Overcoming Internal Resistance Within the Military Command Structure

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As General Patton, the American Commander of the Third Army, credited his soldiers for their victory over the Germans during the Second World War, he revealed a lot about his command through his words. “This ovation is not for me, George S. Patton – George S. Patton is simply a hook on which to hang the Third Army.”[1] The very essence of his command was centered on his larger-than-life personality. His soldiers were the action bearers of his intent, but he was their director. While other commanders may not be as eloquent, this fact stands true for any successful command. A commander’s forces are an image of himself and a projection of his personality. He, too, is inseparable from them; a symbolic head of the beast, which he must endeavor to tame. The aim of this essay is to demonstrate using historical evidence that human interaction is the source of internal resistance within the command structure and a commander’s clear understanding of his and his target group’s personal strengths and weaknesses is key to achieving success in command.

Command can be defined as the authority vested in an individual for the direction, coordination, and control of military forces and is very closely related to leadership and management.[2] Over the years, it has been broadly exercised under the two models of mission command and detailed command.[3] Since mission command has been the most emphasized style since the 1980s by leading modern militaries across the world, its concepts alone will be the foundation of this study. Mission command finds its roots in the Prussian-German doctrine of *Auftragstaktik*.[4] Its practice by German commanders allowed the Wehrmacht tactical and operational superiority over the allied forces during the initial stages of the Second World War.[5] Loosely translated as mission command, this German concept is based on the philosophy of decentralization of command at all levels, authorizing subordinate commanders to act independently even at the risk of disobedience as long as their actions are in line with the commander’s intent. It imposes greater responsibility and accountability on the subordinate commander as he is duty-bound to take action without seeking orders, in keeping with the commander’s intent.[6] Therefore, flexibility, delegation of authority and empowerment of subordinates are the central themes of mission command. The understanding of mission command is important as it provides a broad view of the expectations of the functionaries – the commander and his target group – of command.

Command is fundamentally a human endeavor which requires human elements. At the most basic level, the commander interacts with his target group to achieve success on the field. The commander exercises command over his forces through his plans prepared by his *staff officers* and actions of troops led by his *subordinate commanders*, and they form the key components of his target group. His staff officers and subordinate commanders are his immediate functionaries through whom he exercises his intent. Although troops are the final instrument through which the commander directs violence, they have been deliberately omitted from the target group as the purpose of this study is to concentrate only on command functions. It would be safe to assume that the commander does not have to deal with the basics of troop leadership. However, limiting the commander’s target group to his internal functionaries in today’s Contemporary Operating Environment (COE) is not sufficient as he is also required to influence audiences outside the organization. In relation to the COE, audiences external to the command structure would imply an external target group which is the state, the international community, and an existing alliance.[7] In their untiring efforts towards the quest for certainty in war, the commander and his target group find their greatest occupation.

Carl von Clausewitz, the Prussian general and military theorist, calls war the “province of uncertainty”.[8] Tapping the sources of uncertainty require the commander to deal with a series of tangible and intangible problems. Prior to any conflict, the commander’s solution to these uncertain events in the future lies in carefully drawn out tangible plans. However, the ability of his plans to survive contact depends on the intangible concept of *friction,* which is the sum of all factors that separates real war from war on paper.[9] Acknowledged by military historians as the greatest contribution by Clausewitz, his “unified concept of general friction” was further developed by the American military analyst Barry Watts to include “friction in the narrow sense of the resistance within one’s own forces” as one of its important and underlying factors.[10] He explains this factor as “internal resistance to effective action stemming from the interactions between the many men and machines making up one’s own forces”.[11] In the battlefield, behind every machine, for each piece of hardware, and within every process lies a human who must ensure its optimum utilization. This factor raises the issue of human interaction in a command structure and the friction that arises thereof. It reinforces the fact that it is individuals who are the functionaries in a command structure and they are driven by intrinsic motives, fear and prejudices thereby producing friction and making the simple more complex.[12] Therefore, to improve interaction within the command structure, the commander must aim to understand the human spectrum of this structure which begins with him. In seeking a definite solution to the problem of internal resistance within the command structure, the Mission Command Doctrine of the United States Army defines three primary principles of mission command philosophy as *building cohesive teams through mutual trust, creating shared understanding* and *providing a clear commander’s intent.*[13] In keeping with these principles, the commander must seek a thorough understanding of his own self and that of his target group. The commander through this knowledge – of his and his target group’s personal strengths and weaknesses – and its effective use can turn this friction of resistance within own forces into a relative advantage over the enemy. However, before even attempting to understand his target group, the commander should first have complete self-knowledge so as to effectively use the tools of command.

