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21ST-CENTURY CHALLENGES OF COMMAND:
A VIEW FROM THE FIELD

Anna Simons

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Comments pertaining to this report are invited and should be forwarded to: Director, Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, U.S. Army War College, 47 Ashburn Drive, Carlisle, PA 17013-5010.

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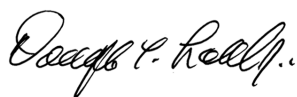
FOREWORD

For all of the attention that is accorded leadership, very little has been written about the day-to-day challenges of command. Dr. Simons' Letort Paper aims to redress this gap. She examines 21st-century challenges of command through the lens of Special Operations Force (SOF) experiences in Afghanistan (and to a lesser extent Iraq), primarily at the O-4 through O-6 level. Her purpose is twofold: to describe the kinds of choices commanders face under the dual pressures of too little time and too much (incomplete) information, and to draw attention to the debilitating effects of what she dubs "objectiveless warfare." The lack of clear, tangible objectives is but one among a number of factors that, she contends, prevent commanders at all levels from being able to affect lasting changes. However, rather than use this to tee up the usual argument about the need for a coherent strategy, she concentrates instead on hierarchy, and argues that without a singular hierarchy, coherent strategy will prove insufficient.

According to Dr. Simons, hierarchy is the most powerful antidote to paralysis humans have yet invented, whereas multiple hierarchies lead to "stakeholder fratricide." She makes a provocative case for why, in the style of General George C. Marshall, the military should revisit the rubric of "singular hierarchy + ownership." By this she means that one individual and his/her staff needs to "own" the war or the problem (e.g. Afghanistan, Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria [ISIS], etc.) until it is resolved, or until the commander is removed on the unlikely chance that the objectives one sets cannot be met.

Simons highlights the importance of decisiveness, while also explaining how adoption of a "singular hierarchy + ownership" approach can help both protect and promote variation within the officer corps. In her view, variation is essential for being able to out-think and out-adapt adversaries.

This Letort Paper merits attention for several reasons. Among them: today's O-4s through O-6s comprise the only pool from among which tomorrow's senior commanders will come. For the remainder of their careers, this generation of officers will be shaped by where, when, with whom, and under whom they served in Afghanistan (and Iraq). Differences among commanders' experiences will not only color their decision-making going forward, but will inevitably affect their views of one another. Two possibilities exist: so many different perspectives could pose problems, or variations within the officer corps could prove beneficial. According to Simons, the Army can turn variation into a boon so long as it puts a second inherent strength—hierarchy—to greater use. Hierarchy, after all, is the military's organizing principle. However, as this Letort Paper counter-intuitively suggests, it may be underutilized.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ANNA SIMONS is a Professor of Defense Analysis at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School (NPS), joining the faculty in 1998. Prior to teaching at NPS, Dr. Simons was an assistant and then associate professor of anthropology at the University of California at Los Angeles, as well as chair of the Masters in African Area Studies Program. At NPS, she teaches courses in the anthropology of conflict, military advising, low intensity conflict in Africa, and political anthropology. Dr. Simons is the author of *Networks of Dissolution: Somalia Undone* and *The Company They Keep: Life Inside the U.S. Army Special Forces*. She is co-author of *The Sovereignty Solution: A Commonsense Approach to Global Security*. She has written extensively about intervention, conflict, and the military from an anthropological perspective for a wide range of publications, such as *The American Interest*, *The National Interest*, *Orbis*, *Third World Quarterly*, and *Parameters*. Dr. Simons holds an A.B. from Harvard College and a Ph.D. in social anthropology from Harvard University.

SUMMARY

Among lessons said to have been learned over the past decade and a half is that the United States should never again use force absent a coherent strategy. Yet, no matter how necessary a coherent strategy is, it will prove insufficient unless the problem of too many competing hierarchies is likewise addressed. A second complicating challenge for those in 21st-century command is churn: churn of personnel, of units, and of responsibility. Without there being **a** commanding general, **a** supreme commander, or some "**one**" individual placed in charge for the duration, decisive results will remain elusive.

Not being able **to be** decisive or to attain meaningful tangible objectives turns warfare into an unnecessarily wicked problem. Worse, when talented O-4s, O-5s, and O-6s see even four-star generals being stymied in their efforts to exert command, the allure of stars (and respect for those wearing them) begins to wear thin. Yet, today's O-4s, O-5s, and O-6s are the only pool from which tomorrow's senior leaders will come.

Consequently, problems loom for the U.S. Army and the military. But fortunately, the institution also has the makings of a solution at its disposal. By putting two of its inherent strengths—hierarchy as its organizing principle, and variation among its officers—to greater use, the institution should be able to mitigate today's most pressing command challenges.

