Auftragstaktik: A Case for Decentralized Battle

JOHN T. NELSEN II

The main question this article attempts to answer is whether the US Army should formally adopt a concept akin to what is called *"Auftragstaktik."*[1] That this question needs answering may be surprising to many readers, since the much ballyhooed emphasis upon mission orders in the 1982 and 1986 editions of Field Manual 100-5, *Operations,* has been linked to *Auftragstaktik.*[2] But the German concept means far more than mission orders. Indeed, it means more even than "task-oriented or mission-oriented tactics," which though certainly a more sophisticated definition is still a rough and imperfect approximation.

There are significant problems in attempting to identify the nature of *Auftragstaktik.* Chief among them is that not until after World War II did the term come into general use. At that time, former German generals coined the term to label certain aspects of the German army's approach to war in the past. Adding to the confusion, West Germany's *Bundeswehr* adopted the term but applied it narrowly to their own system of command and control, translating it as "mission-oriented orders." In short, the term *Auftragstaktik* is an artificial, after-the-fact construct whose meaning has never been defined with any precision. How then should one use the term? It is particularly useful as a rubric for denominating those aspects of German army methodology prior to 1945 which led to the exercise of such impressive initiative in battle by its leaders at all levels. To study these aspects, however, one must examine the German army's regulations and military literature of the period, as well as the writings of former German officers. One must be wary of focusing on any single aspect in isolation; what is now termed *Auftragstaktik* formed part of a seamless fabric in the German army's warfighting philosophy. Virtually all notions were interrelated in some fashion. They were not grafted piecemeal onto this philosophy, but evolved organically over a period of at least eighty years. Thus, the concept of *Auftragstaktik* is a useful analytical tool—the more so as one bears in mind its limitations and views it in its proper historical setting.

Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

1. REPORT DATE	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED
SEP 1987		**00-00-1987 to 00-00-1987**

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE	5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
Auftragstaktik: A Case for Decentralized Battle	5b. GRANT NUMBER
	5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)	5d. PROJECT NUMBER
	5e. TASK NUMBER
	5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **US Army War College ,ATTN: Parameters ,122 Forbes Avenue,Carlisle,PA,17013-5238**	8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)	10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
	11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Approved for public release; distribution unlimited

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT

15. SUBJECT TERMS

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE			
unclassified	**unclassified**	**unclassified**	**Same as Report (SAR)**	**14**	

The Historical Backdrop

Auftragstaktik, as demonstrated in World War II, was the product of an evolutionary process dating from the 19th century. The driving force for it was the necessity of developing greater initiative in leaders at all levels. At the tactical level, the Prussian army discovered both during the Austro-Prussian War (1866) and the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) that the increased lethality of weapons forced greater dispersion across the battlefield. Commanders of armies, corps, divisions, brigades, regiments, and often battalions could neither fully observe nor control their forces in the detail previously allowed. Frequently, captains and lieutenants were forced to employ their units in fast-moving situations without detailed instructions from superiors. In short, they had to make decisions on their own which in the past had been reserved for higher-level commanders. The results were frequently disastrous. Prussian junior leaders were untrained for this and often proved inadequate to the task.[3]

Of necessity, the new Prussian army studied the problem, seeking a way to better prepare leaders at lower levels for independent decision-making. Without allowance for this, decisions on the dispersed battlefield threatened to be too time-consuming. Speed of decisive action would be lost. The result of the study was a new provision in the Drill Regulations of the Infantry (1888). It stipulated that commanders should give subordinates general directions of *what* was to be done, allowing them freedom to determine *how* to do it. This approach, it was felt, would stimulate development of the "thinking leader" who was used to making tactical judgments in his own right. Such leaders would less likely freeze up when faced with new situations in the absence of detailed instructions from above. By 1914, the spirit of this provision had taken root.[4]

World War I saw pendulum-like swings in the application of this provision. In the initial campaigns, it was fully applied with good results. However, the high attrition rates and the great influx of reserve officers who had not received adequate training caused the application to wane. In the west, the more centralized nature of trench warfare also had an influence. Commanders issued increasingly detailed orders that gave subordinates few opportunities to exercise much initiative. Then, the German development of elastic defense-in-depth tactics (1916-1918) and assault tactics (1918) changed the situation. Both demanded great initiative and creativity from