Command Intent, Command Culture, and *Command Presence* are the tools available to the commander for the furtherance of his command.[14] Being the central figure of the command structure, it bears upon the commander to ensure that his intent is transmitted down to the lowest denominator of his force without losing its true meaning. The intent is the personal expression of the commander’s strategic view and its operational conduct.[15] At no point, should the commander’s own weaknesses interfere with the intent and his ability to command while his strengths should augment the intent’s achievement and the competence of his command. It must, therefore, be carefully articulated by the commander and correctly received by his target group. The commander’s self-knowledge will be instrumental in the intent’s unbiased and clear formulation while his personality, as perceived by the target group, will shroud it and its consequent action. Maintaining the sanctity of his intent as it flows down the chain of command becomes incumbent on the commander and he must ensure that his command structure is built upon shared understanding and mutual trust. The commander must, therefore, establish a cohesive *command climate* and ensure effective *command presence* both of which are a direct reflection of his personality.[16]

In his quest for competent command within the precincts of mission command, the commander must seek to create a favorable climate which fosters bonhomie, excites creativity, promotes initiative and unlocks human potential. A supportive climate within the organization is a must to build emotional muscle essential for success.[17] Creating the characteristics of the environment in which his command structure functions challenges the commander to reflect on his own personal strengths and weaknesses. His failure to harness his personality can create negativity and loss of initiative which is detrimental for mission command. As Hitler failed to temper the weaknesses of his personality towards the end of the Second World War, he created a climate of gloom, mistrust and intolerance within the German high command, sapping it of its famous initiative.[18]

Establishing an appropriate impression through bearing, and personal and professional conduct is known as command presence.[19] As the commander physically moves through his ranks and theatres, he creates the set and temper for his intent to be transmitted informally. Through his command presence, he institutes a suitable platform for his subordinates to comprehend and adapt to his intent.[20] This importance of command presence cannot be undermined and every commander is aware of this powerful tool’s potency. Since command presence is purely the commander’s persona exemplified, individuals unsure of their character strengths and weaknesses can make themselves appear unconfident, over dramatic, weak and even unsympathetic causing command presence to work

the other way around. Despite being an ideal example of constructive command presence, General Patton's failure to check his emotions resulted in his slapping a sick Private during the Second World War which nearly cost him his command and made him lose his credibility as a commander.[21] Establishing and pushing these conceptual boundaries, requires the commander to reinforce his character strengths and alleviate his personal weaknesses. They also require the commander to be aware of the limits of his human endurance within which he can effectively function.

The commander's ignorance of his mental and physical limitations can affect his ability to command effectively. Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, commander of the German Africa Corps brought his command similar difficulties during the peak of the North African campaign in the Second World War. In his endeavor to exercise forward command, he was almost always on the move barely managing a few hours of sleep daily.[22] Denying himself sleep and comfort by sleeping in the back of trucks, and pushing his body to its limits affected his health severely, and he was forced to leave the theater of operations on many occasions so as to convalesce back in Germany.[23] This affected his clarity of thought and decision-making ability as is evident from the unforgiving operational mistakes he made as a commander during the final stages of the African campaign.[24] In contrast, Field Marshall Bernard Law Montgomery, the commander of the British Eighth Army and Rommel's opponent in the African desert war, knew very well that his core function as a commander was sound decision-making followed up by effective action. He paid a great deal of attention to his physical health by ensuring that he ate and slept well at all costs and hence always travelled in his personal caravan in Africa and special train called 'Rapier' in England while visiting his troops prior to Operation Overlord.[25] Montgomery defeated Rommel's forces in North Africa and went on to lead the allied charge into Germany.[26] This comparison underscores the importance of knowing and establishing such simple personal limits to find an equilibrium for proper functioning as an individual on whose sound planning and decision-making the balance of war depends. Armed with self-knowledge, the commander is in a better position to capitalize on the strengths and hedge against the weaknesses of his target group within the command structure.

