



Beyond *Auftragstaktik*

The Case Against Hyper-Decentralized Command

By Trent J. Lythgoe

The U.S. Army's mission command doctrine has sparked considerable discussion and criticism among Service professionals. Most agree that mission command is the right approach for commanding and controlling Army formations. However, some argue that the Army's de facto implementation of mission

command fails to live up to its intellectual predecessor, *Auftragstaktik*,¹ a Prusso-German command philosophy that emphasizes decentralization, commander's intent, and low-level initiative.² These critics maintain that the Army must decentralize command as much as possible in order to realize the *Auftragstaktik* ideal.

This article sets out to show that the argument for hyper-decentralized command is flawed and that the concept itself is dangerous. The case for hyper-decentralization relies on a misinterpretation of *Auftragstaktik*, which underappreciates the role of planning and coordinating in Prusso-German warfighting. Moreover, decentralizing as much as possible is no guarantee of command effectiveness and is often harmful. This is not to say, however, that the current approach is effective. Army doctrine advises commanders to “balance” centralization and

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Israeli gun boat passes through Straits of Tiran near Sharm el-Sheikh during Six-Day War, June 8, 1967 (Israel Government Press Office/Yaacov Agor)

decentralization. This static approach fails to account for the dynamic nature of operational context. It also frequently results in overly centralized control because many Army commanders lack trust in subordinates, are uncomfortable with uncertainty, and are risk-averse.

Ultimately, mission command must enable forces to win by bridging the gap between doctrine and operational context. It must resolve the inherent tension between centralization and decentralization. Mission command must allow forces to mass combat power on decisive points while remaining adaptable to emergent opportunities and threats. Perhaps most important, it must enable the commander to operate in diverse, dynamic, and violently entropic operational contexts. An *iterative approach* to mission command is necessary to satisfy these requirements. An iterative approach would allow the commander to move continually between centralization and decentralization based on the demands of the operational context. By iterating continuously through a

cycle of four activities—synchronization, dissemination, initiative, and reporting—Army commanders would be able to continuously adjust to the demands of the operational contexts within which their formations must fight.

Auftragstaktik and Moltke's Dialectic

Born in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars and rooted in the theories of Carl von Clausewitz, the philosophy of Auftragstaktik was an exceptionally effective tactical innovation. One factor that made Auftragstaktik successful was its emphasis on lowering decision thresholds. By allowing company- and field-grade leaders to act without first seeking permission, the Prussians/Germans increased their tactical decision cycle speeds. In World War II, the German *Wehrmacht* gave a spectacular demonstration of Auftragstaktik's tactical potency. The Germans combined Auftragstaktik with well-trained soldiers, aggression, and mechanized formations.

The Wehrmacht penetrated, exploited, encircled, and collapsed its hapless opponents with ruthless efficiency.

The U.S. Army explicitly modeled its mission command doctrine on Auftragstaktik for good reason.³ An unfortunate side effect of this linkage is that many Service leaders evaluate mission command vis-à-vis Auftragstaktik rather than on its own terms. They argue that mission command falls short because it fails to live up to the Prusso-German ideal. These criticisms follow a predictable script. They begin by claiming the Army's adoption of mission command is deficient. Next is a brief history of the Prusso-German way of warfighting that characterizes Auftragstaktik as a completely decentralized command philosophy. Critics then contrast the ostensibly decentralized, improvisational character of Auftragstaktik with the Army's centralized, methodical approach. Finally, the proposed fix is hyper-decentralization—lowering decision thresholds as much as possible—to bring mission

command in line with what critics imagine Auftragstaktik to be. The problem with this argument is that it relies on a flawed interpretation that equates Auftragstaktik with decentralization. While decentralization was an important part of the Prusso-German way of war-fighting, it was not the sole factor that made Auftragstaktik effective.

