

The Challenges of Adopting a Culture of Mission Command in the US Army

A Monograph

by

LTC James W. Wright
United States Army



School of Advanced Military Studies
United States Army Command and General Staff College
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

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Name of Candidate: LTC(P)James W. Wright

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Approved by:

_____, Monograph Director
Robert T. Davis II, PhD

_____, Director, School of Advanced Military Studies
Henry A. Arnold III, COL, IN

Accepted this 23rd day of May 2015 by:

_____, Director, Graduate Degree Programs
Robert F. Baumann, PhD

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Abstract

The Challenges of Adopting a Culture of Mission Command in the US Army, by LTC James W. Wright, USA, 78 pages.

While the US Army has ostensibly embraced mission command doctrine, it has failed to live up to many of its central tenets. It unevenly practices mission command and has been unable to fully institutionalize its principles. Mission command, like its Prussian-German predecessor *Auftragstaktik*, is a cultural phenomenon that requires a very specific set of characteristics to function effectively. There are noticeable cultural barriers that are prohibiting the full adoption of mission command in the US Army.

A breathless, decade-long pace of operations superimposed with environmental pressures, constrained budgets and resources, dramatic reductions in force structure and personnel, and major social and technological changes are affecting the organizational culture of the US Army. Internal organizational tensions stemming from competing value systems also threaten the institutionalization of a culture of mission command. The decentralized system of organizational control employed in Iraq and Afghanistan is fundamentally at odds with peacetime procedural control that favors more centralized control and less risk. Likewise, the development and implementation of high-end information technology creates a paradox for mission command.

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Acronyms

ATLDP	Army Training and Leader Development Panel
BCA	Budget Control Act
CGS	Chief of the General Staff
CGSC	US Army Command and General Staff College
CJCS	Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
CSA	Chief of Staff of the Army
DOD	Department of Defense
DOPMA	Defense Officer Personnel Management Act
DSG	Defense Strategic Guidance
E-SERB	Enhanced Selective Early Retirement Boards
FY	Fiscal Year
NCA	National Command Authority
OSB	Officer Separation Boards
QSP	Qualitative Service Program
RIF	Reduction in Force
SERB	Selective Early Retirement Boards
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure

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Introduction

“Curiously enough, the individual is usually so deeply immersed in his culture that he is scarcely aware of it as a shaping force in his life. As someone has remarked, ‘The fish will be the last to discover water.’ People who know no other cultural patterns but their own tend to regard them as God-given and intrinsically right.”

–James C. Coleman

The US Army’s wartime experience in Afghanistan and Iraq inspired a renewed emphasis on the principles of mission command. The complex and widely distributed character of the wars reinforced the distinct advantages of fostering initiative and empowering junior leaders in a decentralized environment. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Martin Dempsey, underscored the importance of the command philosophy, “Mission command must be institutionalized and operationalized into all aspects of the joint force, our doctrine, our education, our training and our manpower and personnel processes.”¹ Since 2012, the Army has gone to great lengths to instill the core principles of mission command throughout the force using senior leader strategic communications, doctrinal revisions, and by aligning curriculums across the Army’s training and education system. An integrated suite of doctrinal publications, rolled out as ‘Doctrine 2015’, emerged in 2012. The topic of mission command became the centerpiece of conferences, white papers, and leader development strategies in an effort to inculcate theory into practice. But, despite a pervasive communications program and significant emphasis by senior leadership, legitimate questions remain about whether or not the basic premises of mission command are embedding into the institutional culture of the US Army.

The Army’s current philosophy of mission command is a descendant of the German concept of *Auftragstaktik*. *Auftragstaktik*, loosely translated as ‘mission tactics’ or ‘mission

¹ Martin Dempsey, *Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mission Command White Paper* (April 3, 2012), 1.

orders', came into mainstream military lexicon after World War II to describe a uniquely German decentralized-style of command. The principles of Auftragstaktik have evolved logically and naturally since the conquests of the Prussian warrior-king, Frederick the Great. Auftragstaktik channeled the aggressive posture and legendary discipline of the Prussian army. As the battlefield grew increasingly dense and complex, the Prussians responded by decentralizing authority and responsibility and allowing greater subordinate freedom of action. They placed heavy emphasis on initiative and empowerment to take full advantage of rapidly changing conditions. Auftragstaktik is not simply a doctrine, but a cultural phenomenon that requires a specific organizational culture. The cultural characteristics took many years to mature and congeal, but have led to a highly effective and adaptive military organization.

The adoption of mission command and its recent doctrinal resurgence in the US Army has proven problematic. The US Army has unevenly embraced the cultural characteristics required for the effective practice of mission command. Its organizational culture is impeded by internal organizational tensions and it faces some challenging and unique environmental pressures. The US Army, like the rest of the US military, is undergoing significant strain owing to a variety of factors. A breathless, decade-long pace of operations superimposed with budgetary pressures, constrained resources, changing missions, and dramatic reductions in force structure and personnel are affecting the organizational climate of the US Army and may well have a longer term impact on its underlying culture. Fourteen years of war have exacerbated long-standing institutional tensions between initiative and discipline, centralization and decentralization, and authority and individual responsibility. All of these factors affect the US Army's ability to inspire and motivate a generation of combat seasoned junior leaders who are accustomed to operating with autonomy. It further calls into question whether the US Army has the right organizational culture required to effectively institutionalize mission command.

The military culture that evolved organically in the Prussian and German army to successfully support Auftragstaktik invites further examination. Why did a decentralized system of command advance naturally and become so deeply ingrained in the German army? What cultural characteristics led to a successful decentralized style of command? Can we apply these lessons to the problems that the US Army currently faces with mission command? Are there cultural impediments to mission command?

Cultural research is inherently difficult and subjective. Culture is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that offers few clear, direct, and simple explanations. But, the field of organization theory assists by providing a useful framework in which to define and analyze the components of a culture. This study begins by exploring the concept of organizational culture and articulating a vocabulary for a meaningful cultural analysis within a military organization. Classifying and categorizing the distinctive features of military culture provides the basis for a conceptual framework. A survey of Prussian and German military history from the late eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth, identifies the influential leaders, theorists, and major events that shaped the evolution of Auftragstaktik. These factors help populate a conceptual model to account for the key features of a military culture that promote a decentralized system of command. The final analysis will then investigate why mission command in the US Army is not congruent or well aligned with the model.

The study suggests that the forces impeding the institutionalization of mission command overshadow the forces that support it. This monograph is not intended as an indictment of the US Army's capacity to exercise mission command, nor to question the broader utility of a decentralized command system. Rather, it confirms that the journey toward realizing mission command in the US Army is not over. The pragmatic objective of this project is to assist the senior leadership of US Army in identifying cultural impediments so that they can continue to

shepherd the process of adoption and adaption and ensure that mission command is thoroughly institutionalized.

Understanding Military Culture

Military historians and analysts have traditionally focused on organizational features like quality of leadership, equipment, training, personnel systems, and doctrine when assessing and analyzing the effectiveness of military forces. More recent scholarship leverages the concept of military culture to illuminate another important facet of military institutions and organizations.² By its nature subjective and somewhat elusive, the concept of culture accounts for some of the intangible forces that guide and constrain the behavior of military forces. Culture provides a perspective from which to examine why military organizations fought the way they did and how adaptive they are to change in response to their environment.³ Culture helps explain and predict why military organizations adopt or pursue particular characteristics, doctrines, strategies, and technologies. Culture also offers a compelling explanation for seemingly irrational behavior, as when a military organization pursues a means or style of warfare that is incompatible with their current environment, or worse yet, the organization actively resists change.

² There are a few different scholarly approaches to examining military culture that cover several academic disciplines. A review of multiple approaches can be found in Stephen J. Gerras, Leonard Wong, and Charles D. Allen, "Organizational Culture: Applying a Hybrid Model to the US Army" (Monograph, US Army War College, November 2008), 3-24. A unique study of US service culture can be found in Carl H. Builder, *The Masks of War: American Military Styles in Strategy and Analysis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 17-43. Also see Donna Winslow, *Army Culture*. US Army Research Institute Note 2001-04. (Alexandria, VA: US Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, 2000), 1-18.

³ Terry Terriff, "Innovate or Die: Organizational Culture and the Origins of Maneuver Warfare in the United States Marine Corps," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29, no. 3 (August 2006): 475-503.

The dominant reason that cultural research in this field is so appealing to senior military leaders is the strong linkage between a military organization's culture and its effectiveness. Military culture has played a crucial role in the effectiveness of military organizations throughout history. It is intuitive that highly successful organizations usually have strong and vibrant organizational cultures, but historian Williamson Murray believes that culture may also explain and predict traits beyond military performance. For Murray, "Military culture may be the most important factor not only in military effectiveness, but also in the process involved in military innovation, which is essential to preparing military organizations for the next war."⁴ Thus, any discussion about the US Army's success or failure to institutionalize mission command must begin with a general understanding of culture and how best to assess the cultural foundations of an organization. Since there is no broadly accepted method to examine military culture, one must turn to the related field of organizational culture for insights on ways to analyze, assess, and change culture.

Theory of Organizational Culture

The study of organizational culture evolved as a branch of organizational theory that offered sociologists, anthropologists, and organization researchers a means to explain and predict the behavior and attitudes of organizations. Other theories in the field take structural or systems approaches that interpret organizations as purely rational and goal-oriented which are best understood through an examination of their goals, structures, regulations, and decision processes. Organizational culture theory, however, contends that there are more powerful forces motivating and directing a group's behavior, though these forces may be largely invisible and unconscious.⁵

⁴ Williamson Murray, "Does Military Culture Matter?" *Orbis* 45, no. 1 (1999): 27.

⁵ Thomas K. Adams, "Military Doctrine and the Organization Culture of the United States Army." (PhD dissertation, Syracuse University, 1990), 18. See also Edgar Schein,

The theory postulates that cultural norms, values, beliefs, and deeply rooted assumptions both guide and constrain the behavior of organization members. In the same way that personality and character provide meaning, direction, and identity to an individual, culture provides the same to a group.

Most organization theorists maintain that organizational culture is a critical variable to ensure effectiveness and long-term performance.⁶ Beyond examining effectiveness, analyzing culture also allows one to better understand the hidden, complex, and sometimes puzzling aspects of life inside organizations, groups, and professions.⁷ Organizational culture helps illuminate and unearth the context and causes of seemingly irrational behaviors of organizations. History is replete with examples of organizations that did not logically act in their own self-interest, either by making poor decisions or by failing to adequately adapt to their environment. Most importantly, analyzing the culture of an organization determines traits that leaders need to change, and helps identify a framework to carry out reform.

Defining Organizational Culture

It is easy to appreciate a commonsense notion of ‘culture,’ but the term’s abstract and ubiquitous nature makes it somewhat elusive and difficult to precisely define.⁸ Culture is

Organizational Culture and Leadership, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 8.

⁶ Pierce, *Organizational Culture*, 16. Researchers and practitioners have long sought to correlate specific cultural traits in organizations to improve efficiency or effectiveness. There are dozens of works by business and management researchers that link specific cultural attributes to business performance and group effectiveness. Schein, *Organizational Culture*, 11. Edgar Schein contends that organizational culture matters because cultural elements determine strategy, goals, and modes of operating. If we want to make organizations more efficient and effective, then we must understand the role that culture plays in organizational life.

⁷ Schein, *Organizational Culture*, 8-9.

⁸ One of the reasons for the diversity in the definitions in the concept of culture is that it lies at the intersection of several fields of research: history, political science, anthropology, psychology, sociology, and management research. Kim S. Cameron and Robert E. Quinn,

composed of such intangible, but essential things as values, assumptions, perceptions, and patterns of behavior.⁹ A survey of academic literature offers general consensus on six features that help to frame a better understanding of organizational culture. Culture requires a *shared history* amongst a group; the deeper and more profound the group experience, the deeper the imprint on the organization's culture. Culture offers *structural stability* to a group by instilling a unique image or group identity that survives even when some members of the organization depart. Culture is *deeply rooted* and often unconscious to its members and, therefore less visible than other parts of an organization. Culture is *broad* and affects all aspects of how an organization operates, externally and internally. Culture is a *dynamic* phenomenon that is constantly enacted and adjusted by interactions with others, and shaped by the behavior of leaders and members. Lastly, culture is largely *socially constructed* and binds an organization together. In essence, the strength and health of an organization's culture depends largely on the perception of its members.¹⁰

Edgar Schein, an influential scholar of organizational theory, offers, "Culture is a pattern of shared basic assumptions, learned by a given group as it solves its problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation

Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture Based on the Competing Values Framework (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 18. Cameron and Quinn surveyed academic literature and found over 150 different definitions of culture. For taxonomy of definitions for "organizational culture" see Exhibit 1.1 in Schein, *Organizational Culture*, 19. See also Table 5.1 of Benjamin Schneider, *Organizational Climate and Culture* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1990), 155.

⁹ Adams, "Military Doctrine and the Organization Culture," 18.

¹⁰ Schein, *Organizational Culture*, 14. Cameron and Quinn, *Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture*, 21. Adams, "Military Doctrine," 18.

to those problems.”¹¹ Culture is comprised of prevailing assumptions, values, beliefs, and norms, which collectively, over time, have created shared expectations that characterize organizations and their members.¹² For members of an organization it represents “how things are done around here.”¹³

Culture formation is the result of the human need for stability, consistency, and meaning. It conveys a sense of identity to employees, provides written and often unspoken guidelines for how to get along in the organization, and helps stabilize the social system that members experience.¹⁴ Schein underscores the importance of learned assumptions to the gradual formation of an organization’s culture. Culture formation in groups is not spontaneous, random, or accidental. Schein contends that a culture begins to form in a group when an initial set of values, beliefs, and behaviors result in a successful outcome. With continued positive reinforcement and shared recognition among its members that it is doing the right things, a group becomes less conscious of these beliefs and begin to treat them as immutable. After a period of use, assumptions become less visible and are eventually taken for granted. They become part of the group’s identity that is perpetuated and strengthened as new members integrate. Thus, the values and assumptions that the group perceives to have contributed to its success become the basis for an underlying belief system that defines how members should think, feel, and act.¹⁵

Organizational culture can run so deep that those embedded in it are often unaware of their

¹¹ Schein, *Organizational Culture*, 14.

¹² Cameron and Quinn, *Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture*, 18. The authors contend that this is the most widely accepted definition of organizational culture.

¹³ Cameron and Quinn, *Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture*, 19.

¹⁴ Cameron and Quinn, *Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture*, 19.

¹⁵ Schein, *Organizational Culture*, 22.

culture until it is challenged, until they experience a new culture, or until it is made explicit or overt through a model.¹⁶

Subcultures

The concept of organizational culture is not completely monolithic; within a large organization there may be a host of competing subgroups that maintain unique characteristics and preserve their own distinctive identity. Organizational theorist Mary Jo Hatch asserts that task interdependence, reporting relationships, occupational identities, proximity, and levels of interaction among members help to shape levels of cohesion within an organization and are catalysts for subculture formation.¹⁷ Although the underlying assumptions of the larger organization's culture serve as the foundation of these subcultures, within each subgroup there is localized consensus on the values and beliefs that make their identity distinct from others. Subcultures can be an asset or a liability to an organization. When a subculture enhances the dominant values of the overall culture, the organization benefits; in contrast, if the subculture denies the values of the overall culture, the organization is weakened.

Assessing Organizational Culture

Theorists offer several conceptual models for assessing and analyzing organizational culture. Schein's simple, qualitative framework for examining the elements of organizational culture remains the most durable.¹⁸ Schein describes three interrelated levels of culture comprised of artifacts, espoused values and beliefs, and underlying assumptions metaphorically resembling

¹⁶ Cameron and Quinn, *Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture*, 19.

¹⁷ Gerras, Wong, and Allen, "Organizational Culture," 8-10. Mary Jo Hatch, *Organization Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 176.

