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Operational Leadership: The Key is Vision

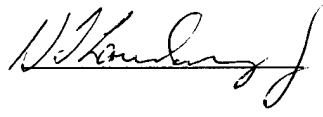
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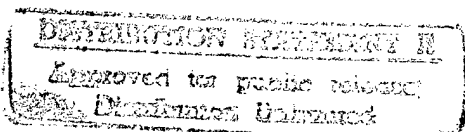
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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature: 



19 May 1997

Paper directed by
Captain G.W. Jackson
Chairman, Department of Joint Military Operations

19970814 097

DRIC QUALITY INSPECTED 1

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

1. Report Security Classification: UNCLASSIFIED	
2. Security Classification Authority:	
3. Declassification/Downgrading Schedule:	
4. Distribution/Availability of Report: DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A: APPROVED FOR PUBLIC RELEASE; DISTRIBUTION IS UNLIMITED.	
5. Name of Performing Organization: JOINT MILITARY OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT	
6. Office Symbol: C	7. Address: NAVAL WAR COLLEGE 686 CUSHING ROAD NEWPORT, RI 02841-1207
8. Title (Include Security Classification): Operational Leadership: The Key is Vision (U)	
9. Personal Authors: Ltc H.T.Landwermyer, Jr. U.S.Army	
10. Type of Report: FINAL	11. Date of Report: 19 May 1997
12. Page Count: 21	
13. Supplementary Notation: A paper submitted to the Faculty of the NWC in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the JMO Department. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.	
14. Ten key words that relate to your paper: Operational Leadership Vision Senior-level leadership	
15. Abstract: There have been volumes of information throughout history that discuss the qualities or characteristics required of successful leaders. This paper examines the proposition that there is actually a fundamental difference between leadership at the tactical and operational levels of war, and that difference is "vision." A discussion of the concept of vision is conducted using historical examples of both successful and unsuccessful operational leaders. The importance of vision at this level is also covered, and is tied to the principle of war -- the objective. Counterarguments to this position are presented and refuted. The principle counterarguments being: there is no difference between leadership at these two levels; tactical level leaders also apply vision; and the only difference in leadership at any level is previous combat experience, which will ultimately determine success or failure.	

16.Distribution / Availability of Abstract:	Unclassified X	Same As Rpt	DTIC Users
17.Abstract Security Classification: UNCLASSIFIED			
18.Name of Responsible Individual: CHAIRMAN, JOINT MILITARY OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT			
19.Telephone: 841-6461		20.Office Symbol: C	

Security Classification of This Page Unclassified

Abstract of

OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP: THE KEY IS VISION

There have been volumes of information written throughout history that discuss the qualities and characteristics required of successful leaders. This paper examines the proposition that there is actually a fundamental difference between leadership at the tactical and operational levels of war, and that difference is "vision."

A discussion of the concept of vision is conducted using historical examples of successful and unsuccessful operational leaders. The importance of vision is stressed by tying it to the principle of war -- the objective -- again using historical examples.

Counter arguments to this position are presented and refuted. The principle arguments being: there is no difference between leadership at these two levels; tactical level leaders also apply vision; and the only difference in leadership at any level is previous combat experience, which will ultimately determine success or failure.

A generally accepted definition of leadership is the "influencing of people to work toward the accomplishment of a common objective."¹ Concerning the three levels of war -- tactical, operational, strategic -- there is a measure of leadership associated with each, and this paper will discuss a key attribute necessary for effective leadership at the operational level. It is a necessary assumption at this point, that the reader agrees in principle to fundamental differences between the tactical and operational levels of war. Those being, but not limited to: number and types of forces employed; span and degree of control; risk levels; and time.²

Given the above mentioned differences in these two levels of war, it is my position that there exists a fundamental difference between leadership at these two levels, as well. As Clausewitz so aptly stated; "There are Commanders - In - Chiefs who could not have led a cavalry regiment with distinction; and cavalry commanders who could not have led armies."³

While there are certainly differences, however, most -- arguably all -- of the basic leadership principles apply at both levels. There have been volumes upon volumes written about these basic principles: care; compassion; candor; character; integrity; confidence; etc. These writings have been primarily about the tactical level, while the operational level has received little press. That

notwithstanding, it is not the purpose of this paper to rehash discussions of basic leadership principles.

There is, however, an additional principle at the operational level, and that is vision. Vision, and how it is imparted to subordinates, is the fundamental difference between operational and tactical level leadership.

The reason this is important will be dealt with through a discussion of the principle of war -- the objective. The argument that there is not a fundamental difference in leadership at the two levels will also be discussed, as will the argument that the only difference in leadership lies not with the level, but rather between peacetime and wartime experience of the operational commander.

