Operationalizing Mission Command
Leveraging Theory to Achieve Capability

By KATHLEEN CONLEY

As the U.S. military emerges from more than a decade of combat experience, two factors hold particular promise for meeting future military needs. First, the joint force has developed a cadre of strong leaders who have successfully adapted in the face of a bewilderingly complex array of challenges.[1] Second, it has compiled a record of enhanced mission achievement associated with dramatic increases in networking and information processing capability.[2] These factors provide the basis for shaping a better integrated and more effective joint force, one that draws inspiration not only from existing doctrine, field experience, and academic research, but especially from key leaders who advocate fundamental change.

Significantly, General Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recently published a Mission Command White Paper.[3]

The paper asserts that, although Mission Command is found in current doctrine, more must be done to cope with an "increasingly complex and uncertain operating environment" and that the "conduct of Mission Command requires adaptable leaders at all levels."[4] In addition to presenting his Mission Command leadership philosophy, General Dempsey seems to be calling for a paradigm shift in the manner in which military leaders relate to their organizations and to the operating environment.

In today's military, leaders typically do not adapt their preferences and style to the organization—rather, the organization adapts to the leader. Leader preferences stem from a collective set of personal experiences, and they reflect informed judgments as to what methods work best. The result has normally been a hierarchical command and control (C2) system. General Dempsey's paradigm shift is that in the future, leaders must focus on adapting their preferences and style not only to the mission but also to the situation. In other words, the situation itself—not leader preferences—may become the overriding factor in determining an organization's C2 approach.

This expansion of an approach with an honorable history in U.S. military lore—particularly as applied by irregular forces—is broadly consistent with the findings of a body of research known as C2 Agility. In general, a military unit is deemed to be "agile" if it can successfully respond to changed circumstances; Mission Command supports C2 Agility by encouraging decentralized decisionmaking fully informed by commander's intent. Furthermore, as General Dempsey specifically states, "Mission Command is not a mechanical process."[5] This statement implies that Mission Command is not a process that commanders can simply inspect and expect to achieve based upon a checklist of do's and don'ts. Rather, Mission Command, we suggest, is more dynamic, first requiring feedback on the effectiveness of the organization's current C2 approach. Based on this feedback, organizations and their leaders should be able to recognize the need for adjustments to the C2 approach. By making these needed changes, U.S. forces would be empowered to retain, regain, or improve effectiveness due to actual, perceived, or anticipated changes to the situation. Viewed in this manner, Mission Command becomes less a static state of being, and more the adoption of a dynamic process

Soldiers discuss training sustainment units for deployments to Afghanistan during First Army Sustainment Unit Logistics Training Symposium

U.S. Army (Michael M. Novogradac)

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for managing change as necessary, a key tool for adaptive leaders.

In fact, in calling for widespread adoption of the attributes of Mission Command, General Dempsey is doing something the joint force is familiar with in a leader: he is setting forth a new agenda, and he is providing insights on why his agenda is important. What may be less clear to many is that General Dempsey is asking the entire force—both commanders and those they command—to continue adapting, not directly to him and his preferences as a commander, but to a diverse, uncertain future operational environment.

Mission Command cannot be embraced and applied blindly. Operationalizing the new Mission Command vision requires that leaders across the force—and the organizations they command—be able to do three things both dynamically and routinely:

■ understand their organization's current C2 approach
■ detect significant changes in the environment or mission that indicate a new approach is needed
■ adapt the C2 approach appropriately and in a timely manner.

Developing and employing these capabilities will drive changes in doctrine, education, training, and operations throughout the joint force. However, there is currently no roadmap for making such sweeping changes across the board. This article aims to facilitate this important force-wide transition by sketching out the contours of such a map.

What Is a Command and Control Approach?