¹⁸ Most qualitative models of organizational culture appear to borrow elements of Schein's work. Quantitative models of culture like Cameron and Quinn's use data from longitudinal studies and survey instruments to produce graphs and statistical analysis.

an iceberg (see Figure 1, Elements of Organizational Culture). Cultural features are extremely overt and observable at the highest level while they are deeply embedded and unconscious assumptions at their lowest.¹⁹ As Figure 1 illustrates, the true depth and breadth of an organization's culture lies beneath the surface and is very difficult to recognize through superficial analysis.²⁰

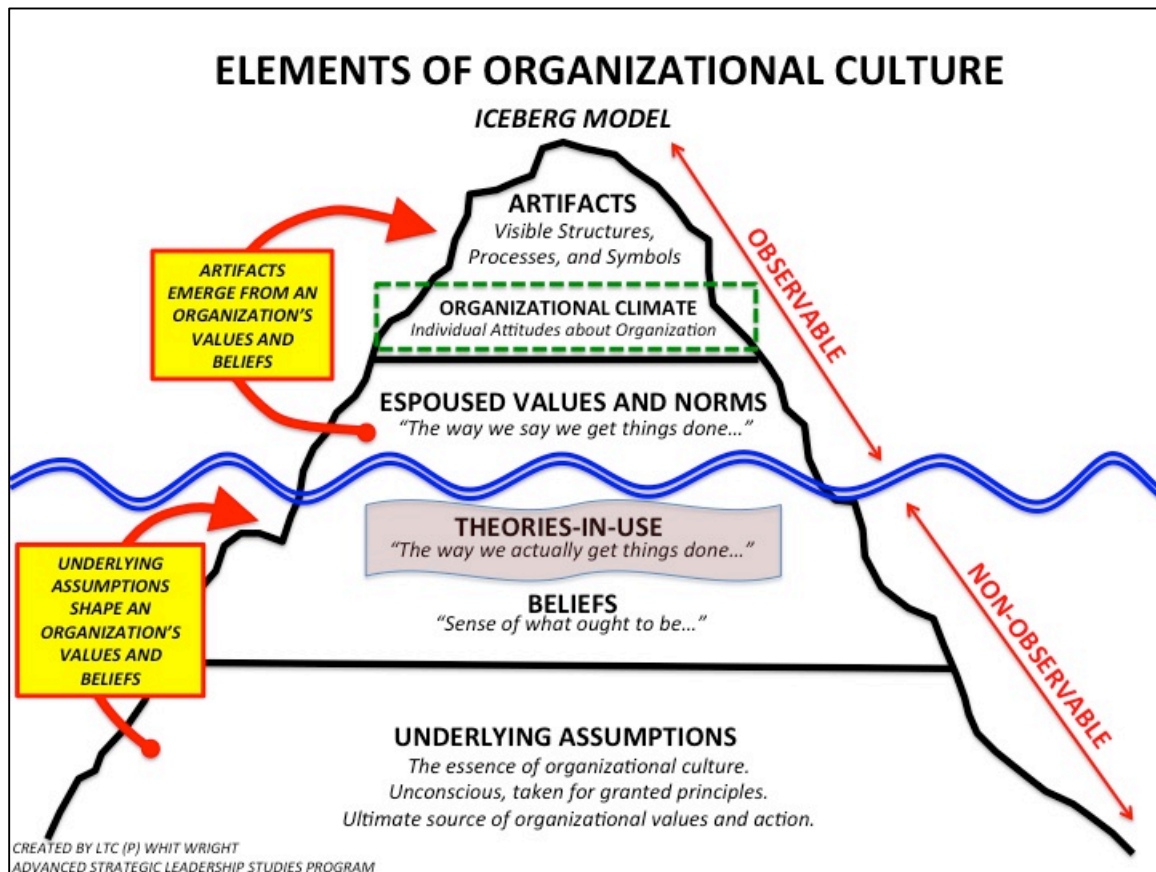


Figure 1. Elements of Organizational Culture

Source: Created by Author. Conceptual framework found in Schein, *Organizational Culture*.

¹⁹ Pierce, *Organizational Culture*, 7.

²⁰ Pierce, *Organizational Culture*, 12.

Above the surface lie an organization's Artifacts. These are the tangible, overt, or verbally distinctive indicators of a particular culture and represent its most widely visible and accessible elements. Artifacts include the phenomena that one sees, hears, and feels when one encounters a new group, and its features might include physical, verbal, or behavioral manifestations of culture. Artifacts of a particular organizational culture can be easily observed in uniforms, dress and appearance, language, stories and jargon, rituals and ceremonies, and myths. Artifacts can also be structures and systems that are subtle and less tangible. Personnel management systems, decision-making paradigms, professional education programs, communication techniques, and the use of technology are also types of artifacts that help make up a culture.

The climate of an organization also represents an important cultural artifact. The two terms, "culture" and "climate" are frequently used interchangeably, but there are distinct differences between them. Culture refers to implicit, often indiscernible aspects of organizations; climate refers to more overt, observable attributes of organizations. Culture includes core values and shared interpretations about how things are; climate includes individualistic perspectives that are modified frequently as situations or leaders change.²¹ Culture is a more enduring, slow to change, and fundamental characteristic of organizations, while climate involves temporary attitudes, feelings, and perceptions of individuals. Culture reflects an organizational orientation, being a function of system values and norms, whereas climate reflects a personal orientation, being a function of personal values.²² Artifacts may be easy to observe, but deciphering their

²¹ Cameron and Quinn, *Organizational Culture*, 22.

²² Schneider, *Organizational Climate and Culture*, 78.

hidden meaning and relevance can be quite difficult.²³ The content and strength of a culture cannot be presumed from observing surface level cultural phenomena.²⁴

The second level of Schein's framework includes an organization's Espoused Values and Beliefs. Some beliefs and values may be as visible as artifacts and some may not, but they are certainly more conscious to members than assumptions. This second level incorporates formal and informal guidelines in the form of written rules and unwritten norms that guide daily life in an organization. It is common, even expected, for organizations to publish their belief systems and espouse the values they believe are most appropriate to reduce uncertainty, train new members how to behave, and to provide guidance in the face of ambiguity. Espoused values provide organizational members with a sense of what ought to be, as opposed to what actually is.²⁵ Examples might include vision statements, goals, organizational strategies, training programs, and published value statements. New members must learn and accept them to become socially accepted. This second level gives meaning, direction, and identity to a group, while constraining the behavior of its members through shared norms.

Schein describes an organization's Underlying Assumptions as the essence of organizational culture and its deepest layer. These assumptions are derived from a shared understanding about solving problems a specific way that has unconsciously become taken for granted as the only way to solve similar problems. These assumptions are typically so well integrated in the organizational dynamic that they can be hard to recognize from within an organization. They reflect a certain understanding of cause and effect relationships and may

²³ Pierce, *Organizational Culture*, 7.

²⁴ Don M. Snider, "An Uninformed Debate on Military Culture," *Orbis* 43, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 3.

²⁵ Pierce, *Organizational Culture*, 7.

ascribe to a worldview.²⁶ In a strong culture, assumptions can become so ingrained that they can become viewed as indisputable and fixed, making them very resistant to change.²⁷

A strong and healthy organizational culture requires coherent and consistent interaction between the layers of culture. Figure 1, Elements of Organizational Culture, depicts this complex interrelationship. Organization members embrace values and conform to norms because their underlying assumptions promote and support the norms. The norms and values, in turn, encourage activities that produce surface level artifacts.

Problems with Organizational Culture

Figure 2, Cultural Problems, depicts the common tensions, strains, and barriers to a healthy organizational culture. The long-term damage done by a poor organizational climate should not be understated. Organizational climates ultimately determine how individuals feel about the quality of the institution as a whole. Although it is more malleable and responsive to immediate pressures than is culture, organizational climate can have a major impact on the underlying culture over the long term.²⁸

²⁶ Eitan Shamir, *Transforming Command: The Pursuit of Mission Command in the U.S., British, and Israeli Armies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Security Studies, 2011), 21.

²⁷ Pierce, *Organizational Culture*, 9.

²⁸ Edwin Dorn and Howard D. Graves, *American Military Culture in the Twenty-First Century* (Washington, DC: CSIS Press, 2000), xviii.

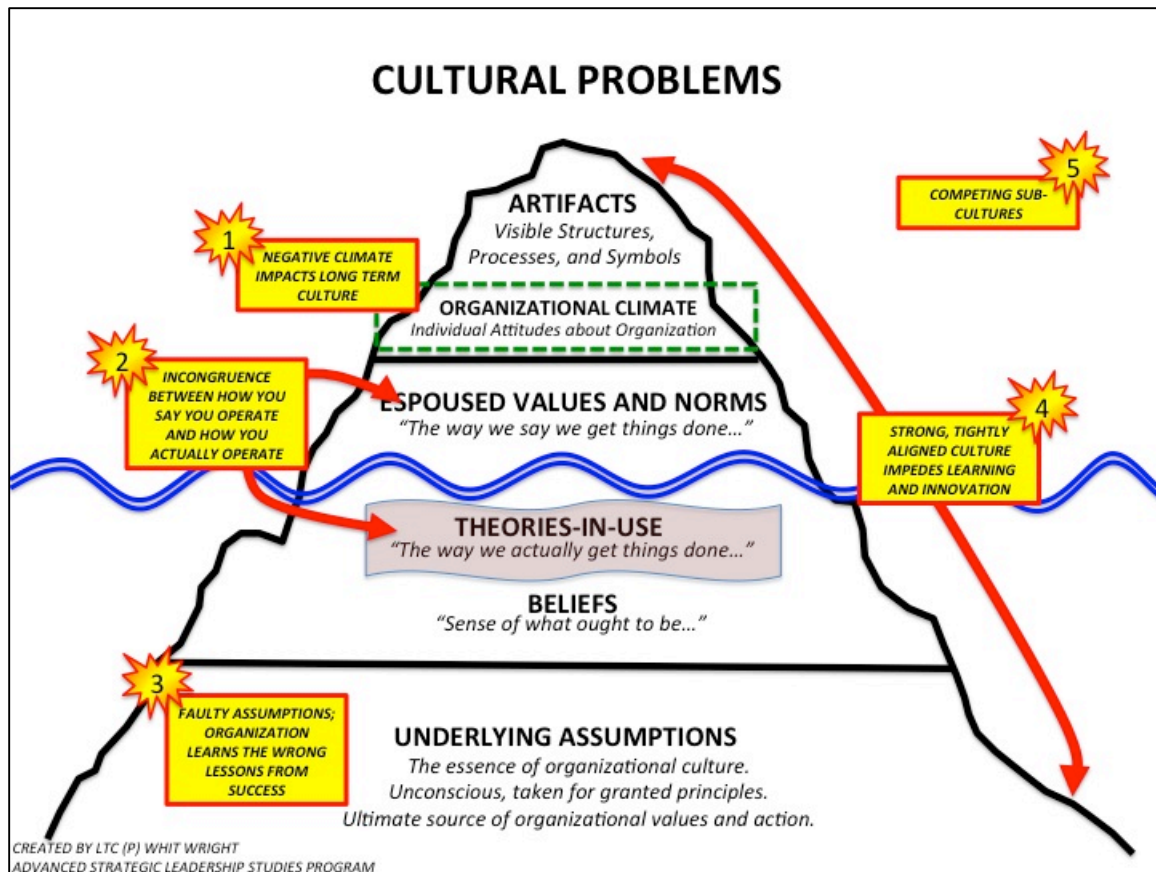


Figure 2: Cultural Problems

Source: Created by Author

Misalignment between underlying assumptions, values, and artifacts can significantly reduce the effectiveness of organizations. Few things drain the energy of organizational members more than the failure of organizational practices to match the organization's proclaimed beliefs. Espoused organizational values are often aspirational and describe conditions that leaders hope the organization will achieve. The values that actually guide organizational behavior are called 'theories-in-use.'²⁹ Trouble may arise when 'theories-in-use' do not match espoused values, or if

²⁹ Pierce, *Organizational Culture*, 9. Argyris makes the case that effectiveness results from developing congruence between theory-in-use and espoused beliefs.

an organization's leaders promote values that are incongruent with its deeply rooted assumptions. For example, if leaders represent an organization as "Family First," but fail to produce policies in the eyes of its members that support this claim, trust is eroded and effectiveness diminishes. Competing values may encourage behavior not congruent with official declarations.³⁰ Culture formation is a result of an organization's prior experience and learning; it must be assimilated over time. Values, beliefs, and norms cannot be artificially imposed without some level of friction.

Another cultural impairment is found in the paradoxical nature of strong cultures. Organizations with extremely tight knit cultures can find that their assumptions are so pervasive and accepted that they are seldom examined. This characteristic can hinder organizational learning, stifle innovation, or prevent an organization from adapting to its environment. Chris Argyris coined the term 'double loop learning' to describe an error and correction process that is important to organizational learning in rapidly changing and uncertain contexts. This process involves questioning, re-examining, and re-evaluating norms and basic assumptions.³¹ But, it is tough to challenge assumptions that are so deeply embedded that members are not even aware that some may be faulty.

Lastly, as previously mentioned, competing subcultures within an organization can threaten the adhesiveness of an organization's culture. In particular, when the value systems of a subculture begin to work against the value systems of the larger organization, the organization is weakened.

³⁰ Shamir, *Transforming Command*, 22.

³¹ Schein, *Organizational Culture*, 31. The alternative to 'double loop learning' is 'single loop learning' – where goals, strategies, the underlying values of an organization are taken for granted during problem solving. The emphasis is on changing techniques or methods to arrive at a solution. Double loop learning involves thinking through both the techniques, but also questions the nature of the organization and its underlying assumptions.

The Elements of Military Culture

The uniqueness of military society, a rigid hierarchical structure, and a shared history immersed in stories, traditions, and ritual, among other factors, contribute to the distinctive culture observed in most military organizations. Figure 3, Elements of Military Culture, illustrates some of the key elements of military organizational culture. Military culture induces common expectations about acceptable behaviors and attitudes among those in uniform – particularly in times of stress and danger.³² A strong culture exists when a clear set of norms and expectations permeates the organization, usually a function of effective leadership.³³ Against the backdrop of a common military culture in which all service members take pride, each of the individual services has its own distinct culture that forms an essential and powerful part of every service member's identity.³⁴

³² Dorn and Graves, *American Military Culture*, 2.

³³ Snider, "An Uniformed Debate," 3.

³⁴ Dorn and Graves, *American Military Culture*, 3.

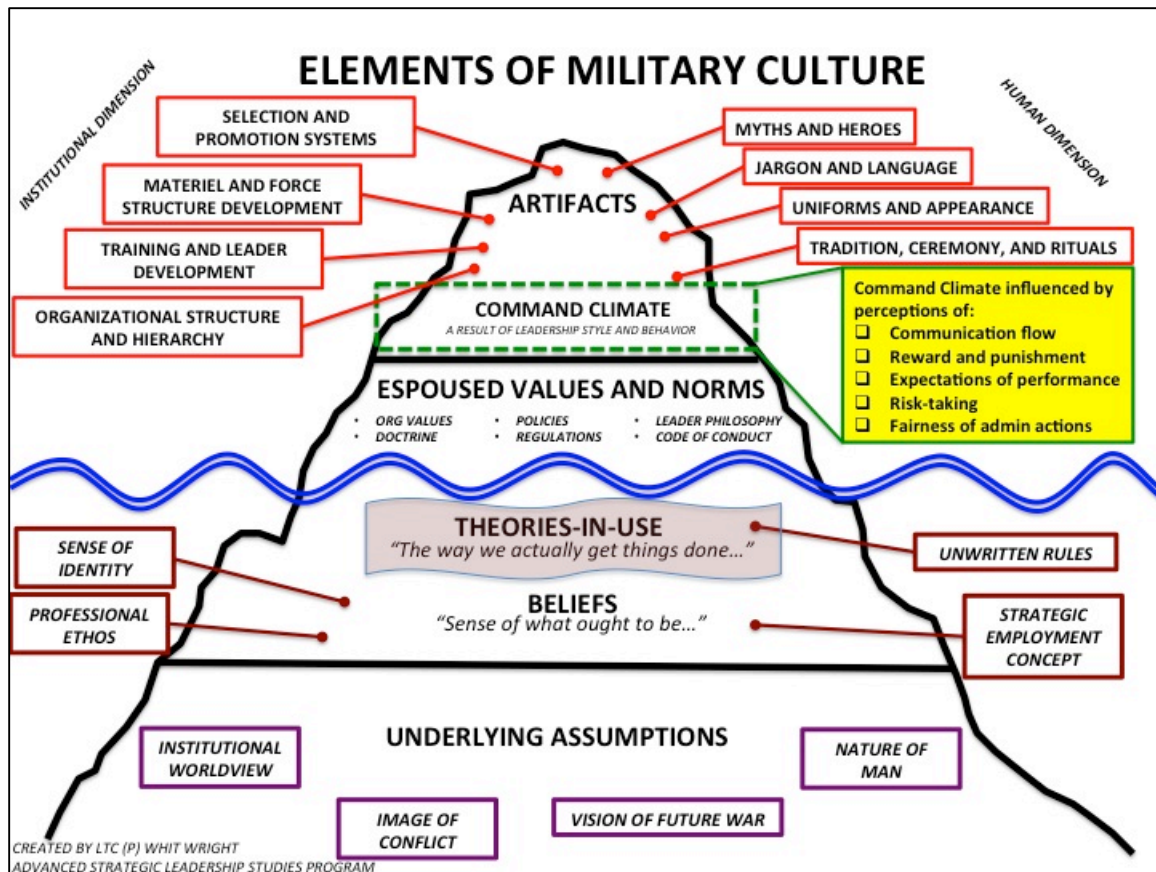


Figure 3. Elements of Military Culture

Source: Created by Author

The US Army, like its sister services, has a strong and distinctive culture that coexists with a number of competing subcultures. The branch system, unit structure, geographic dispersion, and diversity of functions and occupational skills encourage the formation of subcultures in the Army.³⁵ Although the underlying assumptions of the larger organizational culture serve as the foundation of these subcultures, within each subgroup there is localized consensus on the values and beliefs that make their identity distinct from others.