---

Major John T. Nelsen II is with G3 Plans, III Corps, Fort Hood, Texas. He is a graduate of Virginia Military Institute and holds an M.A. in European history from the University of Wisconsin and a Master of Military Art and Science degree from the School of Advanced Military Studies, Fort Leavenworth. He has served in several staff and infantry troop assignments and has taught history at the US Military Academy.

leaders down to the noncommissioned-officer level, often in fluid situations and in the absence of orders. The Germans trained hard for such leadership behind the lines and enjoyed impressive success at the tactical level. As a consequence, the German army of the post-World War I era evinced a strong institutional commitment to developing leaders who were willing and able to take prudent, independent action to handle the unexpected.[5]

This desire for increased leader initiative was in full consonance with the German army's perception of the nature of war. First, speed was considered imperative for victory at both strategic and tactical levels. German field service regulations emphasized that "the first demand in war is decisive action." As a country with a central position in Europe, Prussia/Germany always faced the specter of a two-front war. Rapid defeat of an enemy through offensive action was essential. This discouraged opportunistic countries from joining the conflict to gang up on Germany. It also reflected the view that in a two-front war, victory was possible only by defeating one foe quickly before the second one was ready to fight. This allowed the fullest concentration of German forces at chosen decisive points, in a way which favored a series of decisive victories. At the tactical level, the idea was to react after enemy contact with a series of rapid maneuvers to force the adversary into a largely reactive posture. He would then be vulnerable to defeat in detail through a series of subsequent engagements forced on him at great disadvantage.

Second, the Germans believed that the appropriate maneuvers to take in the face of the enemy could not be pre-planned in meticulous detail. They subscribed to the elder Moltke's dictum that "no operation plan extends with any certainty beyond the first encounter with the main body of the enemy." Since war was viewed fundamentally as a "clash of wills," enemy action would seldom conform to expectations. Added to this was a keen appreciation for the disruptive effects of friction on military activities.[6]

Third, the Germans considered every situation in war unique. This required competent leaders to make rapid estimates and decisions, and then to act on them swiftly. Furthermore, such decisions would always be made with incomplete, inaccurate, or conflicting information. Uncertainty and the fog of war stalked the battlefield. Thus the leader had to be a thinking soldier. He needed both intuitive powers to interpolate correctly and creative powers to devise a successful course of action. Each situation required a unique application of tactical principles which could not be prescribed by universal recipes or by detailed planning. This view of war was subsumed by the first article in the Field Service Regulations of 1933: "Leadership in war is an art, a free creative activity based on a foundation of knowledge. The greatest demands are made on the personality."

Thus the German view of war fully supported granting junior leaders great scope for initiative—if that was what it took to generate the speed necessary for victory. At the same time, this situational and artistic

perspective on war shaped the framework for the exercise of leader initiative. This framework provided for three essentials: proper leader character, sound methodology for issuing and carrying out orders, and enlightened senior-subordinate relations.

So far as leader character was concerned, initiative in a leader flowed from his willingness to step forward, take charge of a situation, and act promptly—completely on his own authority, if necessary. Not surprisingly, the German field service regulations stressed that the noblest quality of a leader was his willingness to assume responsibility. To do so under stressful conditions required considerable moral courage, self-reliance, and self-confidence—attributes the German army prized highly.

Closely related were the attributes which stressed risk-taking and decisive action. Since all decisions were made under conditions of uncertainty and since every situation was unique, there could never be a demonstrably perfect solution. Therefore, one should not demand one. There were theoretically several workable solutions for every tactical problem. "Many roads lead to Rome" was a common refrain heard in this regard. The object was to pick any reasonable plan swiftly and then to execute it with energy and dispatch. Leaders were cautioned against waiting to gather more information so as to reach a perfect decision, or even the best decision possible. Good leaders made a rapid estimate, adopted as sound a course of action as feasible, and executed it decisively. In this view, speed was more essential than precision; a decent plan carried out immediately was superior to a superb plan carried out much later.[7]

To operate in this way, a leader had to assume great risk willingly. To encourage this, the German army framed two rules. First, in situations clearly requiring independent decisions, a leader had not only the latitude to make them, but the solemn *duty* to do so. A good leader cultivated a will to action. Second, inaction and omission in such situations were considered much worse than judgmental error based on a sincere effort to act decisively. The former was the shameful antithesis of leadership. The latter was an honorable effort to practice the art of warfighting, in which no single action was guaranteed success. While errors in judgment might cause unsuccessful local engagements, the broad exercise of initiative by all leaders, it was felt, would carry the battle. Thus no opprobrium was associated with failure resulting from prudent risk-taking by the thinking leader. Such setbacks were simply the breaks of war.