The concept of an "approach" to C2 is foreign to many, largely because a single approach is prevalent throughout the U.S. military. Students of C2 describe this familiar approach as hierarchical—one characterized by centralized decisionmaking authority, limited ability to share information, and limited ability to interact laterally and across organizational boundaries. Developed across a series of multinational research forums, figure 1 depicts these attributes graphically, with each component of the C2 approach falling on a separate axis.

The traditional hierarchical C2 approach falls near the origin of all three axes; C2 Agility theory postulates that this

approach has important advantages in some situations. Its attractiveness largely stems from the fact that authority and information travel along predictable pathways. These pathways are straightforward and direct. Both command relationships and accountability are simplified: among commanders and staffs, the critical relationships are between superior and subordinate; among units, the connections are between supported and supporting organizations.

Beyond this typical approach, however, the history of warfare as well as recent operations are replete with examples of alternate, often ad hoc, command and control approaches that diverge from this single standard. A vivid example of a C2 approach that occupies the box labeled "Edge" in figure 1 comes from the battle of Mazar-e Sharif, Afghanistan, in 2001. Special Forces Operational Detachment A (SFODA) 595 shared certain decision rights with entities not under U.S. command, notably the Northern Alliance Force, led by Afghan General Abdul Rashid Dostum. In addition, highly variable patterns of interaction enabled SFODA

595's C2 element to communicate directly with the Combined Air Operations Center and Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) aircraft. Lastly, creative distribution of information between these nonstandard formations and their supporting logistics elements enabled a 21st-century logistics system to deliver needed saddles, horse feed, and blankets to special operations forces and to provide AK-47s and 7.62mm ammunition to Northern Alliance fighters.[6]

As this illustrates, and as General Dempsey points out, the security environment is becoming increasingly dynamic and complex. This will stress the hierarchical approach along all three dimensions of the C2 approach space or "cube." Mission Command responds by advocating decentralized execution based upon mission type orders, increased sharing of information both horizontally and laterally, and networked interaction with a greater number and variety of all types of organizations—any of which can support or be supported by any other.

General Dempsey describes three key attributes of this approach—understanding,

Figure 1.
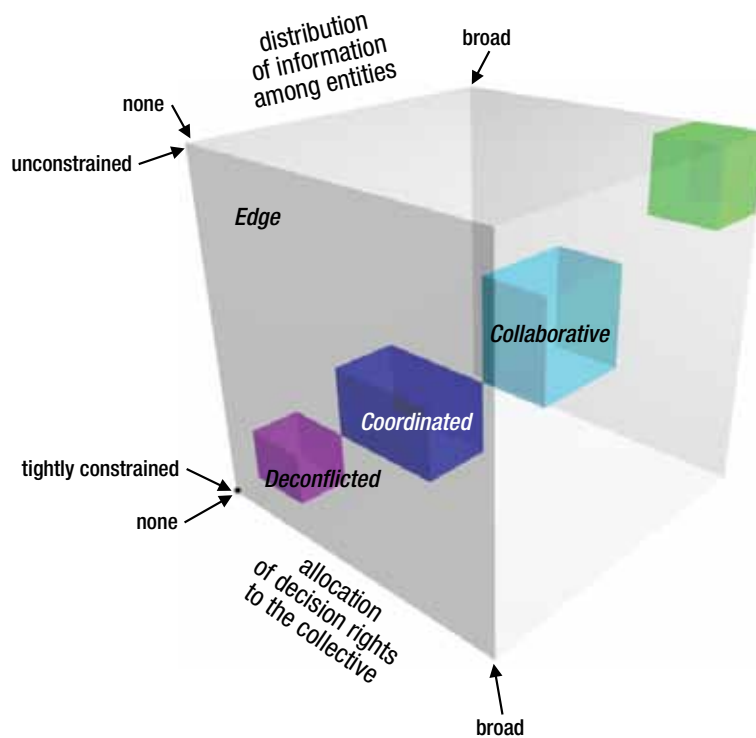
Source: David S. Alberts, Reiner K. Huber, and James Moffat, *NATO NEC C2 Maturity Model* (Washington, DC: CCRP, 2010), 66, available at <www.dodccrp.org/files/N2C2M2_web_optimized.pdf>.