³⁵ Gerras, Wong, and Allen, "Organizational Culture," 10.

Assessing Military Culture

Military organizations are deeply steeped in tradition, constituted by a plethora of symbols, rituals, and practices that give meaning to their uncommon profession of war and to the sacrifices of individuals that the profession maintains.³⁶ Surface-level artifacts abound in daily military life. Some are tangible and others reflect the output of deeply ingrained systems and processes - uniforms; insignia of rank; jargon and styles of communicating; ceremonies and rituals of induction, promotion, and change of command; the celebration of myths and heroes; organizational structure; and technology, to name but a few. Each of these cultural artifacts in their own way provides stability to military organizations by indoctrinating new members, setting clear expectations and norms, and providing continuity to the life of units.³⁷

The command climate of military organizations also represents an artifact of deeper organizational culture (see Figure 3, Elements of Military Culture). Command climate is based on unit members' perceptions and feelings about their work environment. Leadership style and behavior are the principle drivers of command climate. Since it is defined by attitudes, a command climate can change quickly. Among the important factors that influence climate: the flow of communications up and down the chain of command, perceptions about the systems of rewards and punishments, expectations for job performance, the reaction to risk-taking in the unit, the fairness of administrative actions, and the example set by leaders.³⁸

³⁶ Terriff, "Innovate or Die," 480.

³⁷ Artifacts are described in: Schein, *Organizational Culture*, 25-27; Pierce, *Organizational Culture*, 7; Gerras, Wong, and Allen, "Organizational Culture," 3; Shamir, *Transforming Command*, 22; Snider, "An Uninformed Debate," 5.

³⁸ Steven M. Jones, "Improving Accountability for Effective Command Climate: A Strategic Imperative" (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2003), 3. Also see Dorn and Graves, *American Military Culture*, 7.

The US Army espouses seven ‘Army Values’ to guide member behavior and promote the ideals that it believes are most appropriate. This is a concrete example of the second layer of organizational culture, “Espoused Values and Norms” (see Figure 3, Elements of Military Culture). Army life is brimming with examples of mechanisms to articulate written rules, unwritten norms, and guidance in the face of ambiguity. Army Regulations, policies, doctrine, leader philosophies, and codes of conduct all function to reduce uncertainty and train new members. While not observable in the same sense as a published document, the Army’s core belief system also resides within this second layer of culture. The Army’s sense of identity, professional ethos, and institutional priorities stem from the Army’s collective sense of “what ought to be.”³⁹

The essence of military culture resides in the deepest layer of the cultural framework in Figure 3, Elements of Military Culture, ‘Underlying Assumptions.’ Military organizations unconsciously form underlying assumptions about things that members collectively believe contributed to their organization’s success. These assumptions may embrace an institutional worldview with specific philosophic positions on the nature of man and character of war. The assumptions may have a particular conceptualization or image of warfare that drives how and under what conditions the organization prefers to fight. For instance, an assumption that junior leaders lack the requisite judgment to make important decisions may manifest itself in tighter

³⁹ An example taken from the 2015 Army Posture Statement, “The Army Ethic defines the moral principles that guide us in the conduct of our missions, performance of duty and all aspects of life. Our ethic is reflected in law, Army Values, creeds, oaths, and shared beliefs embedded within Army culture. It inspires and motivates all of us to make right decisions and to take right actions at all times. The Army Ethic is the heart of our shared professional identity, our sense of who we are, our purpose in life and why and how we serve the American people. To violate the Army Ethic is to break our sacred bond of trust with each other and with those whom we serve. Army Professionals must fulfill distinctive roles as honorable servants, military experts and stewards of our profession.” Department of the Army, *2015 Army Posture Statement* (Washington, DC), 5.

procedural controls and high decision thresholds. An assumption that technology will reduce uncertainty may result in a reliance on high-end technology in the decision making process and less tolerance for risk. An assumption that casualties must be avoided may shape the manner in which the organization fights.

Leadership and Organizational Culture

Strategic leaders perform an important role in organizations by creating, preserving, molding, or transmitting culture.⁴⁰ Schein uses the concept of culture to differentiate between management and leadership. In his view, leadership creates and changes culture whereas management and administration merely act within it. He stated, “The only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture.”⁴¹ US Army doctrine reflects this thinking and challenges its strategic leaders to, “shape the culture of the Army and define the azimuth for cultural change.”⁴²

Strategic leaders must have a clear and accurate understanding of the levels of culture that buttress their organizations. They must be able to gauge the functionality of the underlying assumptions made at that level.⁴³ Only then can they ensure that the organizational culture is aligned with the future demands of the environment while congruent with a core set of values. Where a gap between “theory in use” and “espoused values” (the things we say we stand for vs.

⁴⁰ Winslow, *Army Culture*, 9.

⁴¹ Schein, *Organizational Culture*, 11. He also argues that leaders are not the only determinants of culture.

⁴² Department of the Army, Army Doctrinal Publication 6-22, *Leadership* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2012), 11-6.

⁴³ Schein, *Organizational Culture*, 17.

the things we actually stand for) generates dysfunction, or when elements of culture have maladapted, leaders must identify and promote cultural change.⁴⁴

Despite the plethora of organizational research on the subject, there is no universal formula for producing effective cultural change and no widely accepted procedure for implementing it. Schein tells us that leaders embed and transmit organizational culture in five ways: by what they pay attention to, measure and control; by their reactions to critical incidents and crises; by deliberate role modeling, coaching and teaching; by the choice of their criteria for allocation of reward and status; by their choice of criteria for recruitment, selection, promotion, retirement, and excommunication.⁴⁵

The culture framework offered in Figure 1, Elements of Organizational Culture and Figure 3, Elements of Military Culture, provide military leaders a vocabulary of description and analysis in which they can examine either the entire military culture of an organization or specific cultural phenomenon within organizations. This study applies this model to the cultural phenomenon of mission command and assesses its health in the US Army. However, one must start with a contextual understanding of its precursor, the German concept of Auftragstaktik.

The Evolution of Auftragstaktik

Auftragstaktik was the product of specific Prussian and German historical circumstances and conditions. The term describes key aspects of a unique and influential military culture that is closely associated with the dominant tactical and operational performance of the German army on the battlefields of World War II.⁴⁶ It has been studied extensively and imitated to some extent by

⁴⁴ Shamir, *Transforming Command*, 23. Schein, *Organizational Culture*, 11.

⁴⁵ Winslow, *Army Culture*, 12; Schein, *Organizational Culture*, 12; Shamir, *Transforming Command*, xx.

⁴⁶ While there are varied opinions as to the German political and strategic acumen, there is much less dispute about the tactical and operational supremacy of the German army displayed

nearly every western military in the last seven decades. The term Auftragstaktik has been translated numerous ways: ‘mission-type orders,’ ‘task orders,’ ‘directive control,’ or ‘mission-oriented command system.’ But, there is no real English equivalent that adequately conveys the depth of its full meaning.⁴⁷ The term encompasses deeply held assumptions and beliefs by the German army on the nature and character of war, desired leadership and character traits, command and control systems, senior-subordinate relationships, training methods, and professional military education.⁴⁸

Auftragstaktik reflects a flexible and decentralized style of command. Its central tenets include timely decision-making, a clear articulation of intention by commanders, the empowerment of subordinates, and the importance of decisiveness, initiative, and creativity. Auftragstaktik requires a high degree of mutual trust and the unwavering commitment of every soldier to understand his role and fulfill his duties. These tenets were assimilated into German military culture over a span of 130 years, beginning with the devastating Prussian defeats at Jena-

during World War II. See Martin Van Creveld, *Fighting Power: German and US Army Performance 1939-1945* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), 163. In his final analysis, Van Creveld described the German army as a, “superb fighting organization. In point of morale, élan, unit cohesion, and resilience, it probably had no equal among 20th century armies.” For alternate historian viewpoints see: Williamson Murray, *War, Strategy, and Military Effectiveness* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Robert M. Citino, *The German Way of War: from the Thirty Years’ War to the Third Reich* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005); and Gordon Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army: 1640-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955).

⁴⁷ There is no consensus among academics about the original use or precise definition of the term Auftragstaktik. In fact, the only point of real agreement is that the term has been abused in military publications in recent years. Some analysts and historians have upheld it as the key to the German army’s long record of success on the battlefield; others maintain that it had no “official” existence. For differing views see Antulio L. Echevarria, *After Clausewitz: German Military Thinkers Before the Great War* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2000), 38; and Bruce Condell and David T. Zabecki, ed., *On the German Art of War: Truppenführung* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2001), 3.

⁴⁸ John T. Nelson II, “Auftragstaktik: A Case for Decentralized Battle,” *Parameters* (September 1987): 27.

Auerstadt in 1806 and came to full expression with the publication of *Truppenfuhrung* in 1934. Several legendary Prussian and German theorists and military leaders contributed to the evolution of Auftragstaktik: Gerhard von Scharnhorst, August Niedhardt von Gneisenau, Karl von Clausewitz, Helmuth von Moltke, and Hans von Seeckt. The broad arc of Prussian and German military experiences from the late 18th century to WWII encouraged the gradual adaption of Auftragstaktik into a strong and significant component of German military culture.

Frederick the Great and the Prussian Tradition of Centralized Command

The tactical and operational effectiveness of the Prussian Army were virtually unmatched on European battlefields during the Seven Years War from 1756 to 1763. The King of Prussia, Frederick II, as sovereign commander, personified the military achievement that was possible in Europe prior to the French Revolution. He perfected the type of warfare used during his lifetime and emerged as one of the great captains of military history.

Frederick the Great was the last successful commander in history able to exert near total control over every aspect of his army. In order to fully leverage Frederick's genius, his command style demanded exacting discipline that turned his army into a machine of single mind and purpose.⁴⁹ Frederick famously proclaimed, “no one reasons, everyone executes.”⁵⁰ Frederick would assign specific missions to units, which were then expected to carry them out without deviation. The staff had limited responsibilities and was precluded from the decision making

⁴⁹ Martin Van Creveld, *The Art of War: War and Military Thought* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 55.

⁵⁰ Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 98. See also Brian Bond, *The Pursuit of Victory: From Napoleon to Saddam Hussein* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 26. Bond wrote, “Even at a time of the acutest manpower shortage during the Seven Years War Frederick would not consider general conscription. His demeanor towards his troops was cold and formal and he made no pretense to charismatic leadership. He developed no divisional or corps system and his senior officers were not encouraged to use their initiative.”

process. Frederick was able to conduct all necessary planning, issue detailed orders, and monitor their execution. Success and failure relied completely on the supreme commander's personal conduct of the battle.⁵¹

The battlefield success and tactical effectiveness of the Prussian Army resulted from the discipline of its formations and Frederick's uncanny understanding of the existing tactics and conditions on the battlefield. While never able to capitalize on revolutionary technologies or doctrine, the rigid discipline of Frederick's armies created decisive advantages over his opponents. Historian Martin van Creveld summarized the Prussian's decisive edge, "In an age when battles were decided by the firepower of linear formations, and victory was completed by cavalry charges, Prussian infantry could deliver more rounds per minute than any of its European counterparts. Prussian cavalry could strike harder, rally more completely, and appear more quickly where needed than any other horsemen on the continent."⁵² Frederick's rapid style of campaigning and his audacious spirit imprinted deeply in Prussian military culture. He was able to harness the naturally aggressive Prussian disposition into an offensive spirit and bias for action. Generations of future Prussians would seek to repeat Frederick's rapid, decisive victories.⁵³

Neither the military genius of Fredrick nor the tactical prowess of his army would be maintained by the Prussians after his reign. Frederick's genius proved impossible to imitate without a formal system of professional military education to institutionalize his thinking.

⁵¹ Shimon Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory* (London: Frank Cass, 1997), 33.

⁵² Martin Van Creveld, *Command in War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 85.

⁵³ Citino, *The German Way of War*, 102. The underlying assumption formulated under Frederick was that "speed and audacity would bewilder the opponent and force him to fight before he was mentally prepared, or not fully deployed, or facing the wrong way." The very fact that the army trained and prepared to wage war in this manner would be a moral advantage even before a shot was fired. Citino argues that the cultural predisposition towards 'short and lively wars' repeatedly surfaces throughout Prussian-German history.

Further, the rigid structure that provided the backbone for the Prussian Army's discipline was reinforced by extreme social stratification that separated the aristocrats from the rank and file. The Prussian command structure based on hierarchy and strict obedience relied on iron-fisted discipline and the coup d'oeil of the commander. It was successful only under the control of a genius and was bound to fail when the social and political climate changed, as the French Revolution would demonstrate a few years later. By the beginning of 19th century, the Prussian Army proved unable to adapt.

The Impact of Napoleonic Warfare

The modern era of warfare unfolded in the shadow of the French Revolution. The social and political upheaval in France at the turn of the century eliminated feudal and aristocratic structures and changed the character of war. A surge in nationalism and the mass conscription policies of the levee en masse swelled the ranks of the French Army with citizen-soldiers that shared a common cause. Commanded by another military genius, Napoleon Bonaparte, the French La Grande Armée, brought over a million men under arms and demonstrated operational prowess as the scale of warfare dramatically expanded on European battlefields.⁵⁴

Reminiscent of Frederick the Great, Napoleon was a complete master of his profession; he could personally do everything connected to war.⁵⁵ Whereas Napoleon's opponents continued the practice of tightly centralized control and closely concentrated forces, Napoleon altered the traditional method of command, reorganizing and decentralizing in such a way as to enable its

⁵⁴ Historian Michael Howard describes the mass phenomenon, "In the 18th century it was generally accepted that there was a strict limit to the size of armies that could usefully be deployed in the field... By the end of 1794 Lazare Carnot, the organizer of the French revolutionary armies, had over a million men under arms, and he used them to obtains a crushing numerical superiority on every battlefield...these were the ideas, and this the instrument, that Napoleon found to hand, and he used them with a genius that was as much political as military." Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence*, 30.

⁵⁵ Creveld, *Command in War*, 63.

parts to operate independently for a limited period of time and tolerate a higher degree of uncertainty.⁵⁶ Napoleon developed the organizational structure of the corps and empowered his subordinates with relative autonomy to give him greater operational flexibility. Napoleon, like Frederick the Great, did all the planning himself, but he designed and implemented a formal staff structure to assist in his administration of such a large organization.⁵⁷

Napoleon's modern brand of warfare, emphasizing numerical strength, deep strategic penetration and rapid concentration of forces, brought to light serious deficiencies in the Prussian Army and the need for modernization.⁵⁸ In October 1806, the Prussian Army met Napoleon's modernized French National Army and suffered humiliating and disastrous defeats at the twin battles of Jena-Auerstadt. These launched a period of grim introspection and opened the door for systemic reform.