For instance, the Department of Defense (DoD) could adopt a "singular hierarchy + ownership" approach when prosecuting future wars. It could place a single commander and command team in charge, from inception of a strategy through its execution.

Doing so should guarantee that the strategy devised might actually be a strategy that could be executed, since those devising it would be those responsible for executing it. With their reputation(s) on the line and with no ability to cast blame elsewhere, the command team would also have no choice but to fully invest in **all** of the forces under its command, since these would now be **its** forces. At the same time, with total ownership, those conceiving the strategy would have every incentive to design it so as to return everyone home in as little time as it takes to complete the job, with no prospect of their having to return to finish the job at a later date.

Ownership of a war or problem set would recalibrate commitment throughout the force. At the same time, with greater continuity would come greater familiarity—with the problem set, with the adversary, with local allies, and among subordinate units.

Because it will be impossible to out-adapt 21st-century adversaries without creative thinking, variation in how officers think needs to be promoted and protected. A commanding general (CG) confident of his or her position should have no reason to fear dissent or disagreement. Because, too, 21st-century command involves managing, and overseeing the management of, people—and not just hardware—it is imperative that commanders be able to read, vet, and assess people and situations quickly and accurately. To recruit, unleash, and retain diverse talent, the military needs to both re-valorize these skills **and** recognize them as essential components of command.

In short, variation matters. However, it cannot flourish constructively without singular leadership at the top.

21ST-CENTURY CHALLENGES OF COMMAND: A VIEW FROM THE FIELD

OVERVIEW[1]

In a 2013 interview, retired Lieutenant General (LTG) David Barno cited a retired four-star from another Service who told him, "we drive out the best generals at lieutenant colonel [LTC]."[2] At the time, Barno was being interviewed about the release of his co-authored report, "Building Better Generals," a report that makes a number of interesting and even edgy recommendations about how to "fix" the general officer (GO) corps, but does not go nearly far enough to address issues that have turned command into an unnecessarily wicked problem. Or so I will contend in what follows.

This Letort Paper's purpose is twofold. First, to examine the challenges of command confronting officers (O-4 to O-6) today, in order to, second, make the case that regardless of whether war remains objectiveless or returns to a type the United States can effectively prosecute, the military needs to make far better use of hierarchy than it currently does.

In order to recruit, unleash, and retain talent as well as to prevail in complex entanglements like Afghanistan (or Iraq), the military needs to (re)recognize that:

1. Hierarchy is key;
2. Ownership of problems is imperative; and,
3. Variation in the officer corps is critical.

Or, to put this in the vernacular: some "**one**" needs to be put in charge—and that someone needs to set goals that are realistic, based on what operators can achieve.

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This means that leaders need to understand and be able to be honest about what their people are: a) currently capable of, and b) can be made to be capable of doing. A second critical command task is to be able to accurately and effectively read others—which raises the tricky question of whether "reading others" is a trait or a skill. Is it something that can be taught? Or can it only be selected for?

While there is a vast literature on leadership, much less attention has been paid to the components (versus the mechanics) of command.

If you had observed commanders at the O-4 to O-6 level in Afghanistan (2013-14) or in Iraq (2011) on the cusp of the retrograde of U.S. forces, here are some of the things that might have struck you at the Special Operations Task Force (SOTF) or the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force (CJSOTF) levels, which are the lenses through which this Letort Paper examines command challenges.

To keep operations running on any given day, commanders needed their staffs to stay: a) aware, b) poised, and c) planning, all while d) providing support to component units, and e) answering calls from "Higher."

While "a" through "e" in turn entailed "f" through "l":

f) coordinating and synchronizing internally, as well as:
- externally—with U.S. forces;
- externally—with Coalition partners;
- externally—with Afghans; and,
- externally—with others, e.g. non-governmental organizations (NGOs), media, etc.

g) coordinating and/or supporting training/ advising;

h) coordinating and/or supporting key leader engagements (KLEs);

i) monitoring and supporting tactical operations;

j) preparing—planning, organizing, and putting logistics into motion—for the upcoming retrograde;

k) coordinating and preparing—planning, organizing, and putting logistics into motion—for ongoing reliefs in place (RIP); and,

l) reassessing and then adjusting and re-adjusting everything described above.

Throughout, attention had to be paid to significant activities (SIGACTS). In addition, attention was due to any new development, which then required being able to distinguish between what was of immediate significance, and what might only become relevant later.

Meanwhile, responsibilities "f" through "l" required continual (24/7) coordination among staff, operators, and any enablers or contractors associated with the command, as well as anyone deemed relevant beyond the command.

At SOTF and CJSOTF levels, the commander was responsible for overseeing this entire gyroscope—**and** he had to lead, as in offer direction, **and** he had to maintain morale. His role was to both mentor and model, which he did 24 hours a day, wittingly or not.