So what is meant by the term vision, and why is it requisite at the operational level? An operational leader must be able to think at the same level he is commanding. Too often we have seen successful tactical commanders that don't perform as well as anticipated at the operational level. The primary reason for failure at the operational level is their inability to think in "big picture" terms. They don't possess the vision required at this level where everything is inherently more complex.

Furthermore, operational leadership provides the "interface between national or coalition policy and military strategy and tactics. It transforms the goals determined by the national strategic politico-military leadership into military plans and combat actions."⁴ Vision is what allows

the commander to establish appropriate operational objectives, "see" the necessary interrelationships of many different actions that are required to accomplish those objectives, which in turn lead to successful attainment of political/strategic goals.

Vision is what focuses the efforts of all subordinate organizations toward accomplishing those operational objectives. It provides the direction and allows subordinates to act in accordance with the commander's intent in the absence of specific instructions. Vision "engages the enthusiasms and energy of subordinates as they strive to make the theater commander's vision a reality."⁵

FM 22-103, *Leadership and Command at Senior Levels* (1987), states that vision establishes focus for action and guidance to the organization.

It is the basis on which senior leaders or commanders generate the moral leadership power our constitutional heritage requires to activate the professional resources needed to muster and sustain organizational trust, cohesion, commitment and will to meet any challenge.⁶

At the operational level, it is a "personal concept of what the organization must be able to do at some point in the future. It is the target."⁷

One of the greatest examples of the successful application of operational vision is that of General Eisenhower during World War II. Some would argue on the surface that this is not the case due to his apparent lack

of a suitable grasp of tactics. And, in fact, on numerous occasions, he allowed subordinate commanders (Montgomery, Alexander, Patton) to take actions that arguably prolonged the war, or at least complicated the accomplishment of operational objectives. These failures included ineffective pursuit operations at both Messina and Falaise that failed to cutoff German forces, as well as Alexander's improper coordination of British and American forces in Italy. These are a few instances where some have argued that a more tactically astute Eisenhower would have intervened and averted the problems.

Quite the contrary, however, Eisenhower's strength was his vision that the very nature of war in the European theater was coalition warfare.⁸ He realized the importance of maintaining an effective alliance and his every action was focused on achieving an allied victory over Germany. His steadfast desire for Operation Overlord, his consistent call for Montgomery to maintain the momentum of the attack following Normandy, and especially his unwavering insistence on the "broad-front" strategy, ensured an allied victory. Eisenhower's vision was that "victory was to be gained not by Montgomery, Bradley or Patton alone, but by the efforts of both allies operating together."⁹

Another highly successful operational commander due to his "vision" was General Grant following his appointment as the overall commander of the Union forces. He knew that the Army of Northern Virginia was the center of gravity for the

South, and as such it must be defeated. His ability to visualize how operations in the western theater, coupled with "Sherman's march to the sea", along with direct operations against Lee's army would ultimately lead to the South's defeat. This ability to visualize the military conditions that would produce the desired strategic objectives enabled him to properly sequence the military actions to bring about the desired end state.¹⁰

When hearing Grant referred to as a "military accident" with no distinguishing merit who had achieved success through a combination of fortunate circumstances, Lee replied -- Sir, your opinion is a very poor compliment to me. We all thought Richmond was protected, as it was, by our splendid fortifications and defended by our army of veterans, and could not be taken. Yet Grant turned his face to our capitol and never turned it away until we had surrendered. Now I have carefully searched the military records of both ancient and modern history, and have never found Grant's superior as a general. I doubt his superior can be found in all history.¹¹

In spite of these examples, there are those that argue "vision" is not what is important. Instead, they argue, prior success at the tactical level is the pre-requisite for success at the operational level. This is absolutely inaccurate.

Let's first look at Eisenhower's case. He was actually a staff officer for most of his career, with the only exceptions being two relatively short command tours. The first was as a tank company commander in Pennsylvania in

1918. The second was as an infantry battalion commander in 1940. He was never a brigade, division, corps or army commander. The first time he commanded a large unit was in 1942 when he became the U.S. Army European Theater of Operations commander. Nevertheless, what General Eisenhower did "as probably no other could have accomplished was to build an allied organization in his theater and make it mesh superbly."¹²

As for Grant, while he did have the opportunity for command at several levels, many of these instances were displays of how not to conduct operations at the tactical level. It was not his previously displayed sub-standard tactical "prowess" that assured the ultimate attainment of the North's strategic objectives. It was instead his overall strategy for coordinated actions on multiple fronts that defeated the South....his vision.

A common, and important, thread in successful operational commander's visions lies in the vision's relationship to one of the nine principles of war -- the objective. Army FM 100-5, *Operations*, says to "direct every military operation toward a clearly defined, decisive and attainable objective."¹³ Given the previous assertion of the operational level being the link between tactical actions achieving strategic success, "clearly defined, decisive and attainable objectives" are made possible by the operational commander's vision, which is embodied as his "intent."