The second part of the framework for exercising initiative consisted in the methodology of issuing and carrying out orders. In present-day terminology, this falls chiefly under the heading of command and control. As mentioned earlier, the Germans adopted a system of orders in 1888 giving subordinates as much latitude as possible in implementing assigned tasks. They refined the methodology over time. Insofar as he could, the commander told subordinates *what* tasks to accomplish, but not *how* to

accomplish them. He also gave them sufficient resources to accomplish those tasks, stated any restraints, and provided required coordinating information. The goal was to allow subordinates as much freedom of action as the situation permitted. Orders were brief and usually verbal.

Leaders so trained, it was thought, would better handle the unexpected in battle, where split-second decisions were often decisive. Such leaders would also feel more ownership for their actions, thereby stimulating greater determination in carrying them out. Self-reliant leaders would derive more personal pride and satisfaction from their duties, causing them to identify more cIosely with their units. This, in turn, would strengthen unit cohesion.

In issuing orders, the most important part was the statement of the commander's intent. This related the various assigned tasks and provided a vision of the desired result of an operation. In carrying out their tasks, subordinates were always to focus on the intent. It was virtually sacrosanct. Subordinates using initiative in response to the unexpected had to conform, insofar as possible, with this intent. Thus the commander's intent promoted unity of effort in fluid situations which failed to conform nicely to plans and expectations. The intent, therefore, both circumscribed and focused the exercise of initiative in subordinates.

Under exceptional circumstances, a subordinate could even modify or abandon tasks if he could still satisfy the commander's intent. This, however, was a serious matter. Prior approval was required if possible. If that proved impossible, the subordinate assumed full responsibility for the decision. He would have to justify his action later to his superior.

This system of operating did not lessen the need for commanders to control their subordinates. Commanders habitually positioned themselves well forward. They kept themselves informed of the situation as well as the actions of their subordinates, whom they visited frequently. In no way did commanders relinquish any command authority or responsibility. They would intervene when subordinates were doing something clearly unsound. They would add or delete assigned tasks, or change their intent, as they saw fit. In short, they supervised and controlled, but in a manner encouraging initiative and thinking in subordinates. Subordinates, on the other hand, made every effort to maintain contact with their commander and to keep him fully informed of the situation. They were expected to solve problems which could be surmounted at their level, and to recommend changes to orders based on a continual evaluation of the situation.

A third element of the framework for exercising initiative was that of senior-subordinate relationships. This falls under today's rubrics of leadership, command and control, and tactics. Commanders were responsible for developing in their subordinates the desired character and leadership attributes discussed earlier. Equally important, they spent much

time teaching subordinates how to think on their feet in making estimates of the situation and in applying tactical principles. The object was not only to train subordinates but to educate them. Leaders were taught not so much what to think about, but, more important, how to think. Superiors and subordinates spent time together in map exercises, terrain walks, sand-table exercises, and field exercises discussing tactical problems. **A** central focus of every field exercise was the development of subordinate leaders. This involved a close teacher-student, coaching-like relationship.[9]

The result was that the leader and his subordinate got to know how each other thought. This was important to the subordinate in helping him to read between the lines of his commander's intent. This was also important to the commander; it allowed him to anticipate intuitively how his subordinate would exercise freedom of action in various situations. From this close relationship flowed mutual trust, which in turn nourished initiative. The subordinate would feel confident that his exercise of initiative in battle generally conformed to his commander's intent. The commander would trust his subordinate with greater rein in accomplishing tasks.[10]

The training and education process, both in units and military schools, facilitated the exercise of initiative in another way. It promoted among leaders a common outlook on the nature of war, on desirable character and personality traits, on the importance of initiative, on proper senior-subordinate relationships, and on how to issue orders. It also taught a common approach in understanding and applying tactical principles to the different types of operations, emphasizing the peculiar features and characteristics of each. Military terminology was precise, standard, and widely understood. The result was a remarkably uniform perspective in tactical operations which facilitated concise orders, accurate but brief communication of intent, and a sensing of how the unit as a whole might respond in given situations. This common outlook and language reassured both leaders and subordinates, reinforcing that sense of mutual trust and dependability so conducive to initiative and freedom of action.