Nor does this list capture everything command involved. For instance, it reveals nothing about time horizons. Yet, as with a commander's span of control, time horizons expanded with rank and responsibility. O-6 commanders at the CJSOTF level, for example, needed to think years and not just months ahead, beyond just the effects they were trying to achieve during their rotation.

A favorite metaphor for describing what commanding (or even serving) in Afghanistan (or Iraq) felt like was to have to fly the plane while building it. However, no matter how evocative this sounds, planes are machines. Either they will lift off and **stay** in the air, or they will not. Proof of concept is simple. In addition, once you have a working prototype, you can mass-produce others. Unfortunately, the same does not hold for staffs, teams, or anything comprised of humans. Nor does it fit when talking about arrangements involving adversaries, let alone situations that entangle multiple sets of adversaries, allies, and interested other actors.

Instead, a different metaphor struck me whenever I sat through the approval process for the detailed concept of operations plan (CONOPS) that team leaders submitted before being permitted to conduct a mission: that of a teaching hospital. During grand rounds risks must be weighed, plus a lot of sharp questioning, correcting, and mentoring occurs as juniors make weighty judgments under the supervision of their elders. Still, hospitals only deal with patients as individuals, and doctors try to fix them in order to, ideally, never have to see them again. Treating individuals does not (normally) need to fit into any broader strategy—or mesh with what other medical professionals in other departments or at other facilities might (or might not) be doing. In addition, while medical mistakes can be tragic, they seldom endanger anyone but the patient in question.[3]

Of course, the most common model people fall back on when talking about the military is business, no doubt because so much of the leadership literature crosses over (as do executives in and out of the Department of Defense [DoD]). However, here too, corporate

comparisons fall short. In the business world, leaders can fire people, whereas one of many leadership challenges for military commanders is that they have to make the most of whom they inherit, the vast majority of whom they had no say in hiring. Command teams themselves are comprised of at least some individuals O-6 commanders have never served with, some of whom they may not even like. Commanders can also count on having at least some subordinates whose first priority will be to pursue their own agendas and careers, along with others who know how the system works and thereby work the system to outwait or slow roll any directives they dislike.

Routinely scheduled changes of command introduce another wrinkle that business leaders do not have to contend with. Not only do all military officers need to pass through certain wickets in order to successfully compete for future echelons of command, but subordinates have to be lined up with the appropriate follow-on assignments. Assessing who deserves to be assigned where does not just demand judgment on the commanding officer's (CO) part, but invariably sharpens the competition among those beneath him, since officers know which jobs will advantage them and what they should do to try to attain them. Of course, in all organizations ambitious people jockey for position. However, another glaring distinction between the business world and the military is that the military lacks objective metrics for success. There is nothing akin to profit, volume, or market-share to help determine who is out-performing—or will continue to out-perform—whom.

Bottom line: the military is more unique than those who study it from an organizational behavior perspective tend to acknowledge. In fact, it is unlike any

other institution or profession. There should be nothing revelatory in noting this except that with all of the talk about the military as a profession, there is little to remind policymakers that there is no substitute **for** the military. Doctors could go on a prolonged strike and other medical practitioners would pinch hit. In fact, name the profession and, in a crisis, others would be able to step in and assist. Nor is it a coincidence that these others would likely be uniformed personnel. Ironically, it is the military that has individuals who could substitute for civilians in virtually any capacity, whereas the reverse is hardly the case.

Indeed, the days of being able to shake and bake a competent expeditionary military force are decades behind us. A 21st-century war could well be over before the first draftees show up for training. Or consider what it means that the United States has no other country capable of affecting our rescue in a crisis. No other military has logistical capabilities comparable to those of the United States—which means our military comprises the only set of responders we can count on. This alone should underscore why it is so critical to ensure that those tasked with protecting us are as well-commanded—and not just as well-trained—as possible.

To be sure, there are numerous challenges of command. Many involve all too predictable human dynamics. Because few of these will change in the foreseeable future, one aim of this Letort Paper will be to identify and call attention to realities about humans that the military should be able to make more of, as well as those it should better mitigate.

Five sections follow; in the next, a number of ethnographic observations are made, and the concept of objectiveless warfare is introduced. "COMMAND—

IN THEORY AND IN PRACTICE," further describes what contemporary command has entailed at the O-4 to O-6 level, within Special Operations Forces (SOF). "AFGHANISTAN—CASE IN POINT" tackles the question of "who should convey what to whom?" with the aim of examining sources and flows of information. This examination is followed up in "SINGULAR HIERARCHY + OWNERSHIP" by identifying additional challenges that plague coordination and collaboration. This is done as a prelude to outlining ways in which adopting a "singular hierarchy + ownership" approach—from the design of a strategy all the way through its execution—would dissipate many of today's command complications. Finally, "FURTHER THOUGHTS AND OTHER APPROACHES" suggests additional lines of inquiry not adequately covered here.