Helmuth von Moltke the Elder is widely credited with institutionalizing Auftragstaktik in the Prussian/German army. His famous dictum that “no plan of operations extends with any certainty beyond the first contact with the main hostile force” is a favorite among mission command critics.⁴ However, Moltke’s views on command were more nuanced than his famous quotation suggests. For example, he observed that “it is always a serious matter to abandon, without the most pressing necessity, a once settled and well-devised plan for a new and unprepared scheme.”⁵ Moltke resolves the apparent conflict between this notion and his more famous dictum by acknowledging the dialectical interaction between planning and reality:

[S]trategy affords the tactics the means for fighting and the probability of winning by the direction of armies to their meeting place of combat. On the other hand, strategy appropriates the success of every engagement and builds upon it. The demands of strategy grow silent in the face of a tactical victory and adapt themselves to the newly created situation.⁶

For Moltke, higher level planning sets the conditions for lower level actions by creating favorable conditions for those actions. Upon execution, however, the results of lower level actions drive subsequent higher level planning. Though Moltke was writing about the interaction between the levels of war, the dialectic can also be seen in German tactical and operational warfare. Planning drives action, the results of action drive subsequent planning, and the cycle continues.

The Battle of Sedan is a characteristic example of Moltke’s dialectic at the tactical level. In May 1940, the German XIX Panzer Corps—consisting of the 1st, 2nd,

and 10th Panzer divisions and led by the legendary Heinz Guderian—spearheaded the advance through the Ardennes. Knowing they would have to cross the River Meuse at Sedan, Guderian’s corps had planned and rehearsed crossing operations extensively before the campaign. Upon arriving at the Meuse on May 12, Guderian’s chief of staff wrote and issued a detailed operations order to synchronize crossing operations. The Panzer divisions did the same. The 1st Panzer Division order, for example, included a fires synchronization matrix, a centralized coordination tool that critics would view as anathema to Auftragstaktik.⁷

Despite being well planned, the crossing was only partially successful. Guderian’s three Panzer divisions began crossing at three bridgeheads during the afternoon of May 13. At the center bridgehead, 1st Panzer had good success and penetrated several kilometers into the French rear. On the flanks, however, the defending French 55th Infantry Division checked the 2nd and 10th Panzer attacks. That night, 1st Panzer commander Friedrich Kirchner pressed his attack even further. Though he had no orders to do so, Kirchner’s aggressive actions were entirely within Guderian’s intent that “once armoured formations are out on the loose they must be given the green light to the very end of the road.”⁸ But Kirchner’s thrust had placed 1st Panzer in a vulnerable position. Lack of progress on the flanks left 1st Panzer occupying a narrow salient with little more than an infantry brigade and no armor.⁹

The French, meanwhile, had spent the night reorganizing from their initial setback. By the morning of May 14, they were ready to counterattack with a combined tank and infantry task force. Guderian himself had crossed the river and was forward with 1st Panzer when German reconnaissance reported the massing French tanks. While Kirchner prepared to meet the French assault, Guderian raced back to the bridgehead and directed his staff to rapidly move 2nd Panzer Regiment’s tanks across the river to support 1st Panzer. Guderian’s speedy reorganization succeeded; the German tanks narrowly beat the French to a key

ridge near the town of Bulson, and the high ground proved decisive terrain from which the Germans were able to repel the French counterattack.¹⁰

Guderian’s victory at Sedan was as much a result of planning, preparation, and coordination as it was of improvisation and initiative. Detailed planning and rehearsals set the conditions for the river crossing. However, uneven success during the initial crossings resulted in a substantially different situation than Guderian’s initial plan had envisioned. Still, Guderian and his staff were able to rapidly adapt to the changed situation and coordinate the necessary changes to deal with it effectively. Those who advocate for hyper-decentralized command too often ignore the centralized aspects that made the German approach work at Sedan and elsewhere. They herald the aggression and initiative demonstrated by Kirchner but minimize or ignore the planning and rehearsals that made the crossing possible in the first place. Ignored too is the hasty coordination to get armor support forward, which saved Kirchner’s aggressive penetration from being a crippling defeat.