Prussian Military Reform

The King of Prussia, Frederick Wilhelm III, appointed Major General Gerhard von Scharnhorst to head a Military Reorganization Commission after the Treaty of Tilsit in 1807 to study the reasons for his army's defeat and make recommendations for change. The committee and most of its members were typical officers of the Prussian Army, poorly educated aristocrats, but in Colonel August Niedhardt von Gneisenau, Scharnhorst found a kindred spirit.⁵⁹ Also in a

⁵⁶ Creveld, *Command in War.*, 101.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 102. Despite the creation of a 'Napoleonic staff' Creveld is quick to point out that Napoleon neither wanted independent subordinates nor tried to educate them. He did not envisage a chief of staff as a coequal collaborator, but merely as a technical organ that might, at best, take over some functions regarded as insufficiently important to merit the emperor's own attention at any given moment.

⁵⁸ Paret, *Makers of Modern Strategy*, 138.

⁵⁹ R. R. Davis, "Helmuth von Moltke and the Prussian-German Development of a Decentralized Style of Command: Metz and Sedan 1870," *Defence Studies* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 84. See also Citino, *German Way of War*, 129. Five members of the reform committee

position to influence the thinking of the commission was the talented, young Karl von Clausewitz, a member of Scharnhorst's personal staff.

Scharnhorst was one of the first to understand the implications of the transformation of war wrought by the armies of the French Revolution and Napoleon. His proposed reforms would be far-reaching and not only transform the army but affect the country's society and economy, break the nobility's near monopoly on officer positions, and release the rank and file from the bondage of the old, often inhumane system of drill and discipline.⁶⁰ He and the members of the commission believed that a gap existed between the Prussian people and the government. In response, King Wilhelm ended hereditary serfdom in 1807 and implemented measures to expand the role of local government and strengthen the relationship between the Prussian government and its citizens.⁶¹ These wide reaching reforms had significant political and social implications and they began to change long-held values and beliefs within the Prussian Army.

Scharnhorst made the commission the center of a new campaign to modernize the country's military with initiatives that reformed nearly every aspect of the Prussian Army including manpower policies, unit structure, doctrine, weaponry, and its professional education system. The commission placed a priority on reinvigorating the training practices and education systems as a prelude to larger institutional changes. The Berlin Military Academy, renamed the *Kriegsakademie* in 1810, became the centerpiece of the Army's education system; graduation from the institution became a prerequisite for service on a strengthened Prussian General Staff. Selection to the academy became stricter, written exams were introduced, and cadet schools began accepting middle class applicants.

would later become Chiefs of the Prussian General Staff.

⁶⁰ Paret, *Makers of Modern Strategy*, 192.

⁶¹ Michael J. Gunther, "Auftragstaktik: The Basis for Modern Military Command," (Monograph, School of Advanced Military Studies, 2012), 6.

The *Infantry Drill Regulations* of 1812 abolished the set-piece conduct of battle and, at least for the more senior Prussian officers, the qualities of initiative and independent action became more important.⁶² The manual stressed combined arms, perceived as one of the most important French Strengths, and tied cavalry and artillery more closely to the infantry support role. This doctrinal shift placed more responsibility and authority on the shoulders of company and battalion level commanders.⁶³ Scharnhorst and Gneisenau recognized that a senior commander could no longer be completely familiar with the situation that each of his subordinates faced and promoted the exercise of ‘command by directive’. This style stipulated that orders should specify only an objective while leaving subordinates the widest possible latitude in deciding how to achieve them.⁶⁴

Other reforms had an impact as well. Selection and promotion began to favor merit over class and many of the officers responsible for the defeat at Jena and Auerstadt were retired.⁶⁵ The NCO corps emerged as the backbone of the Prussian army after emphasis was placed on their training and education.⁶⁶ Slowly, the character of the Prussian army changed. The mercenary aspect of the army was lost as universal conscription produced a more representative national army. Corporal punishment was eliminated, military discipline was adjusted to meet the needs of a citizen army, and careers were opened to all men of talent and ability.⁶⁷

⁶² Werner Widder, “Auftragstaktik and Innere Führung: Trademarks of German Leadership,” *Military Review* 82, no. 5 (September 2002): 2-3.

⁶³ Citino, *The German Way of War*, 131.

⁶⁴ Geoffrey P. Megargee, *Inside Hitler’s High Command* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2000), 8.

⁶⁵ Citino, *The German Way of War*, 129. “Of the 142 generals in the Prussian army in 1802, 17 were cashiered and 83 honorably dismissed – a purge of unprecedented proportions.”

⁶⁶ Shamir, *Transforming Command*, 35.

⁶⁷ Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army*, 38-53. Craig identifies the “deplorable absence of a popular sense of duty and sacrifice” as the most shameful aspect of the Prussian loss

Gneisenau replaced Scharnhorst in 1813 and continued to emphasize the role of independent judgment and initiative in response to the three major developments in warfare during the Napoleonic period: the increased dispersion of battlefields, the increases in lethality of weapons, and the massive, industrial scale of modern war. Gneisenau laid the intellectual foundations for a decentralized command system that began to see results as European countries rallied to defeat Napoleon. The Prussian army acquitted itself well at the Battle of the Nations in Leipzig in 1813 and at Waterloo in 1815 and validated the efforts of the reformers. The successful outcomes of these battles helped reinforce these early cultural shifts in Prussian Army values, beliefs, and behaviors.

The writings of Karl von Clausewitz provided theoretical and intellectual heft to the major reforms of the Scharnhorst and Gneisenau era. Clausewitz was a protégé of Scharnhorst and had been drawn in early to Scharnhorst's circle of reformers. He served the Prussian and Russian armies in various capacities during the Napoleonic Wars. He admired Napoleon's genius and recognized the sweeping changes to the character of modern war. Until his untimely death in 1831, he analyzed the nature of war in its full political and social context and defined it in theoretical terms. The principle tenets of his seminal work, *Vom Kriege (On War)* became deeply embedded in Prussian military culture.⁶⁸

Historian Peter Paret offers that the concept of *Auftragstaktik* was a by-product of two of Clausewitz's most important contributions: his belief in decisive battle and his concept of

at Jena-Auerstadt. The reformers understood that, "If Prussia was to survive, the interest of the masses in the state must be awakened and they must be persuaded to serve it willingly." Nearly all of the reforms had narrow political and social interests in mind.

⁶⁸ Antulio J. Echevarria, "Neo-Clausewitzianism: Freytag-Loringhoven and the Militarization of Clausewitz in German Military Literature before the First World War" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1994), 27. Clausewitzian themes generally fell into four categories: the uses and limitations of theory; the impact of psychological and moral forces on war; the importance of striving for a decision by battle; and the superiority of a strategy of annihilation over all others.

imponderables.⁶⁹ Clausewitz believed it was essential to achieve the maximum concentration of force and rapidly destroy an enemy's army in a decisive battle. But, he offered no specific prescriptions for this because he did not believe in the existence of permanent principles of war. He believed that war is in the realm of human activity and governed by human emotion, friction, chance, and uncertainty. Thus, war is an art rather than science, requiring flexibility and rapid decisions.⁷⁰

Clausewitz provided a theoretical foundation for a more decentralized Prussian command structure. His work accentuated the importance of initiative, decisiveness, and creativity on the modern battlefield. These principles emerged as undisputed assumptions about war that served to define Prussian military culture. The deeply ingrained belief system engendered tangible cultural artifacts: revised doctrine, updated training methods and philosophies, selection and promotion systems emphasizing specific leader qualities, and a more liberal professional education curriculum.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Echevarria, "Neo-Clausewitzianism," 189-190. The concept of imponderables includes several elements: danger, friction, chance, and uncertainty. These elements distinguish real from abstract war. The introduction of imponderables into his theory distinguished Clausewitz from virtually all others of his day, for they failed to appreciate the existence of factors that impeded perfect execution. In fact, Clausewitz maintained that no event or outcome could be foreseen with absolute certainty.

⁷⁰ Paret, *Makers of Modern Strategy*, 212.

⁷¹ Echevarria, "Neo-Clausewitzianism," 29-36. Echevarria's dissertation illustrates the extent to which Clausewitz influenced Prussian, and later German, military theorists. Echevarria contends that many of these thinkers misappropriated Clausewitz's original ideas, but that even their misuse and distortions were forms of the intellectual influence. Clausewitz's theories got a boost from Field Marshal von Moltke's endorsement of his work shortly after Germany's successful Wars of Unification. Moltke's affirmation firmly established Clausewitz as the Prussian preeminent. Legitimacy as a military writer required proper deference to and usage of Clausewitz.

Helmuth von Moltke and the Institutionalization of Auftragstaktik

The basic principle of decentralized command had become embedded in Prussian military culture by the middle of the 19th century. It was not until Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke's thirty-one year tenure as the Chief of the General Staff of the Prussian Army (1857-1888), however, that the principle was developed into a rational theory, adapted to modern technology, and enforced as official doctrine.⁷² Moltke led the Army through a time of profound political, industrial, and technological changes. The German Wars of Unification pitted Prussian and German forces against Denmark in 1864, against Austria in 1866, and against France in 1870-1871. Advances in the range and lethality of weaponry, the industrialization of warfare, and the widespread use of the telegraph and railroad characterized the wars. As a result of these changes, young subordinate leaders were forced to employ their units in fast moving situations without detailed instructions. In after action reviews, Prussian junior leaders were assessed as inadequately trained and not sufficiently prepared to meet these new demands.⁷³

The critical analysis of military performance during the wars led to several studies that fueled a lively debate within the German Army after 1871.⁷⁴ Broadly speaking, there were two major groups of reformers. The 'standardized tacticians,' or Normaltaktikers, advocated the use of large, standardized formations trained in basic drills that could be employed by even hastily trained units. They believed in a control-oriented style of command in which actions planned to

⁷² Davis, "Helmuth von Moltke," 84-85.

⁷³ Nelson, "Auftragstaktik," 22.

⁷⁴ Gunther, "Auftragstaktik," 9. Following the successful Austro-Prussian War of 1866, Moltke ordered the General Staff to study the campaign, identify way that the army could improve its conduct of operations, and make recommendations for organizational changes. The study took nearly two years to complete. One portion of the study framed the basis for Moltke's *Instructions for Large Unit Commanders*, which was published in 1869. This book is important because it codified into doctrine many of the guiding principles for mission command for the first time. By 1879, the Prussian army entered another period of critical reflection as it openly debated the proper roles for infantry, cavalry, and artillery forces.

exacting detail, arguing that detailed orders were crucial to synchronization of movement and firepower. On the other hand, supporters of Auftragstaktik favored free-flowing, independent action and wide dispersal on the modern battlefield to increase survivability. They argued that the standardization of formations was no longer appropriate to the modern battlefield; the unique circumstances on the ground, such as terrain, enemy composition, and type of mission, should drive independent employment decisions. Decentralization was necessary to adapt to the enemy's actions and to unforeseen situations.⁷⁵ The term Auftragstaktik first surfaced in the 1890s by Normaltaktikers as a pejorative term to describe a system they felt was a threat to military discipline.⁷⁶

Moltke is considered in Germany the creator of the operational-level command and control system and the spiritual father of Auftragstaktik.⁷⁷ In the same spirit as previous Prussian reformers, he transformed the Prussian command system because he was able to intuit that the technological and political conditions of warfare were changing. Though his performance during the German Wars of Unification was celebrated, his reforms to the professional education system and his long-term impact on broader Prussian military culture were more profound and lasting. His influence resulted in several generations of critical thinking German officers who developed an advanced operational approach to command.

Moltke was a disciple of Clausewitz and embraced his basic axioms about imponderables and decisiveness. Moltke saw no certainty in war and prepared Prussian and German commanders

⁷⁵ Echevarria, Antulio J, *After Clausewitz: German Military Thinkers before the Great War* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2007), 32-35 and 94-100. Echevarria provides the best description of the decades-long debate between proponents of Normaltaktik and Auftragstaktik. The debate centered on the best ways for Infantry units to attack on the modern battlefield. See also Shamir, *Transforming Command*, 44 for a description of the "Tactical Debates 1870-1914."

⁷⁶ Widder, "Auftragstaktik and Innere Führung," 5.

⁷⁷ Widder, "Auftragstaktik and Innere Führung," 4.

to cope with friction and uncertainty. “Strategy,” he famously wrote, “is a system of expedients.” Commanders could never hope to have complete and timely understanding of the battlefield; flexibility was paramount since “no plan survives contact with the enemy’s main body.”⁷⁸ Moltke fostered independent thinking among subordinate commanders and resisted institutional efforts to restrict individual initiative. He fought to ensure freedom of action and believed that commanders should act according to their own instincts rather than wait for orders, disobeying orders if necessary. Moltke claimed, “Diverse are the situations under which an officer has to act on the basis of his own view of the situation. It would be wrong if he had to wait for orders at times when no orders can be given...most productive are his actions when he acts within the framework of his senior commander’s intent.”⁷⁹

Doctrine and training under Moltke stressed the key principles of Auftragstaktik. “Commanders of units to be committed must receive definite tasks (auftrage) but not be limited in the choice of means to accomplish them.”⁸⁰ In other words, the commander devised a mission and explained it in a short, clear order, and then left the methods and the means of achieving it to the officer on the spot. Conveying ‘why’ is far more important than ‘how,’ a focus on purpose rather than method. Moltke cautioned, “One does well to order no more than is absolutely necessary and to avoid planning beyond the situations one can foresee.” His basic rule was that “the higher the authority, the shorter and more general” the orders. It was the responsibility of the lower echelons to fill in the necessary detail.⁸¹ Furthermore, “The advantage that a commander believes he can achieve through continued intervention is usually only an apparent one. By doing so he takes over an activity that other people are meant to carry out, more or less destroys their effectiveness as

⁷⁸ Moltke quoted in Citino, *The German Way of War*, 152

⁷⁹ Widder, “Auftragstaktik and Innere Führung,” 4.

⁸⁰ Moltke quoted in Widder, “Auftragstaktik and Innere Führung,” 4.

⁸¹ Citino, *The German Way of War*, 152.

well, and multiplies his own tasks to such an extent that he can no longer fulfill them completely.”⁸²

The Prussian Army combined these ideas in new doctrine that empowered lower levels of independent decision-making in a new provision in the *Drill Regulations of the Infantry* (1888). This further affirmed and institutionalized Auftragstaktik and stipulated that commanders should give subordinates general directions of what were to be done, allowing them freedom to determine how to do it. The approach, it was felt, would stimulate the development of the “thinking leader” who was used to making tactical judgments in his own right.⁸³

Auftragstaktik in Practice: World War I

The institutional debates and reforms at the turn of the 19th century allowed the Germans to further embed some of the key principles of Auftragstaktik into their doctrine before World War I.⁸⁴ The principles were apparent and well applied early in the war, at least at tactical and operational levels. However, as maneuver warfare bogged down in the trenches of the western front, high attrition rates and a great influx of poorly trained reserve officers caused the practice to erode in favor of massive, tightly controlled operations.⁸⁵ As with the allied armies, significant operational flexibility was lost when the lines became static. Communication technology, such as

⁸² Moltke quoted in Megargee, *Inside Hitler's High Command*, 8.

⁸³ Nelson, “Auftragstaktik,” 22.

⁸⁴ Creveld, *Command in War*, 170. The newest Infantry Drill Manual was published in 1906 and updated to account for advances in technology and to help standardize training across German formations – which was not being uniformly applied. “Combat demands thinking, independent leaders and troops, capable of independent action. From the youngest soldier upward, the total independent commitment of all physical and mental forces is to be demanded. Only thus can the full power of the troops be brought to bear.” Echevarria, *After Clausewitz*, 124. Echevarria wrote, “The 1906 drill regulations accepted that the principles underpinning the Auftragstaktik method of command had been validated by the Russo-Japanese War. This method of command was explicitly regarded as the unique hallmark of the German army.”

⁸⁵ Nelson, “Auftragstaktik,” 22.

the telephone and radio, may have even stifled local initiative and aggressiveness by causing subordinate commanders to cautiously seek permission during a crisis rather than taking decisive action.⁸⁶

Faced with stagnation and brutal attrition in the trenches, the adversaries took very different approaches to resolving the stalemate. While the allies invested in technological innovations like the tank to break the deadlock, the Germans pursued a qualitative approach. They promoted and encouraged new tactics from their junior officers and NCOs and found a promising solution in small, highly trained assault squads called *Stosstrupps* (Shock Troops). Squad leaders were trained to take the initiative within the framework of their commander's intent and seize opportunities that presented themselves. Employed on a large scale in 1918, these specially trained units were extremely effective at infiltrating and penetrating front lines, though the German High Command proved unable to fully exploit them for strategic effect.