intent, and trust. He also stresses the importance of gaining the proper situational context and of commander's intent. General Dempsey notes:

Importantly, in Joint Force 2020, leaders at every level must contribute to the common operating assessment of context, "co-creating it" as operations progress and situations change. Created knowledge at the point of action is critical to operational and tactical agility. Understanding in mission command must flow from both bottom-up and top-down. Shared context is a critical enabler of . . . intent.[7]

Far from being a minor subset of a more general, hierarchical C2 approach, Mission Command is seen by General Dempsey as becoming a "common attribute" of the military profession. This implies that Mission Command can be taught and learned—but how? How do leaders—each of whom General Dempsey has challenged to become a "living example of Mission Command"—know that their current approach is no longer effective? As the environment morphs from day to day, how do leaders and staffs know they have decentral-

ized enough (but not too much), that they have shared enough information while still maintaining necessary operational security, and that their organizations are interacting appropriately with other organizations without creating mission-threatening vulnerabilities?

Students of C2 describe this continual reassessment and timely, effective, and prudent adjustment of one's C2 approach as C2 Agility. Rather than a single approach, Mission Command thus can be seen as a continuum of approaches, with the choice of approach dependent upon a given environment and mission, as shown in figure 2.

Viewed in this way, the cognitive task becomes pivotal, requiring constant reassessment of the complexity of "self" or organization and of the complexity and uncertainty of the operational environment. In terms of the C2 approach space, this cognitive task can be restated as follows: "How do I know where my organization is in the C2 approach space, whether (and where) it should move, and how to get there?"

The dilemma for operators then becomes how to adjust the C2 approach as conditions change—in order to bring about what General Dempsey describes as

the highest state possible (under existing conditions), wherein "shared context and understanding is implicit and intuitive between hierarchical and lateral echelons of command, enabling decentralized and distributed formations to perform as if they were centrally coordinated."[8] In terms of the C2 Agility theory, the question becomes: "What specifically must change if I am to move from one C2 approach to another?"

What Lies Ahead?

We are only beginning to formulate these questions—the answers will take time. But as this discussion demonstrates, senior U.S. military leaders recognize a need to address C2 as an urgent, critical issue. General Dempsey's Mission Command White Paper sets the direction, while C2 Agility theory complements Mission Command by providing a helpful framework that can be used to guide its implementation. Here, both operators and researchers have a clear opportunity for collaboration. Working in tandem, they can accelerate the joint force's implementation of true information-age C2 by leveraging the research accomplished over the past two decades.

Much work lies ahead for C2 researchers—for example, instrumented environments should be developed to give commanders and staffs experience with operating in different regions of the "Mission Command space." In addition, tools can be developed to enable visualization of information sharing and collaborative behaviors—and to demonstrate the "so what?" of Mission Command. It should also be possible to recognize the existing level of trust within an organization, and to identify and teach methods for enhancing trust.

For operators and commanders, this discussion reveals an opportunity to seize the initiative. By embracing the C2 Agility concept as the basis for implementing Mission Command, operators will gain a framework through which it can be discussed, evaluated, taught, exercised, measured, and improved. Through the lens of Agile Mission Command, they can learn to see Mission Command as a way to "task organize C2"—just as they routinely think of task organizing forces and resources to achieve mission effectiveness. Mission Command thus ceases being a static concept (that is, defined as decentralized execution based on mission type orders) and takes on a dynamic