The Dangers of Hyper-Decentralization

The idea that Auftragstaktik is a hyper-decentralized command philosophy persists despite contrary evidence.¹¹ Many Army officers have come to believe that decentralization is the most important tenet of mission command. For example, one Army major writes that mission command is “the practice of decentralizing decision-making and authority down to the lowest possible echelon.”¹² This obsession with decentralization is not only ahistorical but also potentially dangerous. There are axiomatic reasons to be wary of hyper-decentralization.

First, decentralization is not inherently advantageous. It is true that in many cases, lower decision thresholds are necessary for operational effectiveness.¹³ At the extreme, however, a completely decentralized force is little more than an unruly mob. Beyond a certain point, more decentralization



Formation of F-35 Lightning IIs from 388th and 419th Fighter Wings stationed at Hill Air Force Base performs aerial maneuvers during combat power exercise over Utah Test and Training Range, November 19, 2018 (U.S. Air Force/Cory D. Payne)

impedes operational effectiveness rather than enables it. Second, the *operational context*—the mission, the enemy, and the environment within which formations fight—is a critical factor in determining how a commander should organize command. Decentralized command is not desirable or effective in every operational context.¹⁴

The Israeli experiences in 1956 and 1967 illustrate the limits of decentralization. In the 1950s, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) adopted German tactical doctrine with the aim of fighting a maneuver war against potential aggressors.¹⁵ A rapid and decisive blitzkrieg campaign was an ideal solution to Israel's dual problems of being surrounded by enemies and lacking the depth necessary for a strategic defense. The Israelis decentralized command even more than the Germans, and this hyper-decentralized philosophy was tested in the 1956 Suez Crisis. IDF maneuver brigades operated nearly independently from one another

with little more than mission orders and commander's intent. The results, however, were middling. While some brigades were successful, others were not. Brigades did not mutually support each other, and fratricide was rampant. Although the IDF prevailed, Israeli soldiers paid in blood for the lack of coordination.¹⁶

After the war, IDF commanders decided that brigades had been given too much independence. The Israelis subsequently revamped their command philosophy by *increasing* centralization to coordinate operations more effectively. The IDF implemented this new approach in the 1967 Six-Day War. This time, division-level commanders ensured brigades were mutually supported, and corps-level commanders synchronized actions among divisions. The results were nothing short of spectacular.¹⁷ IDF commanders demonstrated the value of being able to dynamically centralize or decentralize command based on the operational context. In the Sinai, for

instance, Brigadier General Israel Tal's division conducted an armored penetration and exploitation along the Mediterranean coast toward El Arish. Faulty intelligence and unexpected events made Tal's fight a series of improvisations that in the end only vaguely resembled his original plan. Major-General Ariel Sharon's division, on the other hand, conducted a tightly controlled set-piece attack on the Egyptian strongpoint at Umm-Qatef. Both commanders were successful because they adapted the IDF command philosophy to suit their unique operational contexts.¹⁸

The IDF experience demonstrates both the limits of decentralization and the importance of considering the operational context. The principal shortcoming of hyper-decentralized command is that it drives commanders to decentralize as much as possible in all contexts. Yet not all operational contexts demand decentralization. This argument is elaborated below, but it bears mentioning the German case at Kursk (1943), where

decentralization and individual initiative mattered little in the teeth of a well-planned and prepared Soviet defense. Commanders must consider the operational demands of a given situation when determining where to place decision thresholds.

Army Doctrine: A Tale of Two Traditions

Command is a means to an end, which is to *win*. The character of command is therefore strongly influenced by the methods by which winning is achieved—that is, a force’s fighting doctrine. A command philosophy must bridge the gap between how a commander *wants* to fight (doctrine) and how the force *must* fight given the operational context. The Army’s fighting doctrine presents a unique challenge because it is an amalgamation of two traditions—the Jominian and the Clausewitzian. Each tradition views winning through a different conceptual lens. This dichotomy leads to different command philosophies and an inherent tension in how Army doctrine approaches mission command.

