Air Force pararescuemen and West Coast–based Navy SEALs leap from ramp of Air Force C-17 transport aircraft during free-fall parachute training over Marine Corps Base Hawaii, January 2011 (U.S. Marine Corps/Reece E. Lodder)

Trust

The Sine Qua Non of Effective Joint Operations

By Stanley A. Springer, John A. Schommer, and Sean S. Jones

Merriam-Webster defines *trust* as the "assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something." Within academic literature, trust is often defined as "the willingness to be vulnerable."[1] One functional definition that captures the uncertainty of military operations calls it "a state involving confident predictions about another's motives with respect to oneself in situa-tions entailing risk."[2] These definitions offer a starting point to examine trust within the context of joint operations.

Trust is referenced broadly both in joint doctrine and in key position papers. Joint Publication 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, describes trust in various ways: as a key component of mission command and an output of military engagement with other armed forces and civilian agencies.

Mutual trust is a tenet of command and control that strengthens unity of command and "expands the Joint Force Commander's options and enhances flexibility, agility, and the freedom to take the initiative when conditions warrant."[3] Recognized as a key component of the profession of arms, joint doctrine states that "trust and confidence are central to unity of effort."[4]

In describing his vision for the Joint Force–Global Integrated Operations (GIO), former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey pointed out that GIO would "exploit the human element in joint operations, em-phasizing trust . . . among other traits."[5]

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Similarly, in a white paper, Dempsey acknowledged trust as a key attribute in the joint conception of mission command.[6] Indeed, he noted that "building trust with subordinates and partners may be the most important action a commander will perform. Given our projected need for superior speed in competitive cycles of decision-making, it is clear that in Joint Force 2020, operations will move at the speed of trust."[7]

Trust, it would seem, is an essential element in joint operations. Put another way, trust can be considered the sine qua non of successful joint operations, and the growing complexity of future operations will further increase the central significance of the concept. Its joint value appears in two forms: interpersonal and interorganizational. General Dempsey's exultation of the value of trust under the concept of mission command alludes to these two forms, especially as he discusses "building trust with one's subordinates and partners."[8] From a commander's perspective, trust is needed on a personal level with one's subordinates and superiors and—on another, arguably more complex level—with one's partners, be they people or organizations. In the study "Trust in Small Military Teams," these two concepts are referenced as person-based trust and category-based trust. *Person-based trust* is the "idea of trust conferred directly on a known person, as a result of direct interaction with this person," whereas *category-based trust* arises when one person perceives that another belongs to an organization or group of people that he or she has come to trust.[9]

In the crucible of conflict, trust within the military Services and between the Services and interagency has served as the requisite condition for unity of effort and action in successful joint operations. That said, we cannot take for granted the bonds of trust forged during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, especially as new challenges continue to emerge. The effectiveness of 21st-century joint operations will depend on maintaining and improving the trust within the joint force while simultaneously expanding joint-interagency operational bonds to enable unity of effort and action across the spectrum of possible conflicts.

Trust in Joint Operational History

Incidents of successful joint and unified action underpinned by interpersonal and even interorganizational trust pepper U.S. military history. George Washington's victory at the Battle of Yorktown had much to do with the personal trust between Washington and the French commanders General Rochambeau and Admiral Francois-Joseph de Grasse. The cornerstone of the Union's pivotal Vicksburg campaign (1862–1863) in the Civil War was the warm relationship between the commander of the Mississippi River Squadron, Rear Admiral David Dixon Porter, and Generals Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman. Indeed, Grant assumed command of the main Vicksburg operation in lieu of Major General John McClernand due, in part, to the Navy's lack of trust in McClernand.[10] In World War II, the performance of the Pacific island-hopping campaigns led by Chester Nimitz and Douglas MacArthur—who were initially skeptical of the strategy, but generally followed its basic tenets—improved steadily as the leaders, organizations, and men of all Services learned the business of war and learned to trust each other. Furthermore, in the European theater, Army Air Corps General Elwood R. "Pete" Quesada forged relationships of trust and confidence with his generals, especially Omar Bradley, which significantly improved tactical air–ground relations and laid the groundwork for a successful Normandy campaign.[11]