This Letort Paper is drawn on first and secondhand observations by the present author that were gathered over the course of multiple trips to Afghanistan and Iraq (2008-14), and 18-plus years' worth of conversations in and out of the classroom.

In a nutshell, this Letort Paper's argument revolves around the surprisingly underutilized usefulness of well-led hierarchy. If one had to assign a bumper sticker slogan to this Letort Paper's argument, it would be: a coherent strategy is necessary but insufficient without singular command.

ETHNOGRAPHIC OBSERVATIONS

Ethnographic Truths.

Without question and as David Barno *et al.* write in "Building Better Generals":

> The U.S. military needs an adaptive and creative officer corps in order to address the complex challenges of the 21st century—where the demands of managing an increasingly volatile international security environment and massive defense enterprise **will rapidly collide with the realities of declining defense budgets and constrained U.S. global military capabilities** [emphasis added].[4]

Truth be told, most who write about tomorrow's military invoke the need for greater adaptability.[5] Take, for instance, Michael Colarusso and David Lyle's monograph, *Senior Officer Talent Management: Fostering Institutional Adaptability*.[6] Colarusso and Lyle recommend myriad ways to broaden and deepen Service members' experiences and education. They also extol the virtues of differentiating people; they want the Army to seek and employ "a diverse range of talents." However, neither they, nor Barno *et al.,* nor even Tim Kane in *Bleeding Talent*, have tackled how to square the variation needed for **true** adaptive ability with what a hierarchy requires to function effectively.[7]

In this Letort Paper's view, hierarchy is key because even if the personnel system could be overhauled to better accommodate a wider range of "high value talent," thereby helping to retain a broader pool of seasoned professionals, this still would not ensure that ambitious "Type A's" could effectively collaborate and cooperate to achieve ends broader than them-

selves in complex environments when problem sets have no obvious or agreed-upon solutions.

Nor do current conceptions of Mission Command help, even though in General (GEN) (Ret.) Martin Dempsey's terms, Mission Command lets the Army "decentralize capabilities and distribute operations."[8] Doctrinally speaking, Mission Command has been described as "the exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to ensure disciplined initiative within the commander's intent to accomplish full spectrum operations."[9] However, according to Eitan Shamir, whose *Transforming Command* examines the adoption of Mission Command by the British, the Israeli, and the U.S. armies, Mission Command only really suits—or rather, **suited**—the German Army from the 19th century up through the beginning of World War II.[10]

> '*Auftragstaktik* was more than a system of command: it was part of a particular life style typical of Prussian officers for more than a century.' This latter point is crucial to understanding the difficulties faced by contemporary modern Western militaries, possessing different traditions of command and historical experiences, attempting to revive and adopt this style of command.[11]

As both Shamir and Jörg Muth, author of *Command Culture*, note, Mission Command was designed by Germans **for** Germans and grew out of "the sophisticated selection, education, and commissioning process of officers existing in Germany." Cadets were socialized to consider themselves as members of the elite if they were not already the sons of noblemen or aristocrats, and their military education started early.[12] This is in striking contrast to the make-up of the officer corps in

the U.S. Army at the turn of the 20th century, when the idea of Mission Command first attracted American attention. As Muth points out, "When the U.S. Army decided that the Prussian/German Army should be studied more closely because it had just won several wars, its officers looked largely in the wrong places and through their own cultural glasses."[13]

In other words, just because Mission Command worked well for the Germans, does not mean it fits us.

Nevertheless, at least some GOs today believe that U.S. soldiers **have** effectively mastered Mission Command. For instance, according to one assessment: "Regardless of the strategic outcomes of these recent wars, decentralized Mission Command has succeeded, empowering junior leaders to act boldly within their commanders' broad intent."[14]

As it happens, this is LTG (Ret.) Barno's assessment. Unfortunately, as he then goes on to lament:

> Mission Command is now on a collision course with the peacetime Army, which values bureaucratic process and compliance above all else. Completing surveys and online training on time, mastering PowerPoint briefings, and grasping the intricacies of training management and readiness reporting all dominate the life of leaders in garrison.

Barno clearly intends to sound the alarm in this passage: in the wake of Afghanistan and Iraq, the Army's "compliance culture" is smothering initiative.[15] Yet, the contrast he draws is overdrawn. While no officers I know would disagree with him about an ever-more infantilizing compliance culture, Afghanistan and Iraq were hardly process or PowerPoint-free. Instead, midway through both wars in both theaters, legions of officers could be found investing innumerable hours

in managing and massaging information on computer screens rather than interacting with troops or with allies.