Figure 2.
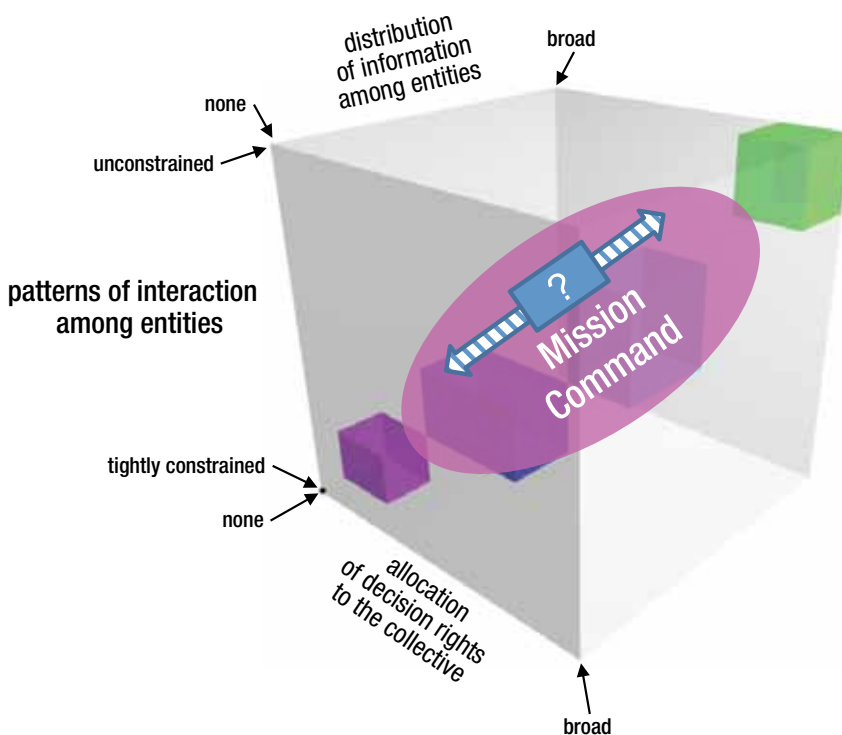
Soldier explains mitigation strategy to members of Joint Task Force 71 during command and control training

fluidity (developing ever greater adaptability, critical thinking, and independent, rapid decisionmaking).

Many leaders and organizations are using the principles of Mission Command in current combat and other activities. Unfortunately, such applications are unique to units and have not been institutionalized in joint doctrine and training. General Dempsey and others clearly see the need to refine these successful principles into Mission Command and have them pervade leader development and organizational design. By visualizing the C2 approach space, Agile C2 theory, when operationalized, would enable joint forces to systematically characterize their current C2 approach within the range of approaches covered by Mission Command; issue enabling directions for the selected approach; and, if necessary, choose which dimension(s) along which to alter the current approach. In addition, the theory highlights that changes in the environment or mission could indicate the need for a new C2 approach. Agile joint forces should understand and be able to exploit this theory, using it to develop procedures for migration to a new approach at the

appropriate moment. These procedures could be validated in operational experiments that would serve to translate C2 Agility theory into Mission Command practice. Lessons learned from these experiments would enable the tenets of Mission Command to be inculcated into doctrine, education, and training, including exercises at all levels. Only then will General Dempsey's ambitious vision become a reality. **JFQ**

N O T E S

[1] Nathan Minami et al., "Beyond Reconciliation: Developing Faith, Hope, Trust, and Unity in Iraq," *Military Review* 91, no. 2 (March–April 2011), 52–59.

[2] Daniel Gonzales et al., *Network-Centric Operations Case Study: The Stryker Brigade Combat Team* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2005), available at <www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG267-1.pdf>.

[3] Martin E. Dempsey, Mission Command White Paper, April 3, 2012, available at <www.jcs.mil/content/files/2012-04/042312114128_CJCS_Mission_Command_White_Paper_2012_a.pdf>.

[4] Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, August 11, 2011), defines *Mission Command* as "the conduct of military operations through decentralized execution based upon mission-type orders."

[5] Dempsey, 4.

[6] William Knarr and Robert Richbourg, *Learning from the First Victory of the 21st Century: Mazar-e Sharif: An Educational/Training Resource Guide* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2008).

[7] Dempsey, 4.

[8] Ibid.