Again, I would offer General Grant as an example. His vision of coordinated advances on multiple fronts drove specific operational objectives for each of his armies. Grant told Meade that Lee's army was his objective. "Wherever Lee goes, you go." Sherman's objective was to attack Johnston's army and push it as far southeast as possible, while simultaneously damaging the South's war resources to the greatest extent possible. To Butler's army, he gave the objective of cutting the railroad between Petersburg and Richmond, and to threaten the South's capitol from the south. Sigel's objective was to pin down defenders and cut Lee's line of communications in the Shenandoah valley area. Finally, Bank's army had the objective to capture Mobile and prevent reinforcements from aiding Johnston.¹⁴

These "clearly defined and decisive objectives" flowed directly from Grant's vision as the operational commander. They were designed so that, when successful, they would lead to the accomplishment of the North's strategic goal -- defeat of the South. How close actuality came to his vision, and how successful each of these subordinate commanders were is not, however, within the purview of this paper. But the importance of the linkage between the operational commander's vision and the principal of war -- objective -- is clearly evident.

Given the stated importance of the operational commander's vision, it is prudent to consider the

criticality of clearly imparting that vision to subordinate commanders. A "vision that exists only in the mind of the commander or his close associates is of no use."¹⁵ Following a briefing by a lieutenant on an upcoming training event, General Marshall asked the lieutenant how much he got paid each month. After the lieutenant responded "\$141.67", General Marshall told him; "Just remember, you get \$1.67 for making your plan, and \$140.00 for seeing that it is carried out."¹⁶ Some refer to this as imposing your will on your subordinates to ensure the desired actions are taken. Clausewitz refers to it as "determination."¹⁷

Throughout history, different operational commanders have used different methods to ensure their vision was fully understood, and accepted, by their subordinates. "It comes down to the art of commandership or generalship as to how you issue your directives or how you project your desires and will down through the command."¹⁸ It is an individual preference.

Eisenhower chose to give subordinate commanders terrific tactical leeway. He consciously stayed away from influencing tactical decisions, almost to a fault. He stayed away from the battlefield as much as possible, for fear of appearing to do his subordinate commander's job for them. "What he did was to visit his subordinates, listen to them, encourage them and never interfered."¹⁹

I liken his method to the "white line theory." This is where one establishes the boundaries subordinates have to

work within, the "white lines", as well as an objective at the far end of the lines. This allows the subordinate to choose how to get to the objective, with the only restriction being to remain between the lines.

Some would argue that this technique provides subordinates too much room to maneuver, and could ultimately risk mission accomplishment. That, however, is the operational commander's call, taking into account his subordinates, the objective and the risks involved. In Eisenhower's case, "he was the most successful general of the greatest war ever fought."²⁰

A different technique was that used by General Ridgway, Commander of the Eighth Army during the Korean War. He firmly believed in the operational commander leading from the front. His idea, however, was not the "follow me" approach expected of small unit leaders. Instead, he wanted to talk to subordinate commanders and ensure they possessed an appropriate knowledge of the plan. That was his way of checking to see that his vision and intent were properly understood.²¹

He also used this technique to get a gut feel for soldier morale, preparedness and confidence level. This definitely appealed to troops at the basic leadership principle level. But, more importantly for him, he got a feel for whether or not his objectives were realistic and "attainable" or not, given the state of his forces. He used

this extensively during the planning and preparation phases of major operations.²²

A third technique belonged to General Patton. While he too was a lead from the front type of commander that exuded extreme confidence, he forcefully motivated his army to achieve his stated objectives. He would not allow them to fail. His desire was simply for his soldiers to have a greater fear of him than they had of the enemy. This is a technique, for sure, but maybe not the one to adopt if you are not predisposed to wearing pearl handled revolvers.

An argument against my position on the fundamental difference between tactical and operational level of leadership, is that tactical commanders use vision and intent as well. Therefore, there is not a fundamental difference. This argument continues that the only difference is in the amount of forces employed at the two levels. I will counter this argument by discussing span of control and risks.

I concede that our doctrine, at least on the surface, supports the opposition's argument. By doctrine, tactical commanders employ both vision and intent. The tactical commander's span of control, however, is such that he can still achieve his objectives without their use. A tactical commander can physically influence the actions required to achieve the objective. If a subordinate unit is unclear on the intent and goes astray, the tactical commander is

physically close enough to the situation to quickly ascertain the problem and correct it.

The operational commander, on the other hand, has to rely on influence instead of control over his subordinate organizations. At this level, knowledge of the operational commander's vision and intent is absolutely critical to mission accomplishment. There will be opportunities for action that present themselves to subordinate commanders during a campaign. Not knowing the vision and intent could cause indecision, inaction or the wrong action, which could preclude achieving stated objectives. Often, the operational commander is not within the physical proximity required to correct a problem before it impacts the overall mission.