Often, the relationships of mutual trust and confidence that led to military-interagency cooperation were forged ad hoc. During the Second Seminole Indian War, the U.S. Treasury Department's Revenue Cutter Service (originally "Revenue-Marine") assisted the Army and Navy in the Seminole Indian campaigns and were involved in the other wars of the 19th century.[12] Later in the 20th century, the U.S.–Republic of Vietnam Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support program combined military and civilian elements from both countries in a single, unified effort in an attempt to subdue many areas in South Vietnam that had once resisted pacification. Though the program was canceled after just 3 years as the war drew to a close, its unified military-civilian framework enabled novel utilization of several instruments of power toward a common objective at the tactical and operational levels of war. Despite these mixed results, without a doctrinal or legal framework to foster mutual confidence, the success of any joint and unified operations depended on leaders slowly building trust between themselves and their organizations—often as bullets were flying and opportunities escaping.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are an equal number of failures in U.S. history that can be attributed to systemic trust issues between the Services as well as between the Services and interagency. During the Civil War, "when officers of the army and navy managed to work together effectively, the Union generally found success; when they did not, the result was disappointment and failure."[13] An example of a good working relationship is between Rear Admiral Andrew Foote and General Grant during the Union attack on Fort Henry, at which Grant's forces attacked by land while Foote's flotilla attacked from the Tennessee River.[14] The 19th-century military-interagency relationship struggled as well. To wit, as often as the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Army coordinated actions to implement the Indian policy of the day, they seemingly managed to find other ways to cause each other problems. Poor coordination resulting from a general lack of mutual trust and confidence between the Army and Navy in the Spanish-American War's Caribbean operations helped lead to the creation of the Joint Army and Navy Board in 1903, but it had no legal authority, and joint operations remained dependent on commander-level, person-based trust at all levels of war. Finally, in spite of the relative success of joint and even unified operations in World War II, the trust earned in global combat did not carry over as a systemic feature of postwar operations.

The Services' perpetual rivalry over budget and missions after 1945 and into the 1980s did nothing to improve interorganizational trust. Consequently, the efficacy of joint warfighting and unified action varied wildly according to the circumstances of the operation. In 1947, the newly formed Department of Defense (DOD) and National Security Council (NSC) established the legal framework that promised unified action in the second half of the 20th century. That said, significant headwinds slowed efforts to improve the government's unified performance in both peace and war. The NSC, while increasingly useful for coordinating high-level cross-agency policy decisions, evolved very slowly, did not incorporate the entire interagency, and did not necessarily drive mutual trust and confidence between the military and interagency at the theater level and below.

Of course, the United States did not abandon joint and unified warfighting as a fundamental precept. There were, in fact, isolated areas of improved jointness, including various battles in Korea and Vietnam as well as the Air Force–Army's AirLand Battle concept in the 1970s and 1980s. Nevertheless, the steps needed to improve unified action through policy and processes that institutionalize personal and interorganizational category-based trust were not taken. Operations *Eagle Claw* (the failed rescue of U.S. hostages in Iran in 1980) and *Urgent Fury* (the invasion of Grenada in 1983) amply illustrated these issues. The Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 sought to mitigate these joint challenges and almost incidentally improved military-interagency cooperation, which had been slowly growing under the aegis of the NSC system.

