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LIMITED DECISIONS FOR UNLIMITED MISSIONS

By

WILLIAM R. WOLFE, JR.
Lieutenant Colonel, Artillery

US ARMY WAR COLLEGE, CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA

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USAWC RESEARCH ELEMENT
(Essay)

Limited Decisions for Unlimited Missions

by

Lt Col William R. Wolfe, Jr.
Artillery

US Army War College
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania
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SUMMARY

Problems of command and control, and more specifically the degree of delegation of authority, have received the focus of attention of military leaders for many centuries. Within the past two decades the rapid development of communications and data processing have made centralized control capabilities greater than at any time in the past. Coupled with these technological developments, the traditional concepts of "peace" and "war" have tended to become fused into a continuum rather than a dichotomy. In this strategic setting the United States has, for nearly two decades, maintained relatively large standing military forces. These military forces have been employed in several efforts to influence the international situation short of general nuclear war. Indications are that, in the foreseeable future, military capabilities will play a major role in the expression of national policy. These factors, along with other variables associated with the protracted conflict with communism, indicate that the traditional concept of the military commander may have become altered. The nature of modern military endeavor seems to have increased the "management" responsibilities of the commander as opposed to his traditional "command" role.

This essay advances the thesis that the widely expressed discontent among military personnel as a result of the increasing tendency toward more centralized control might be alleviated by recognition of the situational changes in the role of military forces and hence the roles of their commanders under present world conditions.

LIMITED DECISIONS FOR UNLIMITED MISSIONS

"Erosion of command," "overcontrol," "no opportunity for subordinate leadership," and numerous other phrases of the same general tenor are common in discussions among soldiers of the United States all over the world. From the platoon to the Pentagon, the topic seems always to be current and sure to evoke spirited participation by those present. The conclusions reached appear to have a common basis. Everyone feels that superiors are exerting too much control over subordinates. Military writers, both in and out of uniform, have taken pen in hand and expounded on the subject. The conclusions reached are usually coupled with dire predictions as to future leadership in view of the lack of opportunity for young leaders to develop their decisionmaking skill in an environment so highly controlled by their superiors. Modern means of communications, the helicopter, and the mimeograph machine are among the items of hardware credited with contributing to the situation.

The utterances and the writings on the subject of command and control appear to have a high emotional content, and well they should, for war is an enterprise which taxes the emotions of men to the highest. Nevertheless, those who are charged with the formulation and execution of national strategy cannot afford the luxury of an emotional approach to the problems facing them. Emotional responses are a highly subtle form of human behavior and thus are most difficult to eliminate in the process of problem solving. Recognizing this inherent difficulty, we should approach

the problems inherent in command and control in this age of scientific and technological progress with a minimum of emotional involvement. Only by recognizing the differences, as well as the similarities, of today's problems as compared with those faced in past eras can we hope to arrive at workable solutions. Furthermore, the temptation to fight the next war based upon the procedures employed in the last one must be tempered with an understanding of the changes which have occurred in the interim.

In many cases, the solution of today may create the problem of tomorrow. The problem of control as opposed to overcontrol has been with us for a very long time. The Old Testament states:

> And Moses chose able men out of all Israel, and made them heads over all the people, rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens. And they judged the people at all seasons; the hard causes they brought to Moses, but every small matter they judged themselves.

The action of Moses occurred long before the pioneers of management were born, yet he applied the principle of delegation of authority. Today, there is no disagreement concerning this principle. The argument is based upon how much delegation should take place. The biblical guidance, while clear, is not specific. The problem facing us today revolves about the problem of determining the difference between "hard causes" and "every small matter." It is in this context that the problem of command and control of present-day military forces must be analyzed.

