than words, our every action must be framed in light of the commander's operational intent in terms of objectives and his aspirational narrative in terms of message.

The cognitive domain is composed of more than information. It includes aspirations, beliefs, insecurities, ambitions and the full array of human passion and emotion. We must compete across a broad spectrum of human interests that in the aggregate influence the will of the people.

Actions convey intentions, but actions can be misinterpreted. For example, a forward operating base established at the edge of a town can be seen as civil protection or foreign occupation depending on the 'context' of the narrative accepted by the people. The commander's strategic communications message establishes the 'context' of his intentions that will be supported by the many 'facts' created by the actions of his force. Since actions convey intentions they become a form of communication. Marines illustrate the intent of their actions by demeanor, deportment and a host of non-verbal means that include everything from how they drive to how they engage the population. The quality and tenor of these many 'engagements' with the populace contribute to the developing 'narrative' that will inform human will. The 'aspirational narrative' is a commander's statement designed to align actions with intentions to influence both reality and perceptions. It is designed to influence the conversation of the village women at the well tomorrow, as well as the headlines of international newspapers next week.

Guidance: Commander's operational guidance, as differentiated from planning guidance, is episodic and timely direction or information that enables agility. Less formal and more timely than a fragmentary order, operational guidance provides timely cautions and warning, alerts subordinates to fleeting opportunity or promotes self coordinating efforts forward in response to higher intentions. When unrestrained by judgment, guidance can lead to micro-management, but as a timely refinement or nuanced modification of intent it can greatly enable agile response to enemy action. Changes to operational guidance will often be prompted by subordinate feedback that causes the commander to reassess his operational appreciation and initiate new action. While changes to operational guidance may be formalized after the event with a frag-o, subordinates are expected to act on commander's guidance as quickly as possible.

Feedback Enables Reframing

Design theory emphasizes the need for the commander to iteratively 'reframe' the military problem as result of a continuous process of assessment. The emergent nature of

complex problems leads us to anticipate unintended consequences from even the best of plans. Consequently, we will need to adjust our actions to changes in enemy disposition or operational circumstances. Mission Command supports design and assessment by weighting the importance of feedback in the 'reciprocal relationship' between collaborative commanders. Subordinates have the duty to exercise initiative in accord with commander's intent and guidance and to provide feedback in the form of CCIR's and other formal products, as well as carefully crafted *insights* gleaned from interaction with the enemy or populace. Commander's and staffs have the responsibility to collect and analyze the feedback from Marines who have taken great risk to acquire it. In some cases the information will prove useful as a data point in the wider operational mosaic, in other cases it will have immediate value if it can be exploited in a timely manner. Some feedback influences future plans, some is turned quickly into operational guidance to exploit fleeting opportunity.

CONCLUSION

Mission Command is the leadership philosophy that complements our warfighting philosophy and sustains our warrior ethos. For the principles of mission command to guide our actions in battle, we must habituate ourselves to their practice in garrison. More importantly, leaders must judge their *character*, and in turn their competence, by their ability to establish the climate of trust, professional respect and mutual understanding that enable the habits of Mission Command to develop and thrive. As a method, mission command has ample precedence as a highly evolved philosophy of command and control that can produce disproportionate combat results, but it is highly dependent on the spirit of entrepreneurship that only develops when leaders have the nerve to trust, the time to teach, and the confidence to nurture reciprocal relationships that engender cohesion. Mission Command is a proven combat multiplier, and consequently an essential institutional value, but it can only gain acceptance and grow in application in an environment of moral courage where junior leaders have the opportunity for professional development and apprenticeship by exercising judgment and examining consequences. These conditions demand senior leaders who exemplify the leadership traits of trust, nerve and restraint to encourage initiative and a bias for action in subordinates. The spirit of entrepreneurship that should characterize all Marine leaders goes beyond the mere exercise of dutiful initiative in achieving commander's intent, and should allow for the development and selection of those leaders who have the predatory combat skills that enable them to grapple to advantage with agile enemies in the physical, moral and cognitive dimensions.

As an institution, it is a Service responsibility to create the professional environment for Mission Command to thrive, yet the habits of Mission Command cannot be imposed by edict, and must arise from the character of those who lead. Institutions are interesting entities. At their inception they tend to thrive on innovation and value risk acceptance, but as they mature they tend to idealize competence and value consistency. All these virtues are good in proper perspective, but as the relative emphasis shifts with time, so too does the institutional culture. When a mature institution is challenged by a new upstart animated by a new paradigm, either in business or war, the adaptability of the

mature institution is tested. Hoisting a new rule set, the challenger accepts disproportionate risk to achieve disproportionate result. Often, the dominant power hesitates as it strives to comprehend and then adapt to the paradigm shift. The agility of the mature institution is dependent on its ability to field comparable risk takers and innovators capable of wresting the initiative from the adversary in multiple dimensions. Should they fail, maps are redrawn and civilization's values are recalibrated.

Our Corps is unique, and the American people count on us as both the first best option and the ultimate last resort. They expect that in extremis, our Corps will somehow cultivate and field Marines with the audacity of a Presley O'Bannon and the tenacity of Dan Daily. Bold courage is not just a fortuitous and episodic consequence of training competence. While it is highly dependent on individual character, combat courage and competence springs from a culture of cohesion and is fostered by trust centered relationships. Courage is a manifestation of a culture that accepts risk to build experience, prefers bold action that misses the mark to indolence that lets opportunity escape, and measures leaders by their ability to sharpen the predatory instincts of bold subordinates and underwrite their learning curve with their own credibility. Our Corps must remain youthful in adaptability and approach, even as we mature in competence and capability. The apex of international power is a privileged and perilous place. Our position and values can only be sustained by adaptive, innovative and courageous leaders. As long as the values of Mission Command are actively fostered by Marines, our Corps will meet the high expectations of the Nation we serve.

Comment and suggestions can be directed to:

Art Corbett (arthur.corbett@usmc.mil)
858-750-5049