While the distinction Barno makes between wartime freedom from bureaucracy and peacetime over-bureaucratization is thus exaggerated, he also misses something else when he urges that senior officers should "take on this challenge directly. They must embrace and protect a [Mission Command] leadership philosophy anchored in trust . . . They must empower their young leaders to say no to the bureaucracy."

First, not everyone in uniform today **is** worth trusting—not given recruitment, accession, and promotion rates that pumped quantity and not just quality into the force over the past decade and a half. Second, it is unrealistic to assume that O-4s, O-5s, and O-6s will say "no" to the bureaucracy when their elders do not.

At the same time, and in fairness to LTG Barno, those who attain the upper echelons of command invariably see things differently from those they lead. This is a truism in all hierarchies. In addition, whom people serve under and with, where they serve, and when they were deployed further colors their assessments—all of which should raise important questions about whose perspective(s) **should** then count, especially when it comes to informing future policy.

Looking ahead, one of the challenges the military writ large will face is to determine which lessons of the past 15 years should be learned and applied versus which are unique to Afghanistan and Iraq. Some units' hard-won knowledge will be particular to these two countries, which begs the questions: should that be Afghanistan **and** Iraq, or Afghanistan **or** Iraq? Moreover, who is qualified to say? Only those who have been to both theaters? But then (again): for how long, where, and with whom?

This issue—of which lessons are, or are not, applicable elsewhere—is likely to, and arguably should, haunt serving officers for the remainder of their careers. Worse, unlike the still contested legacy of Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq represent two very different kinds of shatter zone, which means that what gets highlighted, forgotten, or slighted in analysis will itself be fraught.[16]

Objectiveless Warfare.

Other questions that those who analyze the past decade and a half will need to grapple with concern the shifting nature of our conceptions of warfare. For instance, while the United States would be best served to treat every conflict it engages in as though it is unique, so that templates tried in other wars cannot be misapplied, no war occurs in a vacuum. The U.S. military was involved in both Iraq and Afghanistan well before 9/11. So—how far back in time, never mind how far afield in space, should ex post facto analysis extend? **Can** Afghanistan be considered apart from Pakistan—though once Pakistan is considered, doesn't India also merit attention? What about Russia or Iran?[17] How widely **should** analysts cast their nets in order to capture all—or should that only be the most relevant—factors, indicators, and perspectives?

Alternatively, how much does anyone **really** need to understand in order to be able to defeat an adversary?

Up through World War II, militaries were sent to war to address three kinds of political problems. Force proved indispensable when it came to:

1. Defense—of territory, population, honor, etc.;
2. Acquisition—of status; and,
3. Conquest—and material gain.

Prior to World War II, the subjugation and/or seizure of territory and populations not only provided militaries with a clear role to play, but also showed that no other arm of government was equipped to do what only armies could. Compare this to what has come to be expected of the military today. Washington seldom (if ever) sends anyone other than Tier 1 forces to achieve **tangible objectives**.

Certainly, no discernible game-changing, destroy-**it**-and-**they**-won't-continue-to-fight objectives have been set for (or **by**) the U.S. military since 9/11.

Yet, psychologically speaking, objectives are far more important than policymakers seem to realize. For instance, in *Kandak: Fighting with Afghans*, Patrick Hennesy (who served with the Grenadier Guards) describes the anticipation soldiers feel while waiting to hit a **physical objective** and the relief that comes once "action" is underway. From Hennesy's descriptions, it is clear that both action and relief affect morale, since both are integral to the conviction that progress is being made.

Essentially, if soldiers, units, and those in charge know they are not going to be able to get out of a situation, country, or war without doing A, B, or C, then generally everyone will not only be eager, but also anxious to do whatever it takes to accomplish those A, B, or C.

Having a distinct, distinguishable enemy helps. However, perhaps as important as having an identifiable adversary is having **physical** objectives. In addition, as Hennesy learns, keeping units in the same location for too long is debilitating. It is likewise detrimental to ask them to take or, worse, retake and then abandon ground. Not only does this prove demoralizing, but it turbo-charges cynicism.

Hennesy is hardly the first author to make these observations. Martin Van Creveld remarked much the same thing about Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, which he found to be corrosive to the Israeli Defense Forces.[18] Or, as one commander of U.S. Army Rangers said in Afghanistan: "Rangers are adrenaline junkies. They seek adversity in order to have a sense of success; they *need* measurable success."[19]

Indeed, talk to experienced SOF officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and many concede that while getting to kill the enemy and engage in and survive firefights is initially exhilarating, over time—and with maturity—going on missions night after night needs to add up to something beyond just more of the same.[20] Over time there needs to be some **tangibly evident** gain. Otherwise, there is nothing to measure success against.[21]

Historically, too, reaching, keeping, or smashing objectives and being able to move on without having to fear for your rear (or flanks) has been essential to declaring victory.