The development and employment of *Stosstrupps* represented another evolution in the German trend of progressive decentralization and highlighted their cultural propensity for learning and innovation. Whereas Moltke institutionalized a form of *Auftragstaktik* for the benefit of his senior commanders, the expansion of these principles to the enlisted ranks during World War I demonstrated that initiative, empowerment, and individual responsibility could prove decisive on the modern battlefield.⁸⁷

Auftragstaktik in Practice: World War II

The possession of a superior tactical doctrine was one of the things that made the German Army such a formidable and effective force during the World War II. Faced with the task of rebuilding an army under the constraints of the Treaty of Versailles, Hans von Seeckt, the first

⁸⁶ Shamir, *Transforming Command*, 47.

⁸⁷ Shamir, *Transforming Command*, 49.

Chief of Staff of the German Army after World War I, commissioned no fewer than 57 different committees to study the lessons of the war. The Germans built on the work of Seeckt's committees to fashion a coherent, combined arms doctrine that would eventually find expression in the blitzkrieg campaigns of 1939-1942.⁸⁸

The 1921 *Führung und Gefecht der verbundenen Waffen (Combined Arms Leadership and Battle)* captured the changes that had occurred in combat since 1914 and provided the basis for a large number of doctrinal modifications in the wake of World War I. In it, Seeckt emphasized that modern leaders required the “trust and respect” of their troops. He deemphasized the traditional Prussian concern for iron-fisted discipline and instead stressed mutual trust, the power of personal relationships, and leadership by example.⁸⁹ Seeckt also reasserted the principle of flexibility built into Auftragstaktik, not wanting his army to suffer from the same blind adherence to obsolete orders that doomed them in the trenches during the previous war. The doctrine legitimized dissent and allowed freedom for commanders to adjust their mission when appropriate. “If the mission no longer suffices as a basis for action, or has been superseded by events, then the [leader’s] decision must account of these conditions. The leader bears full responsibility if he abandons or changes an order. However, he must always act in the framework

⁸⁸ Murray, *War, Strategy, and Military Excellence*, 4. See also Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army*, 389-408. Craig finds it remarkable that the German army did not adopt a purely defensive orientation in light of its severely restricted size and inadequate equipment following the Treaty of Versailles. Seeckt held to the traditional Prussian view that “destruction of the opposing army...is still the highest law of war.” Seeckt implemented ingenious measures to preserve quality manpower, doctrine, and training during a period of extreme austerity. He also deliberately evaded and circumvented many provisions from Versailles.

⁸⁹ Citino, *The Path to Blitzkrieg*, 13. “If the troops know that the leader lives for them and shares their joys and sorrows, they will willingly give their all to achieve success, and will bear up under setbacks.”

of the whole...a strict adherence to a decision can lead to error. The art of leadership is recognizing when a new decision is required.”⁹⁰

The 1933 publication *Truppenfuhrung* (Troop Leadership) regulations built on Seeckt’s work and served as the basic doctrinal manual that guided combined arms training and operations, as well as leader development of the German Army from its publication until the end of WWII.⁹¹ It represents the full expression of Auftragstaktik in its mature form. The manual begins echoing Clausewitz, explicitly reaffirming several of the underlying assumptions of the German Army about the nature and character of warfare:

1. War is an art, a free and creative activity founded on scientific principles. It makes the very highest demands on the human personality. 2. The conduct of war is subject to continuous development. New weapons dictate ever-changing forms. Their appearance must be anticipated and their influence evaluated. Then they must be placed into service quickly. 3. Combat situations are of an unlimited variety. They change frequently and suddenly and can seldom be assessed in advance. Incalculable elements often have decisive influence. One’s own will is pitted against the independent will of the enemy. Friction and errors are daily occurrences.⁹²

Truppenfuhrung devoted ten paragraphs to articulating principles of decentralized command.⁹³ The manual explicitly demanded the independent judgment of commanders at every level and legitimized professional criticism when warranted. The decentralized command concept articulated in the manual was based on the assumption of professional competence of the entire officer corps, reinforced by a professional certification process through formal schooling. It emphasized initiative stemming from mutual trust among all echelons of command, and

⁹⁰ Von Seeckt in Citino, *The Path to Blitzkrieg*, 14.

⁹¹ Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence*, 111. *Truppenfuhrung* was co-authored by esteemed Generals Werner von Fritsch and Ludwig Beck.

⁹² Condell, *On the German Art of War*, 17.

⁹³ Shamir, *Transforming Command*, 43 and Condell, *On the German Art of War*, 5. Condell highlights paragraphs 6, 9, 10, 15, 36, 37, 73, 74, 75, and 76 as evidence that the concept of Auftragstaktik was firmly embedded in the publication of *Truppenfuhrung*.

advocated freedom of action to field commanders at every level.⁹⁴ Moreover, the key principles were emphasized down to the individual soldier.⁹⁵

37. The mission (Auftrag) and the situation (lage) lead to the decision (Entschluss) of the course of action. If the assigned mission no longer suffices as the basis for action, or if it is overtaken by events, the course of action must take these circumstances into account. An officer who changes a mission or does not carry it out must report his actions immediately, and he assumes responsibility for the consequences. He must always act within the overall framework of the situation... The commander must allow his subordinates freedom of action, so long as it does not adversely affect his overall intent (Absicht). He may not, however, surrender to his subordinates decisions for which he alone is responsible. 10. The decisive factor, despite technology and weaponry, is the value of the individual soldier. The wider his experience in combat, the greater his importance. 6. The command of an army and its subordinate units require leaders capable of judgment, with clear vision and foresight, and the ability to make independent and decisive decisions and carry them out unwaveringly and positively.⁹⁶

Truppenführung also laid the conceptual framework for a combined arms approach that would later be described as Blitzkrieg. Blitzkrieg used panzer divisions, airpower, and mobile artillery augmented by radio communications systems to achieve a decisive victory through bold operational maneuver. The basis of this concept was well aligned with the freedom of action and initiative afforded by Auftragstaktik. Blitzkrieg was an effective example of technology and advances in weaponry that were placed in the service of existing doctrine rather than as the basis of something new.

The German commitment to the principles of Auftragstaktik leading up to World War II represented a conscious effort to maintain at all costs that which was believed to be decisive to the conduct of war: mutual trust, a willingness to assume responsibility, and the right and duty of

⁹⁴ Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence*, 137.

⁹⁵ Condell, *On the German Art of War*, 4. Condell highlights von Seeckt's emphasis on increasing the responsibility of individual soldiers. Writing in 1925, "The principal thing now is to increase the responsibilities of the individual man, particularly his independence of action, and thereby to increase the efficiency of the entire army."

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

subordinate commanders at all levels to make independent decisions and carry them out.”⁹⁷ The investment paid dividends. Auftragstaktik undoubtedly contributed to the German army’s tactical and operational excellence during most of the war.⁹⁸ It reached its apogee during the war’s early stages and its persistent cultural influence ensured that German resistance remained tactically effective well after their strategic situation deteriorated later in the war.

As a cultural phenomenon, Auftragstaktik proved susceptible to environmental pressures and internal organizational strains during the war. There were specific reasons for its decline. First, Germany witnessed a steady decline in combat effectiveness as mounting casualties necessitated lower recruitment standards and shorter periods of training. Second, micromanagement increased as the German High Command became more and more involved in operational details as the war progressed. Hitler proved to be a supreme commander who intervened not just in operational details, such as placement of reserves, but who regularly sent directives to lower tactical units about deployment of their light mortars or their anti-tank guns.⁹⁹ Similarly, Hitler’s orders to stand fast and hold “until the last man” on the eastern front violated basic principles of initiative. Ultimately, Auftragstaktik ceased to function at the operational level as trust evaporated between Hitler, his senior generals, and the remainder of the leadership.

⁹⁷ Van Creveld, *Fighting Power*, 165. Van Creveld elaborates on the organizational costs associated with Auftragstaktik, “To generate independence, freedom had to be granted. To train men towards responsibility, authority had to be delegated. To create trust, reliability and long standing acquaintanceships had to be assured. A direct outcome of these considerations were, in the first place, the German regulations which, as compared to the American ones, did not go into great detail and did not attempt to prescribe solutions in advance. A decentralized system of administration left much to the discretion, not to say intuition, of individual commanders and men, but at the same time put complete undivided responsibility squarely on their shoulders.”

⁹⁸ A point which has been contested in recent literature.

⁹⁹ Megargee, *Inside Hitler’s High Command*, 230-236. Megargee found that Hitler was not solely to blame for the German predicament, but also the German High Command. The German’s fundamental inability to make sound strategic judgments lies at the heart of the problem.

Perhaps the final death knell of Auftragstaktik in World War II came on January 6, 1942 when General Franz Halder, the army Chief of Staff, sent a set of directives in which he stressed that it was time for a stricter system of command based firmly on Hitler's will. He felt that the decentralized system of command had done serious damage to the German position. It was time for clear and unambiguous orders, he told them, "The duty of soldierly obedience leaves no room for the sensibilities of lower headquarters."¹⁰⁰

Auftragstaktik: The Basis of a Modern German Command Philosophy

Though the cultural attributes necessary for Auftragstaktik were virtually extinguished in the upper echelons of the Wehrmacht during World War II, they were never institutionally forgotten. Almost as soon as the Bundeswehr was established in 1955, Auftragstaktik was reinvigorated as its chosen philosophy of command.¹⁰¹ German AR 100/100 describes the modern concept, "Auftragstaktik is the pre-eminent command and control principle in the Army. It is based on mutual trust and requires each soldier's unwavering commitment to perform his duty... the military leader informs what his intention is, sets clear achievable objectives, and provides the required forces and resources. He will only order details regarding execution if measures that serve the same objective have to be harmonized, if political or military constraints require it. He gives latitude to subordinate leaders in the execution of their mission."¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Citino, *The German Way of War*, 302-305.

¹⁰¹ The Bundeswehr does not consider itself a successor to the previous two defense forces in Germany, the Reichswehr (1921-1935) or the Wehrmacht (1935-1945). Today's German Army is a component of the Bundeswehr.

¹⁰² From German AR 100/100 quoted in, Widder, "Auftragstaktik and Innere Führung", 5-6. The concept of Auftragstaktik is now closely tied to the concept of 'Innere Führung'. This reflects the idea of German soldiers as responsible citizens committed to a solemn duty to their country and acting of their own free will. Innere Führung implies the commitment of German soldiers to espoused moral and ethical standards. This is a key feature of German military culture post World War II.

A Cultural Model of Mission Command

The use of Prussian and German historical context to build a cultural model for US mission command is certainly imperfect. Though *Auftragstaktik* is often idealized, in fact it was unevenly practiced and proved susceptible to environmental pressures, institutional tension, and the occasional vagaries of leader behavior. Undercurrents of class conflict and social tension created unhealthy factions within the Prussian officer corps.¹⁰³ Periods of rapid military growth and periods of austerity threatened key cultural prerequisites required for mutual trust. Advances in technology like the telegraph and radio offered illusions of control that challenged the efficacy of decentralized command. Attrition in wartime withered the training, education, and overall professional competence of the force.

Despite its inadequacies, the cultural phenomenon of *Auftragstaktik* still provides useful insight into the characteristics required for modern mission command. The Prussians and Germans systematically developed a decentralized command system into a comprehensive theory and integrated it into doctrine and practice. They did so in a manner more vigorous, thorough, and deliberate than any other military and were rewarded by tactical and operational excellence. *Auftragstaktik* evolved organically over a long period of time and endured several phases of critical examination and adaptation. Its journey is relevant as we explore why mission command is has failed to take firm root in US Army culture.

Enriching the framework of organizational culture found previously discussed with qualitative analysis from the evolution of *Auftragstaktik*, one can create a model representing the normative cultural dimensions of mission command. The model provides a way to for leaders to visualize and think through this complex phenomenon. Given that no current analytical example

¹⁰³ Steven E. Clemente, *For King and Kaiser!: The Making of the Prussian Army Officer, 1860-1914* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 15-20. Clemente offers insightful analysis on the impact of class conflict in the Prussian army.

exists in academic or doctrinal literature, this model should provide a more comprehensive and thoughtful means to reflect on the often-cited ‘culture of mission command’ in the US Army.



Figure 4. Cultural Model of Mission Command

Source: Created by Author

The deepest and most consequential layer of culture contains an organization’s underlying assumptions. A strong, well-aligned culture of mission command is predicated on three types of assumptions: assumptions about the nature and character of war, assumptions about command and the role of commanders, and assumptions about the role of subordinates and followership.

Assumptions about the nature and character of war are rooted in Clausewitz’s belief in decisive action and his concept of imponderables.

- War is fundamentally a human endeavor.
- Uncertainty is inherent in war.
- Decisive action is required to exploit fleeting opportunities.

Assumptions about the nature of command and role of commanders:

- Commanders must exercise independent judgment.
- Commanders must assume great risk willingly.
- Commanders have an inherent responsibility to develop and mentor subordinates.
- Commanders must value organizational learning.

Assumptions about the Subordinates:

- Subordinate leaders possess the requisite independent judgment to act responsibly. They are often in better command of the facts on the ground.
- Subordinate leaders must understand and operate within the framework of Commander's intentions.

An organization will embrace certain values and subscribe to a set of beliefs because its underlying assumptions promote and support those norms. In the case of mission command, there are three categories of beliefs that arise from the underlying assumptions. Some of these may be observable and espoused in doctrine, while others may be concepts that are embedded and internalized by the organization.

Beliefs about warfare:

- Every situation in warfare is unique. There are no universal prescriptions.
- Humans are more important than technology and weaponry.
- Organizations must rapidly learn, adapt, and innovate to adjust to changes in the environment.

Beliefs about command:

- Commanders must tolerate mistakes and failures in the execution of their orders.

- Commanders must learn to live with chaos rather than seek to control it.
- Commanders must make timely decisions.
- Decision will be made with imperfect and incomplete information.
- In situations requiring independent decisions, the Commander has the latitude, but also the duty to act.
- Inaction and omission are worse than errors in judgment.

Beliefs about subordinates and followership:

- Subordinates must be willing to take risks and take the initiative.
- Subordinate freedom of action is required to take advantage of rapidly developing situations.
- Responsibility must be linked to authority.
- Rigorous training, professional education, and leader development processes ensure shared understanding about employment of doctrine and tactics.
- It is appropriate to modify or abandon assigned tasks if you can still meet the broader intent of the Commander.
- Critical review of operations and training essential to learning.

Artifacts. Every facet of an organization will produce observable artifacts that represent its culture. Artifacts from a well-aligned culture of mission command might include:

- Technology that supports rapid decision-making.
- Social architecture that fosters relationships between senior-subordinates.
- Rigorous command selection process and professional credentialing based on demonstrated expertise and application of mission command principles
- System of rewards for initiative, decisiveness; system of punishment for shirking, inaction
- High levels of delegation; well-understood authorities

- Adaptive training methods
- Training and Professional Military Education; Leader Development programs
- Mythology, stories, ceremony, ritual that prizes individual initiative, sound judgment, and aggressiveness
- Universally understood and accepted doctrine

Command climate is an important artifact of organizational culture. A command climate effectively practicing mission command should include:

- Mutual trust established through well-developed superior-subordinate relationships
- Strong command emphasis on leader development
- Tolerance of well-intended mistakes
- Encourages initiative and displays of judgment
- Formal and informal mechanisms for discourse and dialogue between Commanders and staff.
- Clear communication. Short, concise orders and clear expectations.
- Acceptance of risk and responsibility.
- Strong emphasis on empowerment and delegation.
- Places value on learning. Formalized process to critically examine and improve organizational process and outcomes.