The standard approach for conducting critiques of tactical exercises promoted initiative as well. Since every situation was unique and since no training situation could encompass even a fraction of the peculiarities of a real tactical situation, there could be no approved solutions. One acceptable solution was as good as another. Critiques of leader actions focused on identifying the student's rationale for doing what he did. What factors did he consider, or not consider, in making his estimate of the situation? Were the actions taken consistent with this estimate? How well were orders communicated? Were the actions taken tactically sound? Did they have a reasonable chance of being successful? These questions served as the basis for critiques. The idea was to broaden the leader's analytical powers, experience level, and base of knowledge, thereby enhancing his creative ability to devise sound, innovative solutions to

difficult problems. Critiques were lenient and understanding, rather than biting and harsh. Mistakes were considered essential to the learning process and thus cast in a positive light. The focus was not on whether the leader did well or poorly, but on what progress he was making overall to develop as a leader. Damaging the leader's, self-esteem, especially publicly, was strictly avoided. **A** leader's self-confidence, it was felt, was the wellspring from which flowed his willingness to assume responsibility and exercise initiative.

It becomes clear that *Auftragstaktik* was an extraordinarily broad concept, holistically embracing aspects of what today would be called a theory of the nature of war, character and leadership traits, tactics, command and control, senior-subordinate relationships, and training and education. In addition, these aspects were organically consistent, mutually reinforcing, and inseparably interwoven. *Auftragstaktik,* then, was much more than a mere technique of issuing orders. It was nothing less than a comprehensive approach to warfighting. Its first imperative was speed, to be achieved by the intelligent and aggressive exercise of initiative at all levels.

The Demands of the Modern Battlefield

To what extent are the main features of *Auftragstaktik* applicable to the needs of the modern battlefield—today and tomorrow? Certainly speed of decisive action—the fundamental rationale for *Auftragstaktik*—is essential for success in contemporary war. Fluid situations, fleeting opportunities, and chaotic conditions will require rapid decisionmaking under conditions of great uncertainty. Furthermore, speed will often demand a conscious sacrifice of precision and will be critical for a smaller force to defeat a larger force. In the words of FM 100-5:

> Agility—the ability of friendly forces to act faster than the enemy—is the first prerequisite for seizing and holding the initiative. Such greater quickness permits the rapid concentration of friendly strength against enemy vulnerabilities. This must be done repeatedly so that by the time the enemy reacts to one action, another has already taken its place, disrupting his plans and leading to late, uncoordinated, and piecemeal enemy responses. It is this process of successive concentration against locally weaker or unprepared enemy forces which enables smaller forces to disorient, fragment, and eventually defeat much larger opposing formations."

There is a broad consensus that speed can result only from decentralized decisionmaking in conformity with *Auftragstaktik.* The exercise of initiative by subordinates at all levels is considered essential.[12] First, the general tempo of war has increased significantly since World War II. In many cases, junior- and mid-level leaders will have no time to request instructions from superiors before having to act. There is less time for

decisionmaking and communicating than ever before. Second, battlefield conditions will cause units at all levels to lose radio contact frequently with their headquarters or to become isolated physically from parent units. This will result from intense electronic warfare and from the fluid shape of the battlefield. To await reestablishment of contact with superiors before acting would court disaster by yielding the initiative to the enemy. Third, unit dispersal will be much greater than in past wars. Experiences at the National Training Center indicate that battalion commanders who attempt detailed control over even a portion of their force are usually overwhelmed by the tempo of the enemy's attack. Distances between subordinate units preclude this kind of control. As Major General E. S. Leland, former NTC commander, wrote: "A unit that does well only those things the boss checks will have great difficulty." Initiative at all levels is a must.[13]

There is widespread agreement on the needed framework for decentralized decisionmaking. It is the system of mission-oriented orders. Commanders should tell subordinates *what* to do, but allow them as much leeway as possible to determine *how* to do it. The commander also communicates his intent—as well as that of his next senior commander—along with any pertinent restraints or coordinating information. The intent is the subordinate's guidepost as he strives to deal with unexpected threats or opportunities, friction, and the fog of war.[14] As FM 100-5 emphasizes, the leader must avoid dependence on constant direction. Rather, he should

> conduct his operation confidently, anticipate events, and act fully and boldly to accomplish his mission without further orders. If an unanticipated situation arises, committed unit commanders should understand the purpose of the operation well enough to act decisively, confident that they are doing what their superior commander would order were he present.[15]