At the broadest level, it should go without saying that no war can be won until one side concedes defeat. Typically, this has required either seizing people by the shorthairs or threatening them sufficiently and credibly that they give up. You usually have to kill their hope, and not just their will to continue. Or, to be blunt: you win—and they prove they have given up—only once they accede to whatever terms you choose.[22]

Perhaps no one better captures the command challenges thrown up by the lack of clearly articulated objectives since 9/11 than GEN Stanley McChrystal, the man who was in putative charge in Afghanistan from 2009-10.

Redefining ISAF's [International Security Assistance Force]—and America's—mission in Afghanistan became a central issue. In June, I'd directed our team to conduct the strategic assessment based upon our understanding of the mission as outlined by President Obama in speeches prior to that time. Although the importance of Al Qaeda was never in doubt, we had interpreted that our mission included helping the nation of Afghanistan develop the ability to defend its sovereignty.[23]

This passage deserves a close read for two reasons. First, the fact that the commander of Coalition and U.S. forces in Afghanistan had to **interpret** what he **thought** the President's mission was, based on recorded speeches rather than receiving the mission directly from the President himself, reveals that there **was** no set objective. Second, we see just how broken the notion of hierarchy has become. Not only should the President have transmitted the mission clearly and in person to GEN McChrystal, but when he did not, why didn't GEN McChrystal demand an accounting?

Many might think that the communications breakdown described in the previous passage points to a "civil-military" disconnect. Perhaps, however, my thesis here is that there is a deeper problem: hierarchy has been misused, both by the civilian leadership and by the military (the topic of this Letort Paper).

If, meanwhile, we examine what has transpired through the lens of James Q. Wilson's work on bureaucracy, here is one possible reading: while the purpose of the U.S. military may be to a) win the nation's wars; b) defend the United States; and c) reproduce itself in order to be able to accomplish "a" and/or "b," when "a" and "b" are not well-defined or clearly articulated, the path of least resistance will be to default to "c."

Further applying Wilson's framework, we might also conclude that whenever a bureaucracy lacks a coherent strategy or a singular goal, and/or when those within it do not share a common vision, it—the bureaucracy—will fall prey to people advancing their own agendas. Sometimes these agendas will converge. Nevertheless, even when they do, horse-trading occurs. The problem horse-trading creates is that dealing in quid pro quos can all too quickly substitute for feeling the need to demand **an** objective, since trading among the tradeoffs can itself **become** the objective.[24]

This describes what a visitor to Afghanistan could see transpiring prior to the retrograde of U.S. forces. It also fits with others' observations about the prosecution of the war there (and in Iraq): in the absence of a coherent vision, commanders reverted to processes. Absent a strategy, commanders concentrated on operations. Arguably, they did so from the inception of both wars. Or, as GEN McChrystal writes in his memoir, from 2003 until 2005 his Task Force in Iraq "had drawn up targeting decks, not maps: We executed missions; we did not wage campaigns."[25]

GEN McChrystal is worth citing throughout this Letort Paper because, more than any other GO of his generation, he continues to exemplify leadership for numerous O-6s who served under him, and remains among the only senior commanders many say they would have voluntarily followed anywhere.[26] Yet, not even GEN McChrystal, as a four-star, could get the system under him (never mind the policymaking world above him) to work as effectively as he needed it to. For instance, the "Afghan hands" program frustrated him. He was "sent a number of non-volunteers and noncompetitive officers," which echoes complaints another four-star commander, GEN Abizaid,

registered about Military Transition Teams (MiTT) in Iraq.[27] According to David Cloud and Greg Jaffe, when Abizaid was the overall U.S. commander in Iraq, he pressed:

> [GEN] Casey to bolster the U.S. advisory teams that were embedded in Iraqi army and police units. Abizaid believed the teams were the key to victory, and he had been frustrated that senior Army officers in the Pentagon had staffed them for years with mostly inexperienced troops.[28]

Chronic disregard for how both of these programs were staffed—no matter how secondary the Afghanistan-Pakistan Hands (AFPAK) Hands (APH) Program and MiTT program might seem to some— is emblematic of what four-star generals could not get prioritized. More telling still, the fact that **commanding generals** (CGs) in charge of **prosecuting a war** were not fully supported by their peers **or** by the bureaucracy reveals a system comprised of parts that not only could, but also did work against each other.