Assessing the Culture of Mission Command in the US Army

Mission command in US Army doctrine is formally defined as the “exercise of authority and direction by the commanders using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander’s intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of unified land

operations.”¹⁰⁴ The six guiding principles of mission command philosophy contained within ADP 6-0 acknowledge the essence of the Auftragstaktik.¹⁰⁵ These include: build cohesive teams through mutual trust; create shared understanding; provide a clear commander’s intent; exercise disciplined initiative; use mission orders; and accept prudent risk. Mission command doctrine took on renewed interest and emphasis in the US Army because of the widely distributed and decentralized nature of campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. The merits of mission command as a system of command in today’s complex and ambiguous environment appear to be universally respected; in fact, the concept has recently been adopted as a central tenet in how the US Army fights.¹⁰⁶

Clearly, the fundamentals of mission command are not new to the US Army. Nor is the idea that Army units should be adaptable and able to operate in a decentralized fashion. For at least one hundred years, many of the key themes of mission command percolated through US army doctrine, updated periodically to reflect lessons learned in combat. There are references as far back as the 1905 Field Service Regulations (FSR) to preserving subordinate freedom of action.¹⁰⁷ The importance of initiative, shared understanding, and decentralized control emerged as key tenets during World War II. The post-Vietnam reforms in the 1970s and 1980s sparked

¹⁰⁴ Army Doctrinal Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-0, *Mission Command* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2012), 1-1. Mission command is a term used to describe both a philosophy of command and warfighting function. This monograph is primarily concerned with the philosophy.

¹⁰⁵ ADRP 6-0, 2-1.

¹⁰⁶ Training and Doctrine Command Pamphlet 525-3-1, *The US Army Operating Concept: How to Win in a Complex World 2020-2040* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2014), 20-21.

¹⁰⁷ For a thorough review of the history of mission command principles in US Army doctrine see Clint J. Anker, “The Evolution of Mission Command in U.S. Army Doctrine: 1905 to the Present,” *Military Review* 93, no. 2 (February 2013): 42.

significant doctrinal debate about adopting a concept akin to Auftragstaktik in the US Army.¹⁰⁸

By 2001, all of the contemporary elements of modern mission command were packaged in one coherent body of work. In 2003, mission command was officially incorporated into US Army doctrine and referenced across all other key manuals.¹⁰⁹

Unfortunately, the practice of mission command has proven much more problematic than the theory. Despite espousing many of the same principles as Auftragstaktik and integrating them into a comprehensive doctrine, the US Army has not been able to firmly embed mission command into its organizational culture. Cultural analysis does not lend itself to empirical data, but there are a variety of unhealthy indicators of cultural misalignment. One of the key findings of the 2013 Leader Development Task Force indicated that, “There is still a large part of our force that is functioning- or perceived to be functioning- in a command environment that is not guided by the principles of Mission Command.”¹¹⁰ As previously described, culture is a socially constructed phenomenon; perceptions of members matter. Less than 50% of Army-wide respondents to a recent leadership survey believed that their headquarters was guided by the principles of mission command.¹¹¹ The demographic trends highlighted by the data are not

¹⁰⁸ Debate about formalizing the principles of mission command during discussion of AirLand battle in the 1970s and early 1980s. See Shamir, *Transforming Command*, 101-111.

¹⁰⁹ The doctrine was first titled “Command and Control,” then “Battle Command,” and finally revised to “Mission Command” in 2013. There have been several revisions to Mission Command publications, but no new major concepts have been introduced. See Anker, “Evolution of Mission Command,” 42.

¹¹⁰ Department of the Army, *Army Leader Development Task Force (ALDTF) Final Report* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2013), 17.

¹¹¹ Department of the Army, *ALDTF*, 16-17. The US Army uses survey instruments like the CAL Annual Survey of Army Leadership to assess leader effectiveness in demonstrating principles of mission command philosophy and the extent to which operational climates in units are organizations are supportive of mission command. Specifically, they are concerned with whether Army leaders understand and practice the mission command philosophy. In this survey, each of the six principles was analyzed: 37% believed that their headquarters could build cohesive teams, 46% encouraged mutual trust, 47% provided clear commander’s intent, 49%

particularly surprising. Typically, senior leaders view their unit climates as more supportive of mission command than do leaders at lower levels.¹¹² Junior NCOs hold the least favorable perceptions about the health of mission command.

The failure of the Army's practices to match its proclaimed beliefs is a source of common frustration among mid-grade and senior leaders.¹¹³ This fact is not lost on Army leadership and there have been several concerted efforts to address the issue. The current challenges of mission command received top billing at three recent high-profile round table conferences chaired by senior leaders.¹¹⁴ The White Paper that emerged from the Major Colloquium declares, "Contemporary Army culture remains risk averse and focused on creating a 'zero-defect' environment. These cultural traits combine with a traditional emphasis on commander-centric processes and hierarchical power structures to discourage disciplined initiative in followers. Army leaders further continue to default to detailed command, despite encountering few occasions requiring this method. The combined effect of these actions actively undermines the

allowed disciplined initiative, and only 37% believed that headquarters underwrote prudent risk in garrison operations.

¹¹² Josh Hatfield, Ryan Riley, Tyler Freeman, John Fallesen, and Katie M. Gunther, 2013 *Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL): Main Findings*. CAL Technical Report 2014-01 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Center for Army Leadership, 2014), 46. This is true particularly with regard to job latitude, learning from honest mistakes, and empowerment to make decisions. Junior NCOs hold the least favorable perceptions about these factors within the working environment.

¹¹³ Observations here come from the author's interactions with Army leaders in his capacity as a Battalion Pre-Command Course instructor. The author conducted dozens of sensing sessions about mission command with PCC and CGSS students between AUG 13 and JUN 14.

¹¹⁴ The 2014 and 2015 Solarium Conferences were chaired by the CSA in JUL 14 and FEB 15. The conferences featured 84 Captains from across the US Army divided into seven teams and tasked with addressing some of the force's key issues, including perceived problems with mission command. The 2015 TRADOC Commander Colloquium was chaired by the TRADOC Commander on 30 MAR 15. Dozens of Army Majors at the Colloquium were provided the opportunity to recommend solutions to some of the Army's most difficult challenges directly to Army Senior Leaders, including problems with mission command.

mission command philosophy's acceptance into Army culture.”¹¹⁵ One senior leader put it more bluntly, “We are totally broken. [Mission command] is not effective across the Army, not in my [unit], nowhere in the Army. We're risk averse; we've got to learn to walk the walk.”¹¹⁶

Several factors shape US Army culture in a manner that impedes the effective practice of mission command. First, mission command did not evolve naturally in the same sense that *Auftragstaktik* developed in Prussia. The adoption of mission command in the US Army resulted from a perceived need to improve performance rather than from the necessity of historic or geopolitical circumstances. Second, external environmental pressures are imposing tensions inside the organizational culture of the US Army. Budgetary and resource constraints, the reduction in force structure and size, and social and technological trends are negatively affecting key cultural components that underpin mission command. Finally, internal tensions are also challenging a culture of mission command. As the US Army transitions from an ‘army of execution’ to an ‘army of preparation’ there are some inherent challenges associated with meeting member expectations.¹¹⁷ The decentralized system of control in Iraq and Afghanistan is at odds with peacetime procedural control where organizational systems and structures favor more centralized control and less risk.

Incomplete Adoption of Mission Command

Auftragstaktik evolved to meet the realities of Prussia's and later Germany's geopolitical situation. Prussia was limited by a small population, resource base, tax revenues, and surrounded

¹¹⁵ Cortis B. Burgess, et al., “Mission Command White Paper” (paper presented at the TRADOC Commander's Colloquium, Fort Leavenworth, KS, March 30, 2015).

¹¹⁶ ASLSP Discussion with Senior Leader, December 4, 2014.

¹¹⁷ ‘Army of execution’ and ‘army of preparation’ were terms coined by GEN Robert Cone in 2013 to describe the reorientation of the army from resourcing and fighting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to one of being prepared for the next conflict.

throughout history by hostile nations. Thus it favored wars that were quick and decisive, preferring a decisive battle of annihilation to a war of attrition.¹¹⁸ Prussian and German wars were characterized by bold operational movement and maneuver, and an aggressive spirit. They sought rapid victory but displayed a dangerous tendency to seek the offensive even when it was ill advised. Prussians and Germans never enjoyed advantages in operational-level logistics or intelligence and tended to assign their best men to demanding combat positions. Officers and noncommissioned officers were given substantial freedom of action and incentives that rewarded fighting process, especially that which required them to run risks.¹¹⁹

The US Army's tradition of command emerged from a far different historical context. America's geographic position kept her isolated and oceans acted as massive barriers that mitigated the threat of invasion. The US Army, backed by vast economic and technological resources, developed an entirely different style of war. It relied on firepower, technology, operational logistics, and an ability to mobilize enormous natural resources.¹²⁰ In World War II, the US Army embraced corporate ideas, such as quantitative models, efficiency and resource management. These enabled the army to face the trials of rapid expansion and support eight million soldiers in a global war. The successful outcome reinforced a cultural predisposition towards firepower, logistics, and heavy reliance on technology through application of vast national resources. In Vietnam, corporate ideas and technology were used to manage the war.¹²¹ When the US Army eventually pursued mission command in the 1980s as a system of command it was unable to shed its preferred style in order to effect the required cultural changes.

¹¹⁸ Citino, *German Way of War*, 9. Citino believes that the Prussians favored "quick and lively" wars.

¹¹⁹ James Q Wilson, *Bureaucracy* (New York: Basic Books, Inc, 1989), 16.

¹²⁰ Van Creveld, *Fighting Power*, 9.

¹²¹ Shamir, *Transforming Command*, 65.

In Prussia and Germany, the emergence of Auftragstaktik serves as an example of a complete cultural transformation. It was precipitated by an organizational crisis that ensued in the Prussian army after defeats at Jena and Auerstadt. The devastating losses undermined the belief in the previous system of command, forcing new leaders, like Scharnhorst and Gneisenau, to introduce new methods that improved organizational performance. Members of the Prussian army attributed the organization's success in the Wars of German Unification to these new methods. In essence, the Prussians gradually learned and validated a new set of underlying assumptions as they effectively practiced Auftragstaktik.

The adoption of mission command in the US Army was more imitation than cultural reform. There have been relatively few periods of institutional circumspection about the desired system of command for the US Army. Mission command was viewed as a 'best practice' and adopted as part of broader institutional and doctrinal reforms.¹²² Rather than learn from its own lessons and experiences, the US Army attempted to imitate the cultural characteristics of another successful organization. As a result, the beliefs, values, and underlying assumptions that worked well in their original context did not completely transfer. Organizational culture requires a certain amount of trial and error in order to adapt a foreign practice to fit an existing style. The US Army remains heavily influenced by traditions, beliefs, and artifacts that grew from its historic brand of warfighting. Absent a significant organizational crisis, these traits and values remain hard to change.

Environmental Pressures

Army culture is increasingly coming under pressure from a variety of external sources that challenge the important cultural elements/conditions essential for effective mission

¹²² Shamir, *Transforming Command*, 101-111. Shamir summarizes the intellectual debates that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s.

command. Across the board, evidence suggests that morale and readiness across all of the US armed forces are suffering as a result of declining budgets, fiscal uncertainty, force reductions, high operating tempo, and resource constraints. Though senior defense leaders are sensitive to the scope and magnitude of the problems, a political solution seems to be beyond their grasp. The Army may face unexpected cultural consequences in the long term.

Budgetary realities are adversely affecting the key trust relationships that are central to a functioning culture of mission command. Military officials are plagued by uncertainty in defense planning and budgeting, coupled with sharp reductions in almost every category of defense spending. Senior Army leaders face the same challenges as the rest of the Department of Defense (DOD) and have to make difficult choices on how best to spend available resources for training and operations, procurement, modernization, personnel compensation and benefits, health costs, maintenance costs for facilities, and operational contingencies. Perhaps the single largest contributor to the high level of uncertainty in the defense budget is the Budget Control Act of 2011 (BCA).

The BCA set budget caps for defense, and these caps were automatically reduced upon the failure of a congressional committee to produce an alternative for deficit reduction.¹²³ A set of fiscal rules implemented ‘sequestration cuts’ to service budgets. Beginning in 2013, sequestration forced a uniform reduction in budget authority of roughly 10.3 percent across all accounts other than military personnel.¹²⁴

In just two years, the consequences to Army readiness are startling. Despite some budgetary relief in 2014, the CSA, GEN Ray Odierno, warned Congress in March of 2015 that,

¹²³ Todd Harrison, “Chaos and Uncertainty: The FY2014 Defense Budget and Beyond,” CSBA, October 2013, 2. Harrison provides a thoughtful analysis of the long-term impacts of Sequestration.

¹²⁴ Under rules passed by Congress in 2011, defense spending will be reduced by about \$40 billion in fiscal 2016 unless lawmakers can amend the 3-year-old Budget Control Act.

“Only 33 percent of our brigades are ready, when our sustained readiness levels should be closer to 70 percent. We have fewer soldiers, the majority of whom are in units that are not ready, and they are manning aging equipment at a time when the demand for Army forces is much higher than anticipated.”¹²⁵ Further erosion of the defense budget under sequestration will serve to magnify the Army’s institutional challenges. If sequestration returns in 2016, the US Army could lose ten to twelve additional brigade combat teams and, according to GEN Odierno, “Modernization would come to a standstill, training would go unfunded, and readiness rates, both unit and individual, would fall to very low levels.”¹²⁶

One of the downstream effects of the budgetary climate is higher anxiety and lower morale among troops and families, a fact that does not escape senior leaders. “As they see we’re not going to invest in them, [our soldiers] begin to lose faith,” stated GEN Odierno. “Sometimes we take for granted the level of ability of our people, and the level of investment we’ve made in their training, which is central to everything we do. With sequestration, we are going to have to reduce that for sure.”¹²⁷ When asked about morale, GEN Odierno replied, “There’s a lot of pressure on soldiers right now. There’s uncertainty. On top of that there’s a lot of discussion about pay and benefits, there’s a lot of discussion about retirement, there’s a lot of discussion on many things. We haven’t seen that breaking point yet, but I worry when that will occur in the future.”¹²⁸ GEN Odierno’s concerns appear well founded. A recent survey of 2,300 active-duty troops from all services found morale indicators on the decline in nearly every aspect of military

¹²⁵ Michelle Tan, “Leaders: Army readiness at historically low levels,” *Army Times*, March 23, 2015, 22.

¹²⁶ Tan, “Leaders,” *Army Times*, 23.

¹²⁷ Leo Shane III, “Again, Pentagon Leaders Lament Sequestration Cuts,” *Military Times*, 28 JAN 15, accessed March 5, 2015, <http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/capitol-hill/2015/01/28/pentagon-leaders-lament-sequestration-cuts/22463223/>.

¹²⁸ Tan, “Leaders,” *Army Times*, 23.

life.¹²⁹ Troops reported significantly lower overall job satisfaction, diminished respect for their superiors, and a declining interest in re-enlistment now compared to just five years ago. The survey data reflect a perception among service members that they are underpaid, under-equipped and under-valued.¹³⁰

During the budget battles, senior leaders have understandably prioritized operational and readiness concerns above all others. From their perspective, keeping faith with the troops means ensuring our military remains the best trained and equipped force in the world; breaking faith with the troops is sending them into battle understaffed, undertrained, or with inferior equipment.¹³¹ But, soldiers and families are prone to see policy changes—that reform the military compensation and retirement system, reduce housing allowance rates, reorganize the military health care system, or restructure the commissary system—as features that will diminish their quality of life or imply a lower value to society.

A culture of mission command requires strong trust relationships between leaders and the led. A commitment to mission command requires a deliberate investment in highly trained and

¹²⁹ The *Military Times* conducted the survey in July and August of 2014. Results were published in a series of articles in December of 2014. No service specific survey instrument has been published by the US Army or any other organization to refute or support the *Military Times* data to date.

¹³⁰ Hope Hodge Seck, “A Worsening Morale Crisis,” *Military Times*, accessed March 10, 2015, <http://www.militarytimes.com/longform/military/2014/12/07/americas-military-a-force-adrift/18596571/?sf34440316=/>. “Active-duty troops reported a significant drop in how they rated their overall quality of life: Just 56 percent call it good or excellent, down from 91 percent in 2009. The survey, conducted in July and August, found that 73 percent of troops would recommend a military career to others, down from 85 percent in 2009. Troops reported a significant decline in their desire to re-enlist, with 63 percent citing an intention to do so, compared with 72 percent a few years ago. In 2009, 87 percent of active-duty troops who participated in Military Times' survey rated their pay and allowances "good" or "excellent." This year, the figure was just 44 percent. When asked how quality of life might change over the next several years, 70 percent of respondents predicted it would decline further.”