The Jominian tradition subscribes to the “one great principle” of war—to throw the mass of one’s force on the decisive point. The Jominian imperative to “arrange these masses . . . at the proper time and with energy” requires synchronization, centralized control, and unity of effort.¹⁹ For Jominians, command primarily *coordinates* the application of combat power. The centralized control required to do so, however, risks sacrificing adaptability. Moltke’s dictum underscores the idea that the chaos of battle will eventually render preplanned controls obsolete, at which point they merely limit freedom of action. Lower level commanders are unable to adapt to changed conditions without permission, and enemies can exploit this inaction. Thus, the principal problem for Jominian command is *how to coordinate the application of combat power at decisive points without sacrificing adaptability*.

The Jominian tradition’s answer to the adaptability problem has historically been a technologically centered effort

to push better situational awareness up the chain of command. The idea is that technologically enabled higher level commanders can make decisions with the big picture in mind but at the speed of adaptability. These efforts, however, have largely proved fruitless and even counterproductive.²⁰ Technology has in some ways inhibited rather than enabled command by creating enormous information appetites that lower level commanders must continually feed.²¹

The second approach is the Clausewitzian tradition. Clausewitzians are skeptical of coordination because combat is inherently uncertain, and reality is unlikely to unfold according to any plan.²² For Clausewitzians, improvisation is necessary to cope with unanticipated conditions, and therefore *adaptability* should be command’s central concern.²³ Since lower level commanders will be the first to recognize the need to adapt, higher level commanders enable adaptability by allowing their subordinates to act independently. The risk is that lower level commanders may fracture the higher commander’s unity of effort. Each lower level commander may act correctly according to his or her understanding of local problems but without appreciating how this might affect the higher level situation. Divergent actions may render disparate units unable to provide mutual support and make them vulnerable to defeat in detail. The Clausewitzian approach, therefore, has the opposite problem of the Jominian approach: *how to adapt to the uncertainty of combat while retaining the ability to coordinate the application of combat power at decisive points*.

The Clausewitzian tradition’s answer to its coordination problem is implicit control enabled by shared understanding and commander’s intent. The idea is that higher and lower level commanders come to a shared understanding of what needs to be done based on the higher commander’s intent, then use this understanding as a conceptual handrail when circumstances change. This is said to enable “decentralized and distributed formations to perform as if they were centrally coordinated.”²⁴