The concept of command is as old as the art of warfare. Modern management, on the other hand, claims a history of less than one

century. Command, to a professional soldier, goes far beyond the authority vested in the commander by law as the official definition states. Traditionally, the military leader considers command as an all-encompassing role including responsibility for all that his organization does or fails to do, as well as the statutory authority to direct its efforts. Any interference with a commander at any level is often interpreted as denial of "command prerogatives." The military traditionalist tends to adhere to the concept that a commander should be given his organization and a mission to perform. The execution of the mission is conceived as being surrounded by the many privileges of command and hence subject to a minimum of control from outside sources. To the soldier, command is a personal thing into which the commander injects his individuality and personal leadership to the extent that an aura of mystery has often shrouded his methodology. Modern management, on the other hand, is characterized by scientific investigation and the application of established functions. While management places considerable stress on the personal attributes of the manager, the rapid development of modern management tools providing for the rapid collection and analysis of data has tended to reduce the influence of the individual manager. The complexity of today's society has increased the dependence upon group thinking and group decisionmaking as opposed to the "great man" situation characteristic of earlier periods. The forces of modern management have made themselves felt within the military service to an increasing degree during the past two decades. This impact

has resulted in increased managerial, as compared to command, responsibilities being assigned to military commanders. While both command and management have a common goal of combining resources in order to achieve a task, the manner in which this combination is performed appears to vary. The time honored responsibilities of the commander have included the functions of modern management and successful commanders have applied the principles of management throughout military history. When procedures and tools of modern management are projected into the military situation and decisions are made in management, rather than military terms, difficulties arise. It would seem that conceptual differences between commanders and managers contribute to any discussion of overcontrol.

Professional soldiers have a tendency to look into the past for guidance concerning problems of the present and, even more important, the future. This occurs as a natural consequence of membership in one of the oldest of the world's professions. There are many lessons to be learned from a study of military history, hence its inclusion as a part of the core curriculum of the Military Academy and the many Reserve Officer Training Corps units in the United States Army. As in any field of study, however, the student can be misled as well as he can be guided. The Principles of War are accepted, with some variation, by the military authorities of all major world powers. The validity of these principles can readily be illustrated through the study of military history. In striving to analyze past military actions on the basis of the accepted Principles of War, there seems to be a tendency to ignore

the situational aspects of the problem. This tendency has resulted in the professional soldier's adherence to a concept of the military commander which may well be outmoded in today's complex society. Command in war has traditionally been surrounded by a certain aura of mystery. Commanders such as Caesar, Alexander, Napoleon, Grant, and Lee are but a few of the many examples. Although the traditional image of the "Great Captain" persists, more intense reporting and recording of the day-by-day happenings during the campaigns and more penetrating analyses by writers doing their work during the life-times of more current military commanders have tended to sweep away at least a portion of the mystique which surrounds earlier military figures. Recognition of the changed character of military leadership was slow. The general public during World War II and the Korean War continued to look for a "hero figure;" however, the sheer magnitude of the Second World War along with the destruction of whole nations and their peoples indicated that the role of the military commander had undergone a change over the years. Field Marshal Montgomery wrote:

> We find that the relationship between a general and his army in the past has little resemblance to present times. The great military geniuses of those days forged their own instruments, and then cut their way to victory unhampered by political control. It is very different today.

If the role of the military commander has changed, then it would appear logical that the roles of subordinate commanders would likewise require modification. If the necessity for change is accepted, the problem becomes one of identifying the areas

wherein change is needed and then setting about to effect the change in a manner which will enhance, rather than detract from, essential military efficiency. While "change for the sake of change" is undesirable, attempts to effect change without thorough understanding of the problem and the proposed solution can be equally unrewarding. It would seem that the outbursts over the issues of command and control are examples of failure to recognize that changes have occurred and are continuing to take place. Insecurity is a prime cause of resistance. Professional soldiers, seeing their traditional concept of military command and leadership undergoing subtle but marked, change cannot help but react in a negative fashion.

The attitudes of professional soldiers are a reflection of the nation which they exist to protect. Thus, the American military man has been developed in the climate of the traditional clear distinction between peace and war. Prior to World War II the role of the military services was to exist in peace while preparing for the eventuality of war. This preparation involved training a small regular establishment on a meager budget. Small staffs in Washington prepared plans for execution in the event of war. The officers who labored through the years of peace were confident that the military forces, when committed to combat, would be free to pursue victory in a manner dictated by military people striving for military objectives. Such had been the pattern of past conflicts from which this nation had always emerged victorious. The events leading up to the United States entry into the war, however, set the stage for the

prosecution of the conflict. American support of the United Kingdom, and that nation's admirable action in standing firm when all else collapsed, dictated that the military judgment of our military commanders was to be modified by political decisions arrived at in consort with our allies. The memoirs of commanders of both United States and allied forces are replete with examples of decisions of this nature. In spite of the passage of time, several senior commanders have written that the interjection of other than purely military factors delayed the eventual victory. Such charges and countercharges will continue for centuries if past history is repeated; however, the point to be recognized is the radical change in the role of the military commander which this conflict wrought.