Not surprisingly, the leadership and character attributes commonly associated with stimulating battlefield initiative bear a strong resemblance to those associated with *Auftragstaktik*. Most important, the leader must be an aggressive thinker—always anticipating and analyzing. He must be able to make good assessments and solid tactical judgments. These must be based on a thorough grounding in doctrine, and on the creative ability to apply it to specific situations. He must take pride in his ability to solve problems at his own level, improvising as necessary to accomplish assigned missions without detailed, blow-by-blow instructions or continual supervision. He must be tough-minded, acting decisively and independently when contact with superiors is impractical or impossible. This behavior requires moral courage, self-reliance, and self-confidence. It also involves a willingness to assume responsibility and take risks in order to do the right thing at the right time. Finally, the leader must be both trustworthy and trusting. As a subordinate, he must faithfully adhere to his

commander's intent in exercising whatever freedom of action he is given. As a superior, he must trust his subordinates with as much freedom of action as possible and encourage them to exercise initiative.[16]

This composite view of war thus echoes an old German army belief. It is the ability of small units—acting with coherence and synergism in behalf of a central plan in chaotic and potentially panicky moments—to shape decisively the whole course of battles. This comment by S. L. A. Marshall is more pertinent today than in the late 1940s when he made it:

> The great lesson of minor tactics in our time . . . is the overpowering effect of small amounts of fire when delivered from the right ground at the right hour . . . . The salient characteristic of most of our great victories (and a few of our defeats) was that they pivoted on the fire action of a few men.

The increased firepower, lethality, and ranges of modern weapons dramatically increase the effect that small units can have at pivotal times and places.[17] What emerges from this overall mosaic of future war is the strong suggestion for the need of an approach roughly approximating *Auftragstaktik.*

Where Do We Stand Now?

The Army, it can be argued, has two opposing traditions of exercising command—centralized and decentralized. They have developed side by side over time, although they have seldom been formally recognized. The personal inclinations of the commanding officer have been the greatest influence in determining which tradition would predominate in a unit.

The centralized philosophy of command visualizes war more as a science than an art. At its extreme, the centralized approach sees a higher-level commander attempting to make precise decisions in a virtual zero-defects fashion. He then devises detailed plans to carry them out, and supervises the execution by micromanagement. All key decisions are referred to this commander. Decisions are based on massive amounts of information designed to cut through uncertainty. Slow responses are compensated for by massing overwhelming men and material against the enemy. In this view, far-reaching initiative from subordinates is not critical to success. Massive relative combat power is. In fact, there is an inherent skepticism that subordinates can make judgments which are precise enough. The centralized plan is sacred. Decentralized decisionmaking is seen as likely to undermine this well-oiled plan. To make the wrong decision is worse than making no decision at all. This approach tends to produce junior leaders who are reactors rather than initiators and who are risk-aversive. S. L. A. Marsha11 lamented that the Army in World War II Korea, and Vietnam leaned too heavily toward this style of command.[18] One of the most

vivid pictures of it in action is seen in the following passage from Lieutenant General Dave Palmer's *Summons of the Trumpet*:

> In the final analysis, the helicopter's most pernicious contribution to the fighting in Vietnam may have been its undermining of the influence and initiative of small unit commanders. By providing a fast, efficient airborne command post, the helicopter ail too often turned supervisors into over-supervisors. Since rarely was there more than one clash in any given area at any given time, the company commander on the ground attempting to fight his battle could usually observe orbiting in tiers above him his battalion commander, brigade commander, assistant division commander, division commander, and even his field force commander. With all that advice from the sky, it was easy to imagine how much individual initiative and control the company commander himself could exert on the ground—until nightfall sent the choppers to roost.[19]

This tradition continues. Experiences at the NTC show that in many units subordinates lack a sense of responsibility as thinking actors. They are used to their commanders doing their tactical thinking for them. Since their role has been one of executing detailed plans, they do not feel they have the latitude to make on-the-spot adjustments demanded by the situation. Nor do they tend to make recommendations or suggest changes to established plans. Junior leaders often do things at the NTC they know are inappropriate because they were ordered to do them.[20] In 1984, the Army surveyed 23,000 officers from second lieutenant through colonel on a number of issues. Of those who responded, 49 percent said that "the bold, original, creative officer cannot survive in today's Army."[21]

The decentralized style of command, on the other hand, views war more as an art than a science. It values the initiative of subordinates, striving especially to harness their creative energies toward simultaneous problem-solving at all levels. The desired effect is speed based on sound judgmental ability developed by trial and error. Adequate, not perfect, solutions are sought. In this view, commanders issue general instructions, relying on subordinates to get the job done within a broad charter for action. Plans are viewed as provisional, with the understanding that no plan is ever implemented exactly as envisioned. The leader must continue to think on his feet, aggressively analyzing, recommending, anticipating, and adjusting.