¹³¹ Todd Harrison, “Keeping Faith with the Troops: How Congress Can Fix the Military's Compensation Problems,” *Forbes Online*, accessed March 18, 2015, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/toddharrison/2015/02/03/congress-military-compensation/>.

well-equipped units that are capable of operating independently. A sustained inability to attain expected levels of readiness or training may lead to a cynical view on the part of members about the institution's standards and may erode confidence in institutional leadership. It also erodes trust on the part of senior leaders that units are capable of effective decentralized operations. The current fiscal and budgetary environment creates additional dissonance in the human dimension of the Army's organizational culture. It places senior leaders in the unenviable position prioritizing operational funding over family programs. The budgetary realities simply may not meet member expectations and align with the US Army's stated goals about supporting families. The current budgetary climate jeopardizes the key trust relationships essential for mission command and there is mounting evidence of declining trust and confidence in policymakers and senior military leaders.

For the third time since the end of the Vietnam War, the US Army is in a postwar drawdown. Largely the result of the budgetary pressures previously discussed, over the last three years the Army has cut the active component by 80,000 soldiers, inactivated 13 brigade combat teams and is in the process of eliminating three combat aviation brigades.¹³² This force reduction is projected to continue until Fiscal Year (FY) 2018; the cuts will accelerate more aggressively if Sequestration is not prevented in FY16.

Under normal loss rates, or natural attrition, the US Army cannot meet its targeted reductions over the next three years. Consequently, it is forced to involuntarily separate quality

¹³² *Hearing before the Committee on Armed Services*, "Statement by the Honorable John M. McHugh and General Raymond T. Odierno," United States Senate, 114th Cong., 1st sess., March 15, 2015, 9. The Army identified an end strength of 980,000 as the minimum required forces to meet the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance (DSG). The current reduction plan will draw the Regular Army to 450,000, the National Guard to 335,000, and the Army Reserve to 195,000 by FY2018. If the 2016 Sequestration cuts were implemented, the Total Army end strength would be cut to 920,000.

soldiers to meet its end strength goals.¹³³ Adjusting accession levels, selectively promoting, and following more exacting retention standards will help shape the force over time. Force reduction initiatives will screen personnel to achieve force structure authorizations in grade, specialty, and component.¹³⁴ These shaping tools include Officer Separation Boards (OSB), Enhanced Selective Early Retirement Boards (E-SERB), and the Qualitative Service Program (QSP).

As US Army boards seek to identify and retain its best and brightest members, policy changes have unmasked previously concealed records, unfavorable documentation, and older evaluation reports.¹³⁵ These now serve as discriminating factors for promotion and selection and may contribute to the separation of otherwise talented and accomplished personnel. However

¹³³ Statement by McHugh and Odierno, *Hearing*, 9.

¹³⁴ *Army Times* Staff Writers, “In 2015, Army will lose more than 20,000 Soldiers in drawdown,” *Army Times*, December 27, 2014, accessed on March 15, 2015, <http://www.armytimes.com/story/military/careers/army/2014/12/26/2015-drawdown-year-ahead/20860491>. An *Army Times* interview with CSA GEN Ray Odierno in September of 2014 indicated that involuntary separation actions will be targeted at the various officer and noncommissioned officer ranks “to keep the force in balance,” and to compensate for the additional soldiers who were brought into service during the manpower buildup for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. “Now that we are reducing the Army, we have got to bring (those levels) back down, and we are going to continue to make decisions to do that. My guess is that as we continue to draw the force down, we will have to do (selective release) boards every year through 2019,” Odierno said.

¹³⁵ The Army reversed a 15-year policy of masking junior officer OERs during selection and promotion boards with the issuance of Army Directive 2015-07 (Unmasking of Army Officer Evaluation Reports). The policy had been emplaced to allow junior officers to grow and develop without fear that their earliest reports would jeopardize the long-term health of their career. For specifics on the policy change see Jim Tice, “OER Masking Rules for Upcoming Boards Issued,” *Army Times*, February 22, 2015, accessed on March 15, 2015, <http://www.armytimes.com/story/military/careers/army/officer/2015/02/22/oer-masking-policies/23674827/>. The Army is issuing new guidance to selection boards as it phases out the practice of masking junior officer evaluations. Under old policy, junior officer evaluations went unseen by the selection board once an officer was promoted to captain or chief warrant officer three. The restricted file was not seen by selection boards, except in rare instances. But in a change ordered Jan. 30, Human Resources Command is moving all previously masked reports to the performance section of an officer’s Army Military Human Resource Record, or AMHRR, which normally is included in the documents packet seen by promotion, school and command selection boards.

necessary from a bureaucratic standpoint, the reduction boards and policy changes have left the US Army open to criticism that it is abetting the creation of a ‘zero defects’ environment.

Research on downsizing in industry indicates that low morale, unhealthy competitiveness, and reduced initiative are common during and after downsizing, often resulting in diminished organizational effectiveness or productivity.¹³⁶ The US Army’s previous experience with industrial-scale downsizing in the 1990s resulted in an unbalanced organizational culture that took years to correct. The multiple Selective Early Retirement Boards (SERB) and Reduction in Force (RIF) actions over a period of 4 years in the 1990s were a traumatic experience for leaders in the US Army. Officers with over a decade of service, including many with combat experience in Operation Desert Storm, were forced into retirement. Promotion rates were dramatically cut, as the Army’s “up or out” policies, codified in the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA) of 1980, were strictly enforced. Not surprisingly, self-preservation crept over the officer corps. Leaders perceived that the way to survive the drawdowns was to follow rigidly prescribed career timelines, and opted to assume less career risk in broadening assignments. Surveys and interviews of senior service college students in the mid-1990s revealed that careerism within the officer corps had increased as well as growing concerns about organizational climate and a return of ‘zero-defects’ standards.¹³⁷ By the late 1990s, the pains of the drawdown had been replaced by a growing retention problem among its junior officers, perhaps the most palpable indicator of problems in the Army’s organizational culture.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Thornton, “Cultural Barriers,” 143.

¹³⁷ Don M. Snider and Gayle L. Watkins, “The Future of Army Professionalism: A Need for Renewal and Redefinition,” *Parameters* 30, no. 3 (Autumn 2000): 5-20.

¹³⁸ Casey Wardynski, David S. Lyle, Michael J. Colarusso, “Towards a US Army Officer Corps Strategy for Success: A Proposed Human Capital Model Focused on Talent” (Report, US Army War College, April 2009), 9. The organizational culture caused a significant portion of young officers to conclude that a career in the Army was unappealing and incongruous with the lives of job-satisfaction, self-fulfillment, and balance that they desired. The Army’s

Research groups studied the morale and retention problems in the US Army and broader US military in the late 1990s and early 2000s.¹³⁹ The Army Training and Leader Development Panel (ATLDP) found that Army culture was out of balance, and reached the strong conclusion that micromanagement had become deeply embedded. Among its findings, “Inexperienced officers, a high operational pace, and associated high standards of achievement encourage senior officers to be more directive in their leadership and less tolerant of mistakes.”¹⁴⁰

Military organizations under stress tend to develop a dysfunctional zero-defects rigidity that stifles effectiveness. Downsizing will inevitably exert pressure on Army culture. The return of a hyper-competitive organizational climate will have lasting repercussions on the culture of mission command. If leaders do not feel they can make mistakes, they will not display initiative. Commanders who fear that their subordinate’s mistakes would jeopardize their own success will reflexively practice micromanagement.¹⁴¹ The manner in which the US Army is perceived by its members to handle the drawdown is critically important to the organizational climate and culture. Currently, some personnel management practices do not seem to match the US Army’s stated values about people.

The culture of mission command in the US Army faces additional external pressures from a unique combination of social, political, and technological forces. Society is enmeshed in a major social transformation, driven in part by, and deriving much of its character from, the amazing advances in technologies of information. The rate of technical change in processing,

organizational culture was becoming less attractive when compared to the changing organizational culture of business – which was moving to flatter organizations, with more individual autonomy, more opportunities for advanced education or ‘retooling one’s career, and greater possibilities for career advancement.

¹³⁹ Department of the Army, *Army Training and Leader Development Panel Officer Study* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office), 2003.

¹⁴⁰ *Army Training and Leader Development Panel Officer Study*, OS-9.

¹⁴¹ Nelson, “Auftragstaktik,” 31.

storage, bandwidth, and sensing is staggering.¹⁴² Today's information environment is ubiquitous and interconnected.¹⁴³ Rapid advances in affordable communications technology have radically transformed the way the world shares information. It has never been easier or cheaper to communicate and convey massive amounts of unfiltered information to a global audience. Access to the information environment has grown exponentially. Since the early 1990s, the world's networked population has grown from the low millions to the low billions and is as much a feature of the poorest countries in the world as the richest.¹⁴⁴ Social media has become a vehicle for individual expression for society worldwide.¹⁴⁵

As the communications landscape becomes increasingly robust and complex, it also becomes more participatory. The networked population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action.¹⁴⁶ Twenty-five years ago, the term 'CNN effect' was coined to describe the impacts of 24-hour media coverage during conflicts or international incidents. By focusing instantaneous and ongoing news coverage on a particular conflict or event, the news cycle generated immediate public awareness and commanded the attention of policymakers who had to demonstrate that they

¹⁴² Robert Axelrod and Michael D. Cohen, *Harnessing Complexity* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 23.

¹⁴³ Lee E. Bokma, "Strategic Communication for Tactical Leaders," (MMAS, Fort Leavenworth, KS, June 2010), 2. Bokma offers four basic characteristics of the modern information environment: ubiquitous and interconnected; faster and less durable; constantly changes; unregulated and empowering.

¹⁴⁴ Dubravac, Shawn, *Digital Destiny: How the New Age of Data will transform the way we Work, Live, and Communicate* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2015), xxi. In 2011, 35 percent of Americans owned a smart phone; by early 2015, nearly 70 percent owned one. Dubravac suggests that the rapid market penetration of these devices illustrates the transformative effect the technology is having on our society.

¹⁴⁵ Clay Shirky, "The Political Power of Social Media," *Foreign Affairs* (Jan/Feb 2011): 1.

¹⁴⁶ Shirky, "Political Power of Social Media", 6. Shirky highlights political action in Tunisia.

remained on top of current issues. According to some, the CNN effect accelerated the pace of policy decisions and increased scrutiny on military operations at all levels.¹⁴⁷ These conditions have only magnified with the omnipresence of social media. Rather than simply expanding awareness of global issues, social media encourages and promotes a medium for widespread public engagement on issues. This has built a greater expectation for transparency and increased public access to information about the military.

The ability for millions of people to communicate with each other in near instantaneous fashion is a power never before seen in human history.¹⁴⁸ Though it is impossible to predict when or under what circumstances social movements will mobilize, there is increasing certainty that flashpoints will quickly be digitized and disseminated to the masses.¹⁴⁹ The implications for military operations are significant. There has never been a higher potential for low-level tactical action or individual behavior to quickly reach mass audiences and have strategic outcomes. Admiral Mike Mullen, former CJCS, remarked on this phenomenon in 2009, “If we’ve learned nothing else these past eight years, it should be that the lines between strategic, operational, and tactical are blurred beyond distinction. This is particularly true in the world of communication, where videos and images plastered on the web—or even the idea of their being so posted—can and often do drive national security decision making.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷Margaret H. Belknap, “The CNN Effect: Strategic Enabler or Operational Risk” (Monograph, US Army War College, 2001), 3.

¹⁴⁸ Dubravac, *Digital Destiny*, 253. The author credits social media as an accelerant for mass public uprisings. As an example, 80% of protesters in Egypt and Tunisia used Facebook to organize or coordinate demonstrations. He also claims that social media was responsible for the rapid appearance and duration of the protests in Ferguson, Missouri.

¹⁴⁹ Dubravac, *Digital Destiny*, 152.

¹⁵⁰ Michael G Mullen, “Strategic Communication: Getting Back to the Basics,” *Foreign Policy Online*, August, 28, 2009, accessed March 30, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/08/28/strategic-communication-getting-back-to-basics/>.

The ‘Age of Radical Transparency’ has amplified the attendant risks of military operations. Risk management algorithms generally focus on the probability of events and the magnitude of specific consequences.¹⁵¹ Under certain conditions even risk events with minor consequences can elicit strong public concern and produce disproportionate reactions. In their research study, “Social Amplifications of Risk,” Dr. Kasperson, et al, found that information from the media acts a major agent of risk amplification.¹⁵² The social amplification of risk spawns behavioral responses by both policymakers and the public, which, in turn, result in secondary impacts like political demands or changes in risk regulation. In other words, given today’s informational environment, the prospect that something *might* go wrong with low-level military operations is enough to elicit outsized fears about potential repercussions. The default organizational response is to emplace tighter control measures and elevate decision-making in an attempt to prevent a serious incident from occurring.

There is no doubt that there are greater demands for public scrutiny, transparency, and accountability in public life as a result of the social and technological developments. While the democratization of information is positive in many respects, it can strain the culture of mission command. Almost every action a soldier takes can be broadcast into living rooms or onto digital devices in real time, and political and senior military leaders must answer for those actions immediately. The pressure on senior leaders to prevent incidents or to take action immediately is

¹⁵¹ Dennis M. Murphy, “Operations Security in an Age of Radical Transparency” (Monograph, US Army War College, 2009), 1. The term “Era of Radical Transparency” is a term coined by Dr. Rafal Rohozinski. Rohozinski has done extensive field research throughout the world on various topics regarding today’s information environment.

¹⁵² Kasperson, et. al., “The Social Amplification of Risk,” 184. Information flow becomes a key ingredient in public response and acts as a major agent of amplification. Attributes of information that may influence the social amplification are: the volume of information in the media, the degree to which information is disputed, the extent of dramatization of the outcome in the media, and the symbolic connotations of the information. One of their case studies included the Three Mile Island nuclear accident and the subsequent fears in communities serviced by modern nuclear reactors.

particularly acute, compelling a desire to want to control everything. This tendency also finds expression in direct interference with the operational and tactical leadership on the ground and act as a drag on decentralized operations.¹⁵³ Recent operations are replete with examples of tight control measures. As counterinsurgency operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan wound down, the US leadership feared that unintended events at the tactical level might have catastrophic results at the strategic level, a possibility that was articulated as ‘risk to mission.’ These risks resulted in elevation of decision approval authorities, tighter restrictions on the rules of engagement (ROE), and generally less engagement with local populations and security forces.

Cultural Tensions

Cultural tensions exacerbated by years of war have created alarming mismatches between beliefs and practices in the US Army. These tensions are at the heart of a nuanced understanding of culture described earlier in the study. As Schein points out, “Not all cultural assumptions are mutually compatible or consistent with each other. If we observe inconsistency and lack of order, we can assume that we are observing a conflict among several cultures or subcultures.”¹⁵⁴ Cultural tension results from artifacts and behaviors that conflict with competing values or evolving cultural norms. This tension is often a fundamental cause of change, either creative or destructive. Under most circumstances, cultural tension is not necessarily good or bad, but since mission command is a phenomenon that requires a specific set of cultural characteristics (see Figure 4, Cultural Model of Mission Command), it is very sensitive to competing values, norms, or behaviors.

Two significant cultural tensions threaten the institutionalization of mission command in the US Army. The first stems from competing management and organizational control practices.

¹⁵³ Widder, “Auftragstaktik and Innere Führung,” 6.

¹⁵⁴ Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 140.

The US Army has long struggled to find a balance between the efficiency of institutional hierarchy and centralized bureaucracy on one hand, and the effectiveness of decentralized initiative and operations on the other. The second tension emanates from the role and function of information technology in the US Army. An organization's ability to tolerate uncertainty is related to its beliefs about the strengths and limitations of technology. In both cases, artifacts stemming from one belief system clash directly with the espoused value system.

At the heart of tension within US Army culture is the style and preference of management and organizational control. Every military organization must adopt structures and set in place mechanisms to shape and control the behavior of its members.¹⁵⁵ It does so not only to achieve the organization's goals and accomplish assigned missions, but also to ensure that it does so in an appropriate manner. In other words, organizational control must account for both *outputs* of its members as well as the overall *outcome*.¹⁵⁶ Broadly speaking, organizations can choose to affect this control either through centralized or decentralized means.