As Tim Kane summarizes one aspect of the larger problem:

> The military's problem is a deeply anti-entrepreneurial structure at the gritty level of personnel policy. From officer evaluations to promotions to job assignments, all branches of the military operate more like a government bureaucracy with a unionized workforce than a cutting-edge meritocracy.[29]

As Kane and other critics point out, the military's personnel system **is** deeply flawed. One hears this time and again from serving officers. However, even if the personnel system were fixed, my contention is that this

would still not solve the problem GENs McChrystal and Abizaid encountered, which is that **as commanders, they could not make the system work**. Couple this inability to truly command with the fact that the military is predicated on the most powerful antidote to paralysis humans have yet invented—namely, well-led hierarchy—and the socio-illogical disconnects should be glaringly obvious.

Indeed, the fact that three- and four-star generals (to include combatant commanders) **still** cannot make a whole range of decisions on their own today, but must first seek others' concurrence points to major flaws in how hierarchy is organized. One unfortunate consequence is that this leaves talented O-4s, O-5s, and O-6s increasingly wondering why anyone should strive to earn one, two, or three stars if, by the time they reach four-star rank, they still cannot fully command.

In light of this, the implications for whom the military will subsequently retain, and whom it will lose—and at what long-term costs—are profound.

System Failure.

While constructive critics like Tim Kane blame the antiquated personnel system for stifling initiative from below, others, like Tom Ricks, have placed the blame elsewhere.

> If the Army is serious about having an officer corps that is adaptive, it needs to try to carry out a major cultural shift that enables it to embrace accountability, rather than shun it. This is not as difficult as it might sound. Generals should be relieved not just for personal foibles but for poor performance in command.[30]

From Ricks' perspective, accountability is the engine that drives adaptability. However, as essential as accountability is, my argument is that ownership is the overarching missing link.[31] For instance, one would be hard pressed to find anyone more willing to adapt or to hold himself accountable than GEN McChrystal. Yet, GEN McChrystal recognized how important it was to be in sole command, since this is exactly what he sought as a Task Force commander:

> I wanted John [Abizaid] to agree that I would be the commander of all my forces in his theater. No matter my location, I would be his single point of contact and of responsibility. It may seem an arcane point of military hierarchy, but intuitively I believed the unprecedented campaign TF [Task Force] 714 was faced, across a wide geographic area would demand as much unity and consistency in leadership as possible.[32]

It is hard to examine 21st-century challenges of command and not conclude that ownership is the necessary complement to a singular hierarchy. As this Letort Paper will subsequently suggest, so long as variation can be protected within the force, "singular hierarchy + ownership" is a greater guarantor of adaptability than anything else the military might try. However, building the right kind of variation, and giving individuals enough, but not too much, rope is tricky.

This is, in part, because militaries have long depended on a paradox: attrition requires that the institution regard everyone as interchangeable. Yet, every individual in uniform needs to believe they are indispensable; this is among the things that inspire members of the military to give their all.

Perhaps nothing better exemplifies the inherent tension between being special (as in uniquely necessary) and being just another uniform or, in this case, Green Beret, than the story of Jim Gant, a Special Forces (SF) Army major (MAJ). As his now-wife, (former *Washington Post* reporter) Ann Scott Tyson reports, Admiral (ADM) Olson (the then-Special Operations Command [SOCOM] commander) referred to Gant as the "Lawrence of Afghanistan." In November 2009, ADM Olson was so taken with Gant's concept for how to unite Afghanistan one tribe at a time that he lent Gant's concept for a tribal engagement team (TET) his full support. Olson's enthusiasm trickled down the chain of command:

> 'You are getting your TET,' [Colonel (COL) David] Maxwell wrote to Jim [on behalf of LTG John Mulholland, United States Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) CO] . . . . 'You basically will be able to write your own ticket. ADM Olson wants you and your team to do some focused training to prepare you, but the longer-term goal is for you and your team to become the future Lawrences of Afghanistan. Bottom line is you are going to be on the cutting edge.'[33]

Then-COL Don Bolduc subsequently used Gant's field-site (Mangwel) "as a shining success story in his official PowerPoint briefings on village stability operations [VSO]" while then-Brigadier General (BG) Scott "Miller said he needed more Special Forces officers with Jim's skill and commitment. 'I wish I had more Jim Gants, to be quite honest'."[34] In a crowning achievement, GEN David Petraeus himself awarded Gant with a Joint Service Commendation Medal after a 4-hour long visit to Mangwel.[35]

Given so much attention from commanders at the highest level, it is hard to imagine how Jim Gant **would not** have felt special, and so indispensable that the normal rules no longer applied. However, once he had broken too many to continue to ignore—

> You drank alcohol downrange. You took drugs and had unauthorized drugs in your room. You put your men at risk . . . and you gave Ann Scott Tyson access to classified information and moved her around the battlefield[36]

—it no longer mattered how much support Gant had previously received from the brass. He was found eminently dispensable. Indeed, here is what LTG John Mulholland said to Gant before drumming him out of the SF:

> There is nothing special at all about what you did or what you were asked to do. Absolutely nothing you did in your military career, in particular what you did over there, matters any more. Reading your statement, it's very apparent to me that you have a skewed perception of yourself and your importance to the war and to the Regiment.[37]

Interestingly, one sees this interchangeability/indispensability paradox at work up and down the chain of command: GEN David McKiernan out, McChrystal in, McChrystal out, Petraeus in—with no strenuous public objections from anyone about the pitfalls of churn at the strategic level, or about how churn only further guarantees the abject lack of objectives of 21st-century warfare.