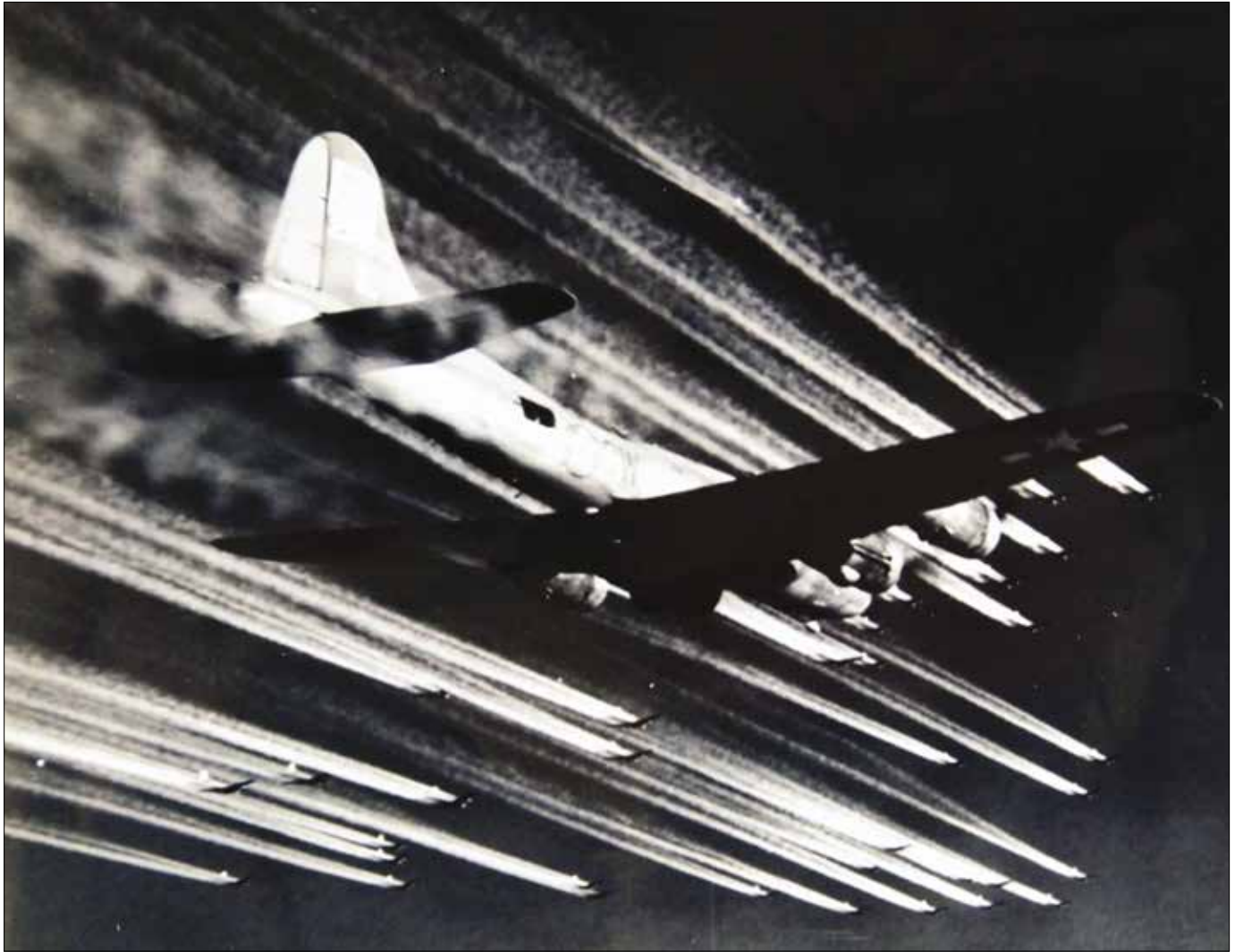
The problem with implicit control is that it degrades over time. Commanders formulate their intent and build a common understanding with subordinates based on a shared visualization of the future situation. This estimate, however, is no more likely to be accurate than the one that underpins Jominian controls. Combat is violently entropic; it relentlessly moves toward disorder and chaos. The commander’s intent and shared understanding may *initially* synchronize action. But as disorder increases, reality diverges from the shared visualization. The implicit synchronization of otherwise disconnected actions erodes and eventually ceases. Unless commanders and subordinates periodically refresh their shared understanding, they will eventually cease to be on the same conceptual page. Implicit controls have the same limitation as the explicit controls favored by the Jominians; they have a short half-life in combat. In other words, the only thing that will make formations perform “as if they were centrally coordinated” is to centrally coordinate them.

Doctrinal and De Facto Shortcomings

The Army’s competing concepts of command create a paradox: neither centralization nor decentralization is independently sufficient, yet both are necessary. The Army’s command philosophy must provide enough control to synchronize combat power at decisive points, but at the same time be decentralized enough to deal with the uncertainty and chaos of battle.

Unfortunately, Army doctrine fails to resolve this tension in both theory and practice. It advises commanders to “use the guiding principles of mission command to balance the art of command with the science of control.”²⁵ This “balancing” approach imagines a continuum of command with decentralization at one extreme and centralization at the other. The commander adjusts the level of control up or down based on the situation.²⁶

In theory, the balancing approach is a modest (if still flawed) improvement over hyper-decentralization. It at least directs the commander to consider operational



B-17 leaves trails over Brunswick, Germany, during World War II (U.S. Army Signal Corps/Library of Congress)

context to determine the degree of control necessary. Its weakness, however, is that it is missing the entire latter half of Moltke's dialectic. It describes how control limits adaptability but fails to describe how adaptability must also shape control. In practice, the balancing approach frequently results in excessive control. Army commanders tend to overcontrol because they either lack trust in subordinates, are risk-averse, or both.