This style has deep roots. Grant's instructions to Sherman during the Civil War bear its imprint: "I do not propose to lay down for you a plan of campaign . . . but simply to lay down the work it is desirable to have done and leave you free to execute it in your own way."[22] Lee operated similarly. In fact, as that war progressed, both sides relied increasingly on decentralized decisionmaking to tap the enormous resources of initiative in subordinates down to regimental and sometimes even company level.[23]

As Assistant Commandant of the Infantry School in the late 1920s, George Marshall did all he could to develop young officer-students into thinking leaders who could operate in a decentralized manner. He often issued students foreign or outdated maps, provided only sketchy intelligence, and compelled them to make their own decisions by cutting off communications with higher headquarters. He routinely made them face the unexpected in order to stimulate their imagination and ingenuity. One of his first orders was that "any student's solution of a problem that ran counter to the approved school solution and yet showed independent, creative thinking would be published to the class."[24]

Another supporter of the decentralized style of command was General George S. Patton. He allowed his subordinates great freedom of action, being tolerant and patient with their errors. He demanded speed and risk-taking. "Never tell people how to do things," he said. "Tell them *what* to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity."[25]

This tradition, too, continues. Generally among subordinates today, the idea of a favorable command climate implies one in which their commanders allow them enough freedom of action, based on trust, to make their own decisions and perform their duties without over-detailed guidance or supervision. It is also a climate that readily forgives honest errors as part of the learning process. Furthermore, the growing number of journal articles advocating adoption of some sort of *Auftragstaktik* suggests that the decentralized tradition is alive and well. In one such article, the results of a poll of a number of former battalion commanders in Europe were reported: "All of them demanded that their company commanders be prepared to take appropriate action on the battlefield in the absence of specific orders." All of them wanted active, thinking leaders with the well-developed capacity to exercise initiative at every opportunity.[26]

There is thus plenty of fertile ground for an *Auftragstaktik*-like approach to grow in the US Army. But as long as the centralized command tradition remains alive and respectable, such growth will be uneven, confusing, and occasionally contentious.

What Is to Be Done?

The strongest psychological impediment to *Auftragstaktik* in the US Army is fear on the part of the commander that his subordinates' mistakes resulting from their loosened rein would make the command look bad and thus jeopardize the commander's own success. Overcontrol, to be honest, is the reflex of the commanders' own career insecurity. The antidote to such insecurity is a top-down command climate which deliberately tolerates the possibility of greater tactical error in confident expectation that the resulting explosion of initiative at all tactical echelons will provide a massive multiplication of combat effectiveness at the operational level.

To secure the manifest benefits of the decentralized approach, the Army should formally and systematically adopt an *Auftragstaktik*-like doctrine. Only thus, it might be added, will the centralized tradition ever be effectively confronted. Any process of formal adoption would require a codified doctrinal articulation of exactly what was meant. Without such an articulation, it would be virtually impossible for service schools and units around the globe to implement the approach in a uniform way. It should as a minimum articulate an integrated theory of the nature of war, desirable character and leadership attributes, command and control, senior-subordinate relationships, application of tactics, and leader education and training. The ideas linking all these aspects together are complex, reinforcing, and interwoven. By explaining fully the rationale for this approach and by thus tying it directly to warfighting and war readiness, formal adoption would facilitate acceptance, especially among many steeped in the centralized tradition of command.

Broad acceptance is particularly important since any *Auftragstaktik*-like approach must be implemented from the top downward in the chain of command. Implementation can be blocked by any commander who wishes to operate in a centralized fashion. Having the imprimatur of doctrine would increase the perceived legitimacy of *Auftragstaktik*, making efforts to circumvent general implementation clearly improper.

A concept like *Auftragstaktik*, if formally articulated as doctrine, offers advantages that range beyond the battlefield. For example, the concept could serve as a valuable prism through which one could better envision the development and integration of technology. The German army between 1933 and 1945 integrated the tank, the airplane, and other emerging technologies without changing or altering in any way their system of *Auftragstaktik*. The Germans recognized that man, not machine, was the first factor in achieving victory. To the extent that technology could support the notions associated with *Auftragstaktik*, it was integrated. If it worked against those notions, it was set aside or adapted. The German army credited their success against France in 1940 to the manner in which they integrated technology in their system rather than to the presence of the technology itself. One should not forget that the French and British had more tanks than the Germans did in this campaign. Besides that, the overall quality of most French and British equipment was better. The German view emphasized not what one had, but how one used it.