Commanders establish command structures in support of their command, the most important component of which is personnel – his target group. Likewise, the mission command system is based more on human characteristics than on equipment or procedures[27]. To ensure that every subordinate is equipped to undertake responsibility and takes prudent action while maintaining unity of effort within the commander's intent, mission command places great emphasis on shared understanding and mutual trust between commanders, their subordinates and staff.[28] For the purpose of this study, this delicate balance of human interactions from the commander's perspective will be divided into *commander – subordinates* and *commander – staff* relationships.

The ability of plans to survive contact depends on various factors, but the most important and often the most neglected factor is the commander's understanding of his subordinates' personality strengths and weaknesses. It is this intangible factor that shapes and modifies the plan on the battlefield. The commander must, therefore, invest a great deal in understanding his subordinates and fostering a smooth working *commander – subordinates relationship* towards successful command. Military history is strewn with examples of such successful relationships. During the height of the Second World War General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the supreme commander of the allied forces, understood this fact only too well as he faced multiple social challenges in his command structure. Maintaining the sanctity of the Alliance amidst aggressive subordinates – Generals Patton and Montgomery – with abrasive relations was his greatest worry besides the Germans.[29] Aware of his target group's weakness, he dealt them with tact, gave patient hearings to their mutual critical views and verbally agreed to their individual strategies and yet employed his generals efficiently while following his personally formulated plans.[30] Furthermore, he was cognizant of their military genius and their personal rivalry. He capitalized on this fact by allowing them to choose their own tactical objectives thereby turning mutual resentment into healthy competition. Eisenhower's knowledge of his commanders' personalities ensured that he was prepared to make tough and decisive choices at critical points in the war, like the appointment of commander of American forces in Operation Overlord and the grand allied deception at Pas de Calais.[31] Although Patton's qualities of aggressiveness, speed and the ability to always think of attack made him more suitable for command of American forces, Eisenhower believed that it made him unstable, volatile and difficult to control and therefore, chose a more somber General Bradley as a safer bet.[32] However, aware of the German high command's fear and respect for Patton, Eisenhower placed him in charge of the Third Army as a decoy making them believe that the invasion would take place at Pas de Calais since the German's were sure that it

would be Patton who would lead the invasion.[33] Eisenhower's keen knowledge of his subordinate commanders' personal strengths and weaknesses and their successful application only corroborate its importance for a competent command. In contrast, Hitler as a commander failed his forces during the same war due to his inability to understand his subordinate commanders.[34]

The veracity of war plans gets tested in the field, but their sound formulation takes place in the commander's headquarters. Although it is the professional ability and experience of staff officers in the command structure that produces brilliant strategy, the role of human nature and the interplay of personal vicissitudes in a team cannot be undermined. As the commander's staff is located far from the field, they are disconnected with the reality of war and are susceptible to peacetime motivations and rewards. In their capacity as advisors to the commander, they are close to the seat of power and, therefore, prone to moral degradation. The commander must have the knack to detect and check the spread of internal politics, lobbying, flawed prejudices and sycophancy within his command structure. Keen knowledge of the personal character of each of his staff officers alone gives him this capacity. Incidentally, the first time Clausewitz himself used the term friction was in reference to the internal impediment in the formulation of precise plans.[35] The term was coined in a letter in 1806 to his wife Marie von Bruhl, as he lamented about the human forces that resisted sound decision-making and resolute action within the Prussian army.[36] He saw the genius of Gerhard Johann David von Scharnhorst, chief of the Prussian general staff, during the 19th century, struggle with the constant friction of opinions of the Prussian chiefs of staff and commanders-in-chief.[37] Another historical example of this internal human resistance in the command structure is the German general staff during the Second World War which was rife with internal politics and sycophancy.[38] When a brilliant plan known as 'Case Yellow' – to invade France through the Ardennes – was proposed by Major General Erich von Manstein, an outstanding general staff officer, the chief of staff and the senior staff officers of the general staff obstructed its approval through groundless arguments and official procedures in favour of their plan in furtherance of their personal gains.[39] 'Case Yellow' did see the light of day due to a series of coincidences and was the only successful strategic German war plan during the entire war.[40] Hitler's general staff failed him again when they showed support for the attack on the Soviet Union and confirmed that the German army was prepared to undertake the campaign with existing equipment.[41] Having lost complete faith in his general staff, Hitler dismissed the chief of staff and assumed personal command of the German high command.[42] He began supervising operations to the minutest of details and centralized decision-making to a point far from the operational front.[43] In doing so, he abruptly brought an end to the German principle of *Auftragstaktik* at the peak of the Second World War, when his subordinate field commanders needed it the most. The commander's perception of war is shaped by his staff officers by presenting to him, both formally and informally, the correct information and formulating optimal plans centered on reality, even to the ire of the commander. His general staff's faintness of character, eternal sycophancy, and internal power struggles fed him with an adulterated picture of the war.[44] This coupled with Hitler's inability to gauge the personal dynamics of his general staff officers cost him the war. The German example clearly indicates that friction in war emanates from the very source that seeks clarity from it. If the commander fails to address it, this disease shrouds a capable force in doubt, and challenges and cripples its warfighting foundations.