Goldwater-Nichols heralded a new era of imbedded structural trust within DOD and, to a lesser degree, between the military and interagency. Under this landmark legislation, planning and operational control of the joint force shifted to the combatant commander from the Service chiefs. The law also restructured the Joint Staff to facilitate interoperability of the Services' forces

and further enhanced joint operations under a single unified combatant commander. Eventually, as the legislation took hold, interorganizational trust between the Services (and, consequently, joint operations) steadily improved. In turn, as joint operations became more systemic within DOD, mutual trust and confidence between the military and interagency seemingly improved as clear chains of command facilitated interagency cooperation from the theater to tactical level. From the late 1980s onward, multiple operations to include *Just Cause*, *Desert Storm*, *Allied Force*, numerous humanitarian relief missions, as well as the early days of *Enduring Freedom* and *Iraqi Freedom*, incrementally displayed the increasing ability of the joint force to conduct unified action.

Trust in Today's Joint Force

At the dawn of the 21st century, as military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq wore on, so did the pressure on the bonds of trust. Both personal-based and interorganizational trust issues have become increasingly apparent. Whether due to a force strained from over a decade of combat, changing cultural norms, or other factors, the degradation of trust and our overall performance appear to go hand in hand.

Trust issues seemingly pervade today's joint force. Newspaper stories abound about toxic leaders, and retention surveys cite "widespread distrust of senior leadership" or integrity issues among the officer corps.[15] In parallel, the scourge of sexual assault has frayed internal bonds of trust within units in all Services while straining relations between Congress and military leadership. As reports of military sexual assault have risen over the years, political leaders have argued to take these cases out of the hands of military commanders because alleged victims "do not trust the chain of command."[16] This may indicate that some Members of Congress have lost trust in the military justice system's ability to address this serious crime.

Of course, DOD has worked hard to combat all of these issues, but often with marginal success as the number of problems seemingly multiplied and

solutions eluded senior leaders. Indeed, senior leaders and commanders are expending enormous resources to counter the deleterious effects of these trust issues on joint effectiveness and unified action. In his "Initial Thoughts" to the Army, former Chief of Staff General Raymond Odierno touted trust as "the bedrock of our honored Profession."[17] The 2015 National Military Strategy also promoted a "campaign of trust" that emphasizes mutual respect and addresses serious issues, including sexual assault.[18] Consequently, mandatory training, workshops, new initiatives, and inspections to mitigate the various forms of internal trust issues have seemingly become the focus of warfighting units, instead of warfighting. Nevertheless, it is not clear that our efforts are working or that the joint force even understands how to fix their challenges. Indeed, one study noted several threats to trust within the Army and observed that leaders lacked an understanding of the topic, which impeded their ability to discuss it effectively with their troops.[19]

Looking ahead, as the military faces potentially $1 trillion in defense cuts over 10 years, DOD will be driven to make tough decisions on force structure size and resource prioritization. People—the most important and most expensive assets—are often the first casualties in a fiscally austere environment. As resources become increasingly constrained and the competition for those resources increases, personnel support programs will likely be viewed as low-hanging fruit. As the Services examine tradeoffs between modern weapons and personnel support, the risk to the morale of the force will increase. This unpredictable environment may lead Servicemembers to question whether they can trust the organization to act in their best interests.[20] If Servicemembers lose trust and confidence in the military institution, their commitment to the organization will fade along with joint readiness.

Similarly, inter-Service rivalries and a subsequent decrease in interorganizational trust are starting to emerge. As the country resets its military after 15 years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, the reduction

Maritime special operations forces prepare for mission during training exercise aboard *Nimitz*-class aircraft carrier USS *George Washington*, September 2014 (U.S. Navy/Everett Allen)

in manpower and budget constraints has triggered inter-Service rivalries that were always present but kept somewhat in check by a common enemy and large contingency operations funding from Congress. For example, the Army and Air Force's perpetual battle over close air support simmered throughout the latter half of the war on terror, spilling into the open briefly in 2007 in the fight over unmanned aerial vehicle support. In today's fiscally constrained environment the problem has reemerged, with one author noting that Army aviation officers do not believe that the Air Force, when employing Predator and Reaper aircraft, is responsive to the needs of the ground forces.[21]