Adjusting the level of control based on trust (or lack thereof) is the same inward orientation error seen in hyper-decentralization. That is, it structures command based on internal concerns rather than operational demands. Moreover, it makes little sense. The purpose of decentralization is to increase adaptability in response to uncertainty. If

we accept that war is inherently chaotic and uncertain, then we must also accept that some decentralization is required to win. Therefore, *trust is required to win*. Commanders who do not trust subordinates enough to decentralize are at a severe disadvantage. Lack of trust cannot be mitigated with additional controls.

While tightening control based on risk is a sound practice, too often commanders impose excessive controls because they are either risk-averse or because they mistake *risk* for *uncertainty*. Risk is a function of the probability that an event will happen and the consequences if it does. For example, a commander may judge that a subordinate unit that advances beyond a certain point may be vulnerable to counterattack and beyond the range of mutual support.

If such a scenario is likely to happen (probability) and could result in that unit's destruction (consequences), then a control (such as a limit of advance) is prudent.

Nevertheless, the urge to overcontrol is strong. One reason is risk aversion.²⁷ Research suggests Army leaders are particularly risk-averse. Officers selected to attend the Army War College score lower than the general population on openness to experience using the Five Factor Model personality test, and those selected for brigade command score even lower.²⁸ Research on personality and risk-taking shows that openness to experience correlates with less risk-taking behavior.²⁹

Commanders also overcontrol because they are uncomfortable with uncertainty. Risk is not necessarily higher

under conditions of uncertainty, but commanders often perceive it to be because they lack the information necessary to estimate risk. Many commanders instinctively tighten controls, *but this is precisely the opposite of what they should do*. Uncertainty increases the possibility of unforeseen threats and opportunities. Lower decision thresholds enable lower level leaders to respond quickly to these emergent demands, while more centralized control limits their ability to do so.

Operational Context and Iterative Command

The idea that the Army's command philosophy must bridge the gap between fighting doctrine and operational context creates two challenges. First, the philosophy must resolve the tension between the Jominian and Clausewitzian imperatives. Second, it must do so in whatever operational context Army forces must fight. Adapting to the operational context is the more formidable task. While Army fighting doctrine is relatively stable, operational context is nearly the opposite. Operational context is *diverse, dynamic, and violently entropic*. Each operational situation is unique, constantly evolving, and continually moving toward disorder.

Neither hyper-decentralization nor the balancing approach has the means to address these challenges. Hyper-decentralization is explicitly biased toward the Clausewitzian imperative, and as a result it fails to account for synchronization and mass. It is inwardly oriented on maximum decentralization rather than outwardly oriented on the demands of the operational context. The balancing approach is likewise inadequate. It does not account for the dialectic between adaptability and control and in practice frequently results in overly centralized control, which is no better than hyper-decentralization.

The solution to these problems is an *iterative approach* to mission command. This approach enables the commander to move continually between centralization and decentralization based on the demands of the operational context. The iterative approach is a continuously

repeating cycle of four activities: synchronization, dissemination, initiative, and reporting.

Synchronization is the process of implementing the minimum necessary control to mass combat power at decisive points and maintain mutual support while preserving as much freedom as possible for subordinates. Importantly, *minimum necessary control* is not the same as *minimal control*. The operational context drives how much control is minimally necessary. In some cases—such as a combined arms breach or an air assault—the minimum controls will be necessarily stringent. In all cases, however, the commander must avoid overcontrolling and should decentralize as quickly as the need to control diminishes.

The second activity, *dissemination*, involves the higher commander communicating his or her intent and mission orders to subordinates. Commander's intent and mission orders should be short, easily understood, and contain the minimum necessary control measures to enable synchronization. When disseminating orders, commanders should not rely exclusively on voice and data communications. The best commanders move around the battlefield and communicate their intent to subordinates face-to-face.

The third activity is *initiative*. Commanders empower subordinates to take the initiative to respond to emergent conditions. Subordinates seize fleeting opportunities and mitigate emergent threats immediately and effectively when they do not have to seek permission or await directions from their higher command. Initiative allows units to adapt to uncertainty and change.