Author James Q. Wilson described military organizations operating in a garrison environment as "procedural bureaucracies."¹⁵⁷ Procedural organizations are agencies where outputs but not outcomes can be observed. Commanders are able to observe or monitor the daily activities of subordinate units with relative ease. Operations and training can be tracked, and the personal conduct of soldiers remains visible. Both high achievement and misconduct among unit members can be easily identified. But ultimately, commanders in garrison cannot measure the

¹⁵⁵ Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*, 130. Economists describe the challenge of control as the "principal-agent problem" because it highlights the need for a principal (that is, the owner of a firm or the leader of an organization) to set in place a system of incentives or constraints so that an agent (a worker or member of a group) will perform exactly as the principal expects.

¹⁵⁶ James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy*, 158-159. 'Outputs' consist of the work the members of an organization do on a day-to-day basis. 'Outcomes' reflect how the world changes because of the outputs.

¹⁵⁷ Wilson, *Bureaucracy*, 163-164.

true effectiveness of their units until they are put into action on the battlefield. In procedural organizations, leadership has a tendency to become means-oriented. How members go about their jobs is seemingly more important than whether doing those jobs produces the desired outcomes. Cultural artifacts in procedural organizations include standard operating procedures (SOPs), systems, structures, processes, and policies that guide, shape, or constrain day-to-day behavior.

While deployed in wartime, military organizations fall into a category Wilson denotes “craft organizations.” A craft organization consists of operators whose activities are hard to observe but whose outcomes are relatively easy to evaluate.¹⁵⁸ The fog and friction inherent in combat, coupled with the dispersion of forces on the modern battlefield, prevent commanders from having the same level of visibility or control found at home station environments. But, commanders do have a better grasp of the outcome of engagements and the overall effectiveness of their units. Craft organizations require an organizational culture with belief and artifacts that provide an ethos and sense of duty to control behavior of its members. Decentralization makes it possible to achieve higher levels of productivity only when subordinate units act coherently to advance the long-term goals of the organization, or intentions of the commander. Thus, a specific organizational culture is required.

After nearly fourteen years of continuous combat and cyclical deployments, the US Army finds itself at a strategic inflection point. It is neither fully at war, nor fully at peace. It does not cleanly resemble an army at war or an army of preparation. In fact, the US Army exercises organizational control in a hybrid manner that encompasses the cultural characteristics of procedural and craft organizations, shifting back and forth as the situation requires. Wilson’s two

¹⁵⁸ Wilson, *Bureaucracy*, 165-168.

solutions – the monitoring of procedures and the creation of internalized norms – operate in tandem.¹⁵⁹ In practice, this generates tremendous cultural tension and frustration among members.

Excessive procedural control remains at odds with cultural components of mission command. The effect of centralized control on units and leaders comfortable exercising a decentralized system of command can be damaging to morale and unit cohesion. There is no question that junior officers fear a return to a bureaucratic, micromanaged organization.¹⁶⁰ LTG Robert B. Brown, Commander of the US Army's Combined Arms Center, echoed this sentiment recently and stated that the Army needs to give lower-level commanders more mission command responsibility at home station. They get it overseas, he said, but when they return, they are not as empowered. "If we don't give them enough space to lead, they'll walk," he warned.¹⁶¹

Evidence of the cultural tension caused by excessive procedural control is found in the deluge of annual company-level training requirements established for US Army units. In a study authored by Drs. Lenny Wong and Steve Gerras of the US Army War College, they determined that the requirements far exceed the ability of units and individuals to accomplish them. They note, "In the rush by higher headquarters to incorporate every good idea into training, the total number of training days required by all mandatory training directives literally exceeds the number of training days available to company commanders: 297 to 256."¹⁶² They continue, "The Army resembles a compulsive hoarder. It is excessively permissive in allowing the creation of new requirements, but it is also amazingly reluctant to discard old demands. The result is a rapid

¹⁵⁹ Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*, 138.

¹⁶⁰ Feedback from Captains attending the Solarium Conference.

¹⁶¹ David Vergun, "Brown: Soldiers should be trained like Olympic athletes," accessed at http://www.army.mil/article/133578/Brown_Soldiers_should_be_trained_like_elite_athletes/. Accessed on 21 APR 15.

¹⁶² Stephen J. Gerras and Leonard Wong, "Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession" (Report, US Army War College, February 2015), 4.

accumulation of directives passed down, data calls sent out, and new requirements generated by the Army.”¹⁶³ The authors determined that the profusion of the training and reporting requirements also fed an unhealthy tendency to falsify reports and lead to cultural acceptance of “ethical fading,” a subject which will be discussed at greater length later in the next section.

LTG (Ret.) Barno is unsparing in his indictment of the phenomenon and the implications for a culture of mission command. Barno wrote, “In combat, risk of death or failure is a daily hazard. In peacetime, risk-taking is systematically extinguished by layers of rules, restrictions and micromanagement aimed at avoiding any possible shortcomings. Peacetime procedures tend to crush the very attributes required for successful unit combat leaders.” Barno, echoing the prediction of LTG Brown, predicts, “If not corrected, this conflict will drive out many of the Army’s best young wartime leaders and demoralize the rest.”¹⁶⁴

It is difficult for members to reconcile their expectations for craft organizations with the reality of procedural bureaucracy. While senior leaders enthusiastically espouse mission command, many of the routine facets of organizational life contradict it. Many of the systems, policies, and procedures communicate a different ideal than mission command.¹⁶⁵ The lack of alignment between beliefs and actions erodes organizational trust.

¹⁶³ Gerras, “Lying,” 18.

¹⁶⁴ Dave Barno and Nora Bensahel, “Lying to Ourselves: The Demise of Military Integrity,” *The Strategic Outpost Blog: War on the Rocks*, March 10, 2015, <http://warontherocks.com/2-15/03/lying-to-ourselves-the-demise-of-military-integrity/>.

¹⁶⁵ Stephen Covey, and Rebecca R. Merrill, *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing that Changes Everything* (New York: Free Press, 2006): 239-240. Covey contends that often leaders are not looking at the systems, structures, processes, policies, frameworks that day-to-day behaviors hang on that are inconsistent with espoused values. There needs to be “alignment between systems and structures with the principles that promote trust.” Nitpicking policies can become a huge symbol of distrust. These become organizational symbols – those things that represent and communicate underlying paradigms to everyone in the organization.

The US military has developed and fielded some of the most sophisticated sensor, communications, and information management technologies available in the world. In fact, high-end technology is a key artifact of the US Army's cultural identity. It sees technology as one of its significant competitive advantages.¹⁶⁶ Over the last two decades, the dramatic advances in command and control technologies provided commanders unprecedented real-time access to information, intelligence, and battlefield imagery. A clear and accurate common operating picture of friendly forces improved the speed, agility, and interoperability of formations. Automated systems dramatically improved efficiency of logistics and sustainment operations and decreased waste and materiel excess. Better situational awareness and improved synchronization resulted in enhancements to operational capabilities. However, there are cultural tradeoffs that come with the use of advanced command and control systems in the US Army that actually challenge the practice of mission command. The benefits of many technological advances are paired with harmful unintended consequences that undermine key tenets of mission command—initiative, trust relationships between senior-subordinate, delegation, and empowerment.

The rapid growth of information technology has not only changed the way the US Army fights, but the way it demands, collects, and manages information.¹⁶⁷ Systems originally designed for generating shared understanding between echelons of command have demonstrated a voracious appetite for data, reporting, battle-tracking, analysis, and feedback. Signal and communications networks are pervasive and accessible enough that digital devices and email connect most US Army leaders day and night.

¹⁶⁶ Statement by McHugh and Odierno, *Hearing*. "We must acknowledge that today's high technological, All Volunteer Force is much different from the industrial age armies of the past."

¹⁶⁷ Barno, "Lying," 4.

Today's leaders are literally inundated by information and reporting requirements. The global reach and accessibility of information systems create expectations for instantaneous reporting to higher headquarters. This has contributed to task saturation and a troubling behavioral change in leaders. The previously referenced US Army War College study by Drs. Wong and Gerras found widespread evidence demonstrating that individuals and units are surrounded by a culture where deceptive information is both accepted and commonplace. They termed the resulting phenomenon as "ethical fading."¹⁶⁸ LTG (Ret.) Dave Barno warns of the dire cultural consequences,

The profusion of reporting requirements demanded of these same leaders, and the tacit acceptance by senior leaders that reports will be false or inaccurate, undermines the very foundation of trust upon which mission command is built. Within the Army, this may be the most dangerous consequence of this silent ethical breakdown – that trust is dissolved between leaders and led, between seniors and subordinates. Such evident hypocrisy among seniors can all too easily drive cynicism to replace critical trust, especially among junior officers. A schism between senior and junior officers rooted in this hypocrisy...will drive leaders of integrity out of the force and may ultimately cause others outside and inside the Army to lose faith in the fundamental integrity of the institution.¹⁶⁹

Information technology has become central to command and control functions. It has generated a range of behavioral options for commanders, and its impact can therefore not be ignored. At their worst, instantaneous communication and improved control systems can blur decision-making authorities and give rise to micromanagement, a trait with particularly corrosive effects at senior levels. A troubling premise of improved situational awareness tools is the

¹⁶⁸ Gerras, "Lying," 17. "Ethical fading occurs when the moral colors of an ethical decision fade into bleached hues that are void of moral implications. Ethical fading allows us to convince ourselves that considerations of right or wrong are not applicable to decisions that in any other circumstances would be ethical dilemmas. This is not so much because we lack a moral foundation or adequate ethics training, but because psychological processes and influencing factors subtly neutralize the 'ethics' from the ethical dilemma. Ethical fading allows Army officers to transform morally wrong behavior into socially acceptable conduct by dimming the glare and guilt of the ethical spotlight."

¹⁶⁹ Barno, "Lying," 4. Barno's remarks are validated by survey data in CASAL 2013 and by CPTs participating in the CSA's Solarium conference in 2014.

unchallenged assumption by higher levels of command that they have a better understanding of what is happening on the ground. This attitude tends to deemphasize and discourage local control and leads to a range of unhealthy command behaviors. The means to affect positive control because of instantaneous communication will act as a powerful drag on initiative when coupled with the nearly simultaneous capacity to criticize decisions without understanding context.¹⁷⁰ Information technology creates temptations and opportunities to skip intermediate chains of command and interfere with tactical decisions on the ground.¹⁷¹

The pervasive usage of information technology, influenced by the increasing prevalence of risk aversion in the ‘Age of Radical Transparency,’ draws decision-making authority upward and increases a desire for certainty among decision makers. Rather than relying on a clear understanding of intent and organizational trust to empower subordinate leaders, the increased visibility of modern information systems encourage senior leaders to make decisions that they would not otherwise be involved in. One senior leader termed this centralization of decision making the “Julius Caesar effect” and lamented the current addiction to “rank crack” that has led to an inflated rank structure and cumbersome approval processes in important operational decisions.¹⁷² Ideally, he stated, when the tempo of information flow gives subordinates a more accurate and timely view of the battlefield, then they should have decision-making authority that is commensurate with that information.

An organizational culture that promotes high-level decision-making erodes opportunities for organizations to learn. If cultural learning is to occur, organizations must be allowed time and space to reflect on their experience. Leaders that are task saturated and afraid to make mistakes

¹⁷⁰ Gregory Fontenot, “Mission Command: An Old Idea for the 21st Century,” *Army Magazine* 61, no. 3 (2013): 64.

¹⁷¹ Widder, “Auftragstaktik and Innere Führung,” 8.

¹⁷² ASLSP discussion with Senior Leader, December 11, 2014.

will not be able to learn during execution when scrutinized by multiple echelons of headquarters. The pace of operations and expectation for immediate answers dampens capacity for organizational learning.

There is no doubt that technology has enhanced operational and tactical capabilities of the US Army. The possibilities associated with emerging technologies remain significant. However, senior leaders must acknowledge the tradeoffs and competing values inherent in the use of advanced information technology. Leaders must carefully avoid the connotation that effective mission command is reliant on high-end technology.¹⁷³ Leaders who grow up expecting an omnipotent boss to be watching over their shoulders every minute can scarcely be expected to exercise much initiative, nor will ambitious people stay long in such an environment.¹⁷⁴

Conclusion

Mission command is a system of command that emphasizes the centrality of the commander and the decentralization of capability and authority. Mission command demands and facilitates initiative at all levels to exploit opportunities on the battlefield. It empowers leaders to exercise their own judgment in pursuit of their mission while remaining aligned to a common framework through a disciplined adherence to their commander's intent. Mission command doctrine is predicated on high-levels of trust in a subordinate's ability to operate without

¹⁷³ One of the most frequent criticisms of mission command is that the term jointly describes both a philosophy of command as well as a technically oriented warfighting function. There is a strong linkage between information technology and mission command – partly a function of the manner in which the army has chosen to link the concepts under the same rubric. The view of mission command systems which describe communications and automation architecture is very different from the view of mission command which demands that leaders at all levels of war are prepared to make decisions with reduced situational awareness. For a more thorough understanding of the confusion this generates, see Neil G. Armstrong, “A Balanced Approach: Thoughts for the Adoption of Mission Command by the Joint Force” (Monograph, Naval War College, 2013), 7.

¹⁷⁴ Barno, “Lying,” 5.

supervision even when faced with unexpected situations. It inherently stimulates the kind of flexibility and innovation that will be indispensable in increasingly complex future operating environments.

Yet, while the US Army has ostensibly embraced mission command doctrine, it has failed to live up to many of its central tenets. It unevenly practices mission command and has been unable to fully institutionalize its principles. Mission command, like its Prussian-German predecessor *Auftragstaktik*, is a cultural phenomenon that requires a very specific set of characteristics to function effectively. There are noticeable cultural barriers that are prohibiting the full adoption of mission command in the US Army.

The Prussian army was the first to organize a system of decentralized command into a coherent theory and comprehensive doctrine and place it into operation with successful results. By adapting the core principles of *Auftragstaktik* into their military culture, the Prussians and Germans were able to transcend the unique personal styles of commanders and individual unit traditions. Battlefield victories and military dominance reinforced a military culture that was able to withstand environmental pressures and crosscurrents from competing cultural values. Prussian and German Chiefs of Staff, like Gneisenau, Moltke, and Seeckt, understood the nature of warfare and devised a system of command best suited to meet the challenges of their day.

An organization's culture helps explain and predict both member and organizational behavior. When there are problems in an organization's culture, it is important to examine the alignment between its supporting elements: the underlying assumptions that provide its intellectual foundation, the beliefs and norms that guide member behavior, and the artifacts that signify the culture. In *Auftragstaktik*, the Prussians and Germans were able to produce and maintain a well-aligned culture in a way that US Army has not been able to reproduce with mission command.

Several factors shape US Army culture in a manner that impedes the effective institutionalization of mission command. First, mission command did not evolve naturally in the same sense that *Auftragstaktik* developed in Prussia. The adoption of mission command in the US Army did not emerge from the necessity of geo-political circumstances, but rather from a perceived need to improve performance. It lacked a precipitating crisis or a catastrophic failure and has lacked inertia to overcome pre-existing cultural tendencies. Second, significant environmental pressures are shaping the character and behavior of the US Army. Budgetary and resource constraints, the reduction in force structure and size, and the information revolution are examples of political and social forces that are undermining key cultural characteristics of mission command. Finally, internal organizational tensions stemming from competing value systems also challenge a culture of mission command. The decentralized system of organizational control employed in Iraq and Afghanistan is fundamentally at odds with peacetime procedural control that favors more centralized control and less risk. The cognitive tension between expectations and reality creates friction for the organization. Likewise, the development and implementation of high-end information technology creates a bit of a paradox for mission command. The technology generates a set of behaviors and effects that contradict assumptions and beliefs essential for mission command.

The fundamental problems with mission command in the US Army can be traced to the second and third layers of culture and an inability to embed suitable beliefs and assumptions. Changing a culture can be difficult and time consuming. Strategic leaders shoulder the burden for shaping the culture of mission command in the US Army. When the gap between espoused theory and reality generates dysfunction, leaders must identify and promote cultural change. Failure to do so will continue to erode trust, reduce effectiveness, and stifle innovation.

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