The inter-Service rivalries and lack of trust also extend to the strategic level as detailed by Mark Perry in a *Politico* article. In particular, Perry described the release of the AirSea Battle doctrine—which became part of Pentagon policy

in 2010—as primarily an Air Force and Navy strategy to integrate capabilities and ensure freedom of action against a potential adversary, such as China in the Pacific. The Army's subsequent realization that the new doctrine would mean less budget money to reset itself following the war chilled relations between the Army Chief of Staff and his fellow Service chiefs.[22] Put another way, at the same time the Services should be trying to do more with less to fight the next enemy, they are expending time and resources chipping away at the interorganizational trust that should underpin the future joint force.

Recommendations

The history of joint warfare in the United States clearly demonstrates the key role trust plays in ensuring unity of action in joint operations. To reinvigorate this trust as the character of war and the Services change in the

21st century, we offer the following recommendations.

First, each of the Services must continue to develop leaders who are skilled in building trust, both interpersonal and interorganizational, and measure their performance in doing so. Of course, commanders must inculcate internal, person-based trust within their organizations to achieve operational excellence on and off the battlefield. However, these leaders should also possess an understanding of the role that trust plays in joint operations and ensure that their personnel and organizations execute in a manner that engenders trust with the rest of the joint force. In reality, this recommendation is not new—it is a core concept of mission command and identified as a Desired Leader Attribute.[23] Our suggestion, however, that the Services document a commander's ability to build trust internally and externally, is new.

Commanding officer of USS *Ronald Reagan* talks to *Reagan* Sailors at Stomp Out Sexual Assault 5k run on Naval Air Station North Island, April 2013 (U.S. Navy/Omar Powell)

Second, the topic of trust should be stressed in the curriculum at every level of professional military education. While commanders set the tone for their organizations, educating Soldiers, Marines, Sailors, and Airmen on the value of trust in successful joint actions should inject the concept into the sinew of U.S. military might. To wit, redoubling efforts to integrate and expand interagency personnel in military education and training programs emphasizing the importance of trust will lay the groundwork for unified actions of the future. Building a government capable of unified action on the 21st-century battlefield depends on the military and interagency categorically trusting each other, and a professional military education system should facilitate this vision from the ground up.

Third, as outlined in the 2015 National Military Strategy, the Joint Staff should continue to develop and expand

its "campaign of trust" to address potential challenges within the joint force. By emphasizing mutual respect and trust, we will have a more ready and resilient joint force. Ideally, this campaign should identify the key components or guiding principles for policies and programs that foster interpersonal and interorganizational trust with the joint force. This would be a comprehensive campaign that promotes trust across the Armed Forces, interagency, and other partners to enhance interoperability and interdependence. Additionally, the campaign should serve as a gatekeeper of sorts to make sure we do not abandon the processes that have served us so well in building today's joint force. For example, in these challenging economic times, the campaign would remind leaders of the importance of large-scale, and expensive, joint exercises that have so effectively taught generations of Servicemembers

and their allies to live, trust, and fight together—before they went to war.

Fourth, senior leadership should continue to promote policies and programs that sustain our all-volunteer force, the singular advantage for our nation. During and following the Vietnam war, public trust in the U.S. military was at an all-time low. A significant number of draftees did not want to serve and faced hostile environments when they returned home. The all-volunteer force changed that. By building trust and keeping faith with our current Servicemembers and their families, we will inspire the next generation of joint leaders to join our ranks in service to their country. By caring for our military family today, we will ensure a viable joint force tomorrow. Operating on a foundation of trust, these policies and programs will support our military family throughout the military life cycle—from the time they enter service until they

transition and reintegrate back into civilian life. How we care for our military family will not only build trust among our Servicemembers but should also engender trust among the American public.

Trust is the grease that facilitates effective joint operations. Without it there is friction, whether interpersonal or interorganizational. But with it, we can ensure a smooth-running joint machine well into the 21st century. **JFQ**

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Notes

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