This has important ramifications for the Army today. For example, the Army is developing two pieces of communications equipment which could provide senior commanders with the capability of readily micromanaging subordinate units. One is Mobile Subscriber Equipment, a system of highly mobile radiotelephones which greatly increases battlefield communications but which would enable corps and division commanders to dial battalion commanders directly. Another item being developed is the

Position Location and Reporting System/Joint Tactical Information Distribution System Hybrid. Among other capabilities, this system would locate for a maneuver brigade commander by automatic, periodic electronic signal every platoon leader's vehicle in the brigade. Positions would be indicated on a computer screen that even a battalion commander would not have in his command post. One can only imagine the temptation a brigade commander would have to try to maneuver platoons, especially if he were an advocate of the centralized tradition of command. Such speculations are not to say the Army should refuse to develop these items, but rather that it must carefully consider how best to integrate them doctrinally.

The situation hearkens back to the old German army's special concern about any communications equipment which allowed a commander to bypass intermediate command levels. Over time, this would cause a withering away of initiative, of a sense of responsibility, and of imagination at those levels. The German army used *Auftragstaktik* as a framework to circumscribe the use of such equipment for the larger good of a healthier command climate.[27] Perhaps such notions in doctrinal form could serve as an equally valuable framework for command in the US Army.

The time for the formal adoption of *Auftragstaktik* by the US Army has arrived. The success of AirLand Battle demands it. FM 100-5 tells us so. But adoption entails more than occasional lip service. It entails a recognition by the Army's leadership of the all-encompassing application of an *Auftragstaktik*-like concept, and then the systematic, top-down implementation of the concept through command leverage, doctrinal and regulatory changes, and service school indoctrination. To generate the necessary change in command climate will be the work not of weeks or months, but of years.

In this monumental redirection of leadership philosophy, we would seek to develop thinking, tough-minded, self-reliant, confident, and courageous leaders who can respond to friction, the fog of war, and unexpected enemy actions with initiative and grim determination—but with no guarantee of success. Such leaders, to paraphrase Teddy Roosevelt, will at best know the triumph of high achievement, but even in failure they will at least fail while daring greatly.[28]

NOTES

1. This article is an abridged version of a monograph titled, "Where to Go from Here?: Considerations for the Formal Adoption of *Auftragstaktik* by the U.S. Army," School of Advanced Military Studies (Ft. Leavenworth, Kans., USACGSC, 5 December 1986). The monograph contains more comprehensive documentation of sources as well as a complete bibliography. It is on file in the Ft. Leavenworth Combined Arms Reference Library and in the Defense Technical Information Center (DTIC) system.

2. John L. Romjue, *From Active Defense to AirLand Battle: The Development of Army Doctrine 1973-1982* (Ft. Monroe, Va.: USATRADOC, 1984), pp. 58-59, 67.

3. Except where otherwise noted, the elaboration of the German concept of *Auftragstaktik* is based generally on the following sources: German army, *Exerzir-Reglement fuer die Infanterie* (Berlin: E.

S. Mittler und Sohn, 1889), pp. 108-09; *Exerzir-Reglement fuer die Infanterie* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler und Sohn, 1906), pp. 78, 90-91; *Truppenfuehrung, Teil I*, Heeresdienstvorschriften 300/1 (Berlin: E. S. Mittler und Sohn, 1936), pp. 1-5, 10, 15-16; *Fuehrung und Gefecht der verbundenen Waffen, Teil I* (Berlin: Verlag Offene Worte, 1921), pp. 6-9, 21-22, 30; Friedrich E. E. A. von Cochenhausen, *Die Truppenfuehrung, Teil I: Mittlere und untere Fuehrung*, 6th ed. (Berlin: E. S. Mittler und Sohn, 1931), pp. 25-26, 105; and *Die kriegswissenschaftliche Fortbildung des Truppenoffiziers* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler und Sohn, 1926), pp. 1-30, 50, 91-97, 153-56; Burkhart Mueller-Hillebrand, *Deutsche und sowjetrussische militaerische Fuehrung im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, report prepared for the Historical Division, US Army, Europe, no date (c. 1954), pp. 24-25, 28, 31, 52-53; Friedrich von Bernhardi, *How Germany Makes War* (New York: George Doran, 1914), pp. 213-21.