Finally, *reporting* means subordinates communicate information rapidly and accurately to the higher commander. Reporting mitigates the risk of units acting on their own initiative. By communicating and reporting, subordinates allow the commander to update his or her visualization of the battle and determine what additional decisions are required to maintain mutual support and unity of effort across the formation. The commander relies on this updated visualization to *resynchronize* the force, and the

iterative cycle begins again. Each cycle is an opportunity for the commander to adjust the level of control. As the operational context changes, the commander can continually adjust his or her command approach to compensate.

Iterative command is in some ways already “out there” in the force. Commanders already synchronize, disseminate, take initiative, and report. The real change is the mental shift required from both junior and senior leaders to make iterative command work. Junior leaders often believe mission command means no higher level control and perceive reporting requirements as micromanagement. These misconceptions must be dispelled. Mission command is not equivalent to minimal control; some situations require more control and some less. Likewise, reporting requirements are not micromanagement. Reporting is necessary for the higher commander to create an accurate visualization, resynchronize the force, and maintain unity of effort.

Senior commanders must also change how they think about mission command. They must accept that mission command is both top-down and bottom-up. It is top-down in that higher commanders synchronize the activities of subordinate units. However, it is bottom-up in that subordinate initiative drives resynchronization. The higher commander must be responsive to and support lower level initiative. In this way, lower level initiative “pulls” higher level synchronization rather than the opposite and more conventional “push” from higher to lower. This arrangement may feel alien to many senior commanders who prefer the more conventional “higher says, lower does” hierarchical approach. However, allowing initiative to drive synchronization is required for mission command to succeed.

Conclusion

Calls for the Army to adopt hyper-decentralized command are misplaced. The case for hyper-decentralized command rests on a misinterpretation of Auftragstaktik, which underestimates the importance of planning and control in the Prusso-German approach while

overestimating the importance of improvisation and low-level initiative. Moreover, hyper-decentralization provides no means to coordinate mutual support among units or mass combat power at decisive points. It relies on questionable assumptions regarding the degree to which the commander's intent and shared understanding can coordinate actions.

The Army's implementation of mission command is also problematic. Army doctrine's balancing approach fails to resolve the inherent tension between centralization and decentralization and often results in overly centralized control. But the solution to this problem is not hyper-decentralization. Though Auftragstaktik has some qualities worth emulating, it should not be the ideal for which the Army strives. The degree to which a command system mirrors that of the Prussians or Germans is less important than its usefulness in enabling Army forces to win.

Instead, the Army should adopt an iterative approach to mission command that allows the commander to empower subordinates to take disciplined initiative while retaining the ability to coordinate and mass combat power. These opposing but necessary imperatives cannot be achieved through hyper-decentralization. Nor can they be achieved through the balancing approach found in doctrine. An iterative approach based on a continual cycle of synchronization, dissemination, initiative, and reporting is the most promising way ahead for mission command. JFQ

Notes

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¹⁵ Gershon Hachohen, *The Six-Day War Was a One-Time Event*, BESA Center Perspectives No. 487 (Ramat Gan, Israel: The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, 2017), available at <www.infosperber.ch/data/attachements/BESA_Six-Day-War-One-Time-Event.pdf>.

¹⁶ Van Creveld, *Command in War*, 196–197.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 199.

¹⁸ Eric M. Hammel, *Six Days in June: How Israel Won the 1967 Arab-Israeli War* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992), 172–218, 228–242.

¹⁹ Baron Antoine-Henri De Jomini, *The Art of War*, trans. G.H. Mendell and W.P. Craighill (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1862), 70.

²⁰ Van Creveld, *Command in War*, 265–268.

²¹ Leonard Wong and Stephen J. Gerras, *Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, February 2015), 15–16.

²² Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael E. Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

²³ I am not arguing that these are Jomini's or Clausewitz's command philosophies, only that American interpretations of their respective theories of war create these command imperatives. Although American interpretations of Jomini's and Clausewitz's ideas frequently put them at odds, their theories are compatible in many ways. See Christopher Bassford, *Jomini and Clausewitz: Their Interaction, Clausewitz.com*, 1993, available at <www.clausewitz.com/readings/Bassford/Jomini/JOMINIX.htm>.

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