Two other factors arose during and shortly following the Second World War. First, the development and use of nuclear weapons by the United States. The two bombs employed against Japan hastened the successful conclusion of the war in the Pacific, but more importantly a new dimension of warfare and national strategy was born. At first the United States, and then Soviet Russia, developed an arsenal of nuclear weapons far more destructive than the two dropped on Japan. It became apparent that war was no longer something to be left to military men who could plan during periods of peace and sally forth to achieve victory in combat after war was declared. It became rather obvious that even the victor in a nuclear exchange would suffer far more than the vanquished of previous conflicts.

Secondly, the emergence of militant communism led by Soviet Russia in the years immediately following World War II brought about the realization that the division of history into periods of "peace" and periods of "war" was a thing of the past. The avowed purpose of communism is clearly to achieve domination of the world. The means by which this end is to be gained apparently will vary through the entire spectrum of conflict from subversion, through limited war, and including general nuclear warfare, dependent upon the chance of success as perceived by the communists.

These two major factors have been accompanied by other issues which serve to complicate the problems facing the United States. The rapid growth of science and technology; the emergence of Communist China as a second major communist power; the dissolution of the former colonial empires of major European powers, and the near vacuum left in their stead have served to complicate the world situation.

In 1945, following tradition, the United States dismantled the greatest military force ever to be established in the world, only to be forced into partial mobilization in 1950 in order to meet a communist invasion of South Korea. Following restoration of the "status quo" in Korea, the United States turned to a strategy of "massive retaliation" which placed emphasis on the maintenance of nuclear delivery forces at the expense of those capable of fighting conventional conflicts. Since 1961, however, the repeated occurrence of small conflicts and unrest, particularly in the developing areas of the world, has resulted in increased forces capable of taking

part in conflicts across the spectrum of warfare. The role of the Army in the present force structure has been described by General Harold K. Johnson, the Chief of Staff, as providing forces for "landpower missions unlimited." These missions vary from being capable of engaging in stability operations including civic action, to participating along with elements of the other armed services in a general nuclear war. Additionally, Army officers serve in a myriad of assignments involving matters of utmost importance to this nation and its continued existence. All of these activities, with the exception of general nuclear war, are taking place during a period of "peace" if the criteria of past history are applied. Herein lies the answer to many of the questions concerning command and control which seem to plague us today. We cannot afford the luxury of applying traditional concepts of command in war to our present situation. The current protracted conflict with our communist adversaries may continue for an extended period of time. In fact, if current statements of communist leadership are accepted, they are quite willing to engage in prolonged struggles in order to achieve the aims of their dogma.

It is apparent that the strategic posture of the United States today bears little similarity to that in effect at any other time in the history of this nation. This being the case, can professional soldiers expect to exercise their responsibilities in a manner based solely upon tradition or is there a need for new concepts more appropriate to today's strategic thinking? In actuality subtle changes have occurred over the past twenty years. Many senior

military and civilian leaders have recognized the changed requirements of command. Hanson W. Baldwin stated:

> Modern war is the product of many minds. Napoleon with his hands thrust in his coat could no longer survey the modern battlefield and choose the opportune moment to order a cavalry charge. War today is a management process.

Alfred Vagts concluded:

> The development of warfare, apart from the demand for an ultimate pyramidal point of decision and political authority, (holds) no role for the solitary military genius; he has been replaced by a managerial staff of experts, a change not all generals like to admit.

(One might substitute "professional soldiers" for "generals" in the last quotation and express the current situation quite aptly.)