4. Fritz Hoenig, *Inquiries into the Tactics of the Future*, 4th ed., trans. Carl Reichmann (Kansas City, Mo.: Hudson-Kimberly Publishing Co., 1898), pp. 25-27, 43, 45, 220, 232-34, 267, and 311; Tim Lupfer, *The Dynamics of Doctrine: The Changes in German Tactical Doctrine During the First World War*, Leavenworth Papers, no. 4 (Ft. Leavenworth, Kans.: Combat Studies Institute, USACGSC, July 1981), pp. 15-21, 41-46.

5. Herbert Rosinski, *The German Army*, ed. Gordon Craig (London: Pall Mall, 1966), p. 310.

6. Baron von Freytag-Loringhoven, *The Power of Personality in War*, trans. US Army War College (Harrisburg, Pa.: The Military Service Publishing Co., 1955), p. 91.

7. Guenther Blumentritt, *The Dangers of Operational and Tactical "Systems,"* ed. A. Hall, trans. H. J. Baerwaldt, report prepared for the Historical Division, European Command, 1948, p. 6.

8. Lothar Rendulic, *Combat Orders*, trans. US Army (Historical Division, US Army Europe, 1947), pp. 5, 11.

9. Lothar Rendulic, *The Command Decision*, trans. M. Bauer (Historical Division, US Army Europe, 1947), p. 9. Reassuringly, the US Army's present emphasis upon "mentorship" in the superior's dealings with his subordinate leaders has many of the earmarks of *Auftragstaktik*.

10. Richard E. Simpkin, *Race to the Swift* (London and New York: Brassey's, 1985), pp. 230-31, 239. Martin van Creveld, *Fighting Power: German and US Army Performance, 1939-1945* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982), p. 36.

11. US Department of the Army, *Operations*, Field Manual 100-5 (Washington: GPO, May 1986), pp. 15-16, 24, 97. The quotation is from p. 16.

12. Van Creveld, p. 35.

13. US Department of the Army, "National Training Center: Lessons Learned," Commander's memorandum signed by Brigadier General E. S. Leland (Ft. Irwin, Calif.: National Training Center, 20 November 1985), p. 1.

14. FM 100-5, *Operations* (1986), pp. 17-18, 21; John M. Vermillion, "Tactical Implications of the Adoption of Auftragstaktik for Command and Control on the AirLand Battlefield," monograph, School for Advanced Military Studies (Ft. Leavenworth, Kans.: USACGSC, 2 December 1985), p. 36.

15. FM 100-5, *Operations* (1986), p. 22.

16. Ibid., pp. 15-16, 26.

17. S. L. A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War* (Washington: Infantry Journal, 1947; reprinted., Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1978), p. 68.

18. Ibid., pp. 114-15.

19. Dave Richard Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: US-Vietnam in Perspective* (San Rafael, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1978), p. 142.

20. Vernon W. Humphrey, "NTC: Command and Control," *Infantry*, 74 (September-October 1984), 36.

21. Benjamin Schemmer, "Internal Army Surveys Suggest Serious Concerns About Army's Senior Leaders," *Armed Forces Journal International*, 122 (May 1985), 18-19.

22. Quoted in Marshall, p. 189.

23. F. W. von Mellenthin, *Armored Warfare in World War II*, Conference Report (Columbus, Ohio: Battelle, 10 May 1979), p. 5. Von Mellenthin likens Lee to the elder Moltke in the common approach of aligning their forces in the right direction for the decisive battle and then letting subordinates actually conduct the fight.

24. Forrest C. Pogue, *George C. Marshall: Education of a General, 1880-1939* (New York: Viking Press, 1963), pp. 248-57.

25. Porter B. Williamson, *Patton's Principles* (Tucson, Ariz.: Management and Systems Consultants, 1979), pp. 36-38, 45-47, 104-08.

26. John W. Mountcastle, "On the Move: Command and Control of Armor Units in Combat," *Military Review*, 65 (November 1985), 37-38.

27. General Frido von Senger und Etterlin, *Neither Fear Nor Hope*, trans. George Malcolm (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1964), p. 220.

28. The full quotation appears in Vince Lombardi, *Vince Lombardi on Football*, ed. George L. Flynn (New York: Graphic Society Ltd. and Wallynn Inc., 1973), I, 16.