With regard to risks, failure to achieve an objective at the tactical level, or achieving the wrong objective, while not good, will probably not cause the "collapse of the free world". By its very nature, a tactical objective is a small, albeit important, piece of a much larger puzzle.

At the operational level, however, the associated risks are enormous. Actions directed by operational commanders have routinely determined the fate of alliances, coalitions, nations and literally millions of lives. With the risk of such catastrophic consequences, it is not a time for confusion about the mission, actions or objectives.

Finally, it's just a difficult position to support that vision and intent are the same regardless of the level. I just flat out disagree that the vision and intent of an army

battalion or brigade commander carries the same relative importance as Eisenhower's vision for the invasion of Europe and the defeat of Nazi Germany, or the same as Schwarzkopf's for the expulsion of Iraq from Kuwait.

An additional argument against my position is that the only difference in leadership is not between the levels, but between peacetime and wartime leaders. Having already stated my position on a fundamental difference between the levels, I'll now deal with the peacetime vs. wartime leaders question.

There has been much debate about the necessity of combat experience. The bottom line is that neither combat experience, nor lack of it, will guarantee success, or failure, at the operational level. Eisenhower was a lieutenant colonel in 1940, and did not see combat until 1942. By 1945 he had successfully carried out the defeat of Germany and was a five-star general.²³

During the Civil War, General McClellan had never known the "despair of defeat or the humiliation of failure"²⁴, until after he took command of the main Northern Field Army. He had plenty of combat experience at lower levels, but it didn't make him a successful operational commander. The same can be said of Meade and Hooker. Both were capable and successful tactical commanders with combat experience, who failed to succeed at the operational level.

On the South's side, General John B. Hood was a tremendous tactical, and combat proven commander. By the end of the war, he ranked next to Lee, but:

He had lost his command. He never mastered the transition from leadership to commandship to generalship. He never knew how to handle a staff or subordinate commanders. Logistics to him was something he paid little attention to. As a result, as he went up in rank he got increasingly ineffective.²⁵

Combat experience clearly doesn't guarantee success at a higher level, and lack of it doesn't guarantee failure. Eisenhower didn't succeed because he was a proven combat leader. Neither did McClellan, Hooker, Meade or Hood fail because they had never experienced combat. On the contrary, these men succeeded or failed because of their ability, or inability, to form a vision of future operations that would achieve operational objectives, and ultimately, strategic goals.

Actually, the difference between peacetime and wartime leaders seems to be the relative importance of some of the basic leadership principles discussed earlier. But that, too, is another paper.

As far back as 1987, the Army formally recognized that leadership in higher level organizations (though "higher level" is not specifically defined) is substantively different from lower level leadership. Both FM 22-103, *Leadership and Command at Senior Levels* (1987), and DA Pamphlet 600-80, *Executive Leadership* (1987), detail these

differences between the two levels as primarily resulting from the more complex, ambiguous, and uncertain situations associated with higher level units.

Some maintain that there are actually different character traits associated with the different levels, but, for every example there is a counter. A study of operational leaders throughout history shows that each has had different character strengths and weaknesses, none of which were the critical factor that determined their success or failure.

What does determine success or failure of leadership at the operational level is the commander's ability to accurately visualize the military conditions that will accomplish operational and strategic objectives. Additionally, a subset of successful vision lies in the leader's ability to impart that vision to subordinates throughout his command. Vision is the fundamental difference between operational and tactical level leadership, and is an absolute requirement for success at the operational level.

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3. Carl von Clausewitz, On War (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1984), 146.
4. Vego, 2.
5. Mitchell Zais, "Strategic Vision and Strength of Will: Imperatives for Theater Command," Parameters, April 1990, 60.
6. U.S.Army, Field Manual 22-103 Leadership and Command at Senior Levels, 1987, 8.
7. Ibid., 16.
8. Martin Blumenson, "Eisenhower Then and Now: Fireside Reflections," Parameters, Summer 1991, 33.
9. Ibid., 34.
10. Rubel, 4.
11. "How others perceived him." Ulysses S. Grant Network Home Page. <<http://www.css.edu/mkelsey/quotes.html#lee>> (19 April 1997).
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16. Omar N. Bradley, "Leadership," Military Review, September 1966, 49.
17. Clausewitz, 102-103.

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19. Blumenson, 32.
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21. Matthew B. Ridgway, "Troop Leadership at the Operational Level: The Eighth Army in Korea," Military Review, April 1990, 58-60.
22. Ibid., 60.
23. Ambrose, 2.
24. McPherson, 359.
25. Clark, 18.

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