At the behest of General Eisenhower, formal instruction in leadership and management was instituted at the Military Academy in 1946 and such instruction is included in the curriculum of service schools from the more basic through and including the US Army War College. The results of these efforts are notable. The young officers and noncommissioned officers serving in units today seem far more knowledgeable in these fields than the individuals occupying similar positions twenty years ago. At the unit level it appears that the capability of solving "human problems on a human basis," as General Eisenhower put it, has been significantly increased. The content of courses of instruction dealing with leadership and management, however, seem to revolve about providing the student with an understanding of the underlying principles involved and as much application as the academic situation will permit. Application

generally takes the form of role playing, group discussion, and case study. Considerable emphasis is placed upon the decisionmaking task of the leader. In the case of the Military Academy, a portion of the Summer training period is devoted to "on the job training" fulfilling the role of a junior officer with an active army unit. As a result of these programs, the young graduate of the Military Academy reaches his first assignment well versed in the theories of leadership and management. In addition to putting his theoretical knowledge into practice in accomplishing his assigned tasks, he is soon subjected to examples of leadership emanating from his superiors, both immediate and removed, as far as the Department of the Army. He soon finds that he is not in a position to make many of the decisions which he practiced as a student. If he is the least bit perceptive, he notes that his company commander, battalion commander, and even the division commander have limited decisionmaking authority. Thus he becomes fully qualified to take part in discussions on the topic of "overcontrol." The situation tends to be self-perpetuating since the young officer must change his concepts of leadership and management to fit the actual situation. A situation in which his superiors adjust, achieve success, and are rewarded, or failing to adjust, fail and are relegated to that portion of the circular entitled, "Fully Qualified, but not Recommended for Promotion."

The problem appears to have its roots in a failure of the professional soldier to recognize that along with the industrial revolution which has taken place in the Army, there has been a managerial revolution. The task facing a commander today is far

more complex than that faced by those of equivalent grade prior to, or even during, the Second World War. The Defense Department even though operating in "peacetime" spends nearly 10% of the gross national product of the United States. The number of military personnel, alone, in Vietnam is larger than any other single agency of the government with the exception of the Post Office Department. Size alone does not account for the complexity of the commander's task. A mammoth organization has marked impact on the operational and administrative functions which it performs. Coupled with the growth of the military establishment has been the rapid advance of technology of all types. Interchange of information has become easy and the handling of mass data has been simplified. Where the top echelons of command once depended upon periodic reports laboriously tabulated, the answer to many questions can be obtained in minutes through the medium of automatic data processing. Detailed information concerning subordinate elements is not limited to the highest echelons of command, but is available at all levels down to and including the battalion. Machine printed rosters of several types enable the battalion commander to know nearly as much about the situation within a subordinate element as does its immediate commander. All of this adds up to the fact that there is now a greater capability to exercise centralized control than has ever existed in the past.

At this point a question might be asked. Is the fact of greater centralized control a matter of necessity, or is the increased direction from above due to the increased capability to exercise

such control? It would seem that the answer to this question is to be found among "the shades of gray," rather than in black or white. Leadership and management should be categorized as among the arts as opposed to the sciences. Unhappily it is not feasible to provide a precise formula by which the degree of control and the optimum means of exercising it can be determined with validity and reliability. As in other arts, certain principles of leadership and functions of management can be identified. The application of these, however, is dependent upon the human element and hence is subject to human emotions, perceptions, and patterns of behavior.

The fact that great combat commanders of history were forced to permit their subordinates considerable latitude may not necessarily mean that they would not have preferred to exercise greater control over the execution of their plans. The results of the Battle of Gettysburg, and hence the history of the United States, might have been considerably different had General Lee been able to exert more positive control over Generals Stuart and Longstreet. On the other hand, Stuart's famous raid at the White House might not have been so successful had he been under more centralized control by General Lee. The degree of decentralization which will produce optimum results is at least partially determined by the situation. The increased capability of centralizing provided by modern communications and other technological developments has served to expand the situations in which greater control can be exercised.