The commander's need for knowledge of the external target group was first emphasized by Clausewitz. As he argues in one of his most famous maxims that war is an extension of politics since it is conducted to meet political ends, the commander must have the ability to understand how politics and war interact.[45] Commanders operating in the COE must, therefore, have thorough knowledge of the state's functioning, the characteristics of the men who shape the state's policies and the international community – their opinions in relevance to the times – as the global standing of a state is paramount during conflict. Furthermore, if the commander is operating with allied forces, the sensitivities of the alliance are an important factor for consideration as its foundation is instrumental to a successful command and victory in conflict. While Eisenhower was successful in keeping the state, the international community and the alliance together during the Second World War, Patton though successful in combat, failed to keep his personal values in line with those of joint operability and brought severe criticism from the alliance and the international community for the United States through his inept political statements and reproach for the alliance.[46]

The human element of the command structure is the fountainhead of internal resistance. As the mission command structure comprises hundreds of individuals acting coherently yet independently in keeping with the commander's intent, the possibility of a single critical mistake in turning reasonable victory into embarrassing defeat is likely to be

high. As the commander cannot be omnipresent he can neither view the translation of his intent into action nor can his subordinates seek clarity in the defining moments of conflict. In these uncertain quagmires of war, the commander is blind even with all the modern technical tools at his disposal. His sight then is the thorough awareness of his personal strengths and weaknesses and those of his target group. In the unity of his command, the commander lives and decides alone, and at critical junctures of war it is this understanding that gives successful commanders the edge of intuitive flair which the Germans aptly termed *Fingerspitzengefühl* or 'fingertips feeling'.[47]

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Notes

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[2] Eitan Shamir, *Transforming Command: The Pursuit of Mission Command in the US, British, and Israeli Armies* (California: Stanford University Press, 2011), 9.

[3] _____, *ADRP 6-0: Mission Command* (Washington DC: Department of the US Army, 2012), v, accessed March 25, 2015, https://armypubs.us.army.mil/doctrine/index.html

[4] Shamir, *Transforming Command,* 52.

[5] *ibid,* 51.

[6] *ibid.*

[7] _____, *ADRP 6-0: Mission Command,* 3-2.

[8] Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), bk. 1, chap. 3, 101.

[9] Clausewitz, *On War,* bk. 1, chap. 7, 119.

[10] Barry D. Watts, "Clausewitzian Friction and Future War," *McNair Paper 52* (Washington, DC: Institute for National Strategic Studies, 1996), 32.

[11] *ibid,* 30.

[12] Shamir, *Transforming Command,* 11.

[13] _____, *ADRP 6-0: Mission Command*, 2-1.

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[20] *ibid*.

[21] Axelrod, *Patton*, 116.

[22] Erwin Rommel, *The Rommel Papers,* ed. B.H. Liddell Hart (New York: Da Capo Press, 1953), 7.

[23] Charles Messenger, *Rommel: Leadership Lessons from the Desert Fox* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 118.

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[25] Charles Messenger, *Rommel: Leadership Lessons from the Desert Fox* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 223.

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[33] *ibid,* 127.

[34] Keegan, *The Mask of Command*, 303.

[35] Watts, "Clausewitzian Friction and Future War," 9.

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[42] Keegan, *The Mask of Command*, 290.

[43] Keegan, *The Mask of Command*, 301.

[44] *ibid*, 290.

[45] *ibid*, 5.

[46] Axelrod, *Patton*, 116.

[47] Messenger, *Rommel: Leadership Lessons from the Desert Fox*, 181.

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