COMMAND—IN THEORY AND IN PRACTICE

Objectiveless warfare could be seen to affect O-4, O-5, and O-6 commanders in Afghanistan in at least four ways.

First, it created unnecessary complexity. By 2014, as the retrograde of U.S. forces was underway, there were so many moving pieces and parts, and so many seams and points of friction between multiple **"us"s** and multiple **"them"s** that it was hard for many commanders at the O-4 through O-6 levels to see how they could help SOF operators help Afghans make any truly lasting gains.

Second, because the stakes in objectiveless warfare cannot be considered existential (otherwise, defeating the enemy would be the clear, unmistakable goal), COs ended up in the untenable position of having to continually weigh whether risks to their men were truly worth it.

Third, fighting by coalition, by rotating units through different areas of operation, by manning staffs with individual augmentees, and so on, was a major (or continual) source of destabilization—the tail, which was **supposed** to support the tooth, served to imbalance the dog.

Finally, hierarchy—the way the military currently formulates it—has grown to include so many people at the top that rather than being comprised of a single structure, it resembles the Valley of the Kings: lots of pyramids, lots of dynasties, and plenty of status displays sucking up inordinate amounts of support. Indeed, by June 2014, it was said that there were more GOs in Afghanistan than SF Operational Detachment Alphas (ODAs), and ODAs were among the only units still interacting with Afghans.

To further set the scene: at every level of command (ODA, Advanced Operational Base [AOB], SOTF, and CJSOTF), operations centers were staffed 24 hours a day.[38] Staff members were on duty to monitor and react around the clock, while the fact that they monitored multiple computer screens and had access to multiple networks meant that they could be tasked with additional work while standing watch—which certainly might have **seemed** efficient at the time, but the "product" they produced only then made more work for others, giving everyone more to have to read, edit, manage, respond to, correct, counter, update, etc.[39]

Had a team of ethnographers been sent to Afghanistan to conduct classic timed observations of behavior, they would have spent their days (or nights) making notations next to a column of headings which would have been labeled: typing, reading/surfing computer screens, conducting business by phone (landline/cell phone); interacting with officemates; interacting with colleagues from other workspaces; walking to the operations center/bathroom/another office; making/drinking coffee; working out; and eating/getting food.

The "Higher" ranking the individual, the more privacy they were afforded—but not by much.[40] People on all staffs and in all Tactical Operations Centers (TOC) and Joint Operations Centers (JOC) worked with constant interruptions, sidebar conversations, and other distractions, but few diversions. Life was stripped down to work, and working out. Alternative activities for those who had (or were willing to make) the time might include watching movies, attending church services, and playing volleyball in some locations.

Accepting that some (if not most) of the work being done was deemed critical by someone somewhere, many of those who were stuck living this Groundhog Day-like existence wondered why they needed to be physically present at all. Since few left their bases, they wondered why they could not do their work remotely—much as drone pilots do. They asked this question not just because they missed their families (and a more normal existence), but for security reasons: the more people there were in-theater, the more servicing and protection they required, the bigger the U.S. footprint became, and the more of an irritant/target that made Americans.[41] Few saw the value in this.

However, GEN McChrystal believed there was a benefit in having his analysts "live and operate forward, teamed with counterparts from other agencies," because this:

> decreased the gravitational pull of their headquarters back in D.C. and dramatically increased the sense of shared mission and purpose. It was extraordinarily powerful for analysts to share information, to brief operators on their assessments, to hear the rotors of an assault force launching on their information, and then to debrief together after the operation.[42]

GEN McChrystal's view is worth citing (again) for several reasons. First, he was commanding his own organization. Thus, his perspective is not the same as that of someone working on a staff in someone else's realm. Second, his Task Forces always had a well-defined focus: man-hunting. Arguably, this made their lives easier. Because Task Force members' interactions with Afghans were generally one-sided, and few interacted with Afghans at all, they and the analysts and staff who supported them could afford a more Manichean view of the war: there were regular everyday

Afghans and then there were very bad Afghans.[43] Unlike others, too, Task Force members were able to see the direct result of their operations in real time on giant plasma screens. Being able to see the targeting