The broadened scope of responsibilities and duties which military commanders are called upon to perform today, coupled with the

increased complexity of modern warfare have resulted in increased managerial, as opposed to command, problems. The commander is more dependent upon his staff, which in turn has grown larger with each passing year, in order that the complexities can be dealt with by qualified individuals. Considerably more technical and administrative detail flows through command channels than was the case fifty years ago. For example, "Army Regulations, 1917" were contained in one paper-bound pamphlet less than one-half inch thick. Today, one must visit Post Headquarters to find a complete set of the "AR's" and even the small fraction found in the rifle company consumes considerable space in the bookshelf. While traditionally, and in accord with management principles, the staff issues orders only in the name of the commander and when doing so without his express approval, acts within policy established by him. The complexity of modern military forces, the immense amounts of technical and administrative directives and information involved, and the large staffs developed as a by-product, result in detailed instructions being originated at high level for implementation at the lowest level. Intermediate commanders often find it expedient to issue implementing directives which, as a rule, further restrict the latitude of their subordinates. While this procedure is understandable, and to some extent defensible in the case of technical matters, and to a lesser extent in administrative matters, the practice has spread to training and inevitably to operations.

In active operational matters which may form a part of delicate international negotiations, detailed control may be definitely in

the national interest. Professional military leaders must recognize this problem and be prepared to cope with it. To do otherwise would be failing to fulfill the trust which the nation has placed in them. On the other hand to habitually centralize in all fields of endeavor is equally a disservice. Not only does it contribute to increased staffing of headquarters at all levels, but it fails to permit subordinate commanders to develop their capabilities and those of their staffs.

Decentralization does not imply acceptance of lowered standards. It does however impose more of a challenge to the commander. If he is to delegate authority and decisionmaking to a subordinate, he must turn to another means of exercising control. In other words he must establish standards and compare the performance of his subordinates against these standards. His comparison must be made at the critical point in the operation. Not too early to ascertain the probability of success, nor too late to take corrective action should the established standards not be met. In many cases it is easier for the commander to retain centralized control than it is for him to develop effective means of insuring that his standards are met.

Thus centralized control and decisionmaking can be said to have increased due to several factors:

(1) Increased capability to exercise control over subordinates.

(2) Increased complexity of military tasks, weapons systems, and administration.

(3) Increased sensitivity of operational missions which may have serious implications for the national interests.

(4) Difficulty of establishing adequate measures of performance for subordinates to whom control has been delegated.

Taking into account the changed strategic setting in which the military commander of today operates, and the increased managerial, as compared to command requirements placed upon him, action to communicate these changes should be effected throughout the service. Recognition of the situational impact of the present strategic setting upon the traditional concept of the combat commander would do much to create understanding and acceptance as opposed to frustration and rejection on the part of superiors and subordinates alike.

In continuing the education and training in the fields of leadership and management which has progressed admirably during the past two decades, there should be an effort to obtain greater understanding of the current role of the armed services and the part they play in national strategy. At the Military Academy, for example, greater coordination between the agencies responsible for instruction in leadership and management, and those teaching economies, political science, law, and international relations might well produce greater understanding of the problems which may develop in the course of a commissioned career in the service.

Commanders at all levels should strive to delegate authority and decisionmaking to the maximum extent while at the same time recognizing the situational influences which may impinge on the problems at hand. The desirability of training and development of subordinate commanders may, at times, assume secondary importance when an operational mission is to be accomplished. At other times the training and development of subordinate leaders may be accorded highest priority. The necessary balance between leadership development and operational requirements must be understood by superior and subordinate alike.

Commanders and staff officers must endeavor to engage in creative and imaginative thinking with a view toward the development of unique and effective methods of controlling subordinate commands to which control and decisionmaking have been delegated. Senior staff officers must be particularly alert to prevent the retention of control and the exercise of overcontrol simply because it is easier for their particular activity or facilitates justification of a larger establishment at the expense of subordinate commands.

The problems inherent in command and control are unlikely to be solved completely until such time as human behavior is more predictable than the present state of the art permits. Any progress toward solution will not result in a decrease in the amount of time devoted to discussing the subject or the number of writings dealing with it. We can, however, approach our problems with a recognition of the situational influences involved along with a

tempered view of the traditional concept of the "commander." As a senior officer who served nearly thirty-six years on active duty once commented: "The Army isn't what it used to be--and never was."

William R. Wolfe Jr.

WILLIAM R. WOLFE, JR.
Lt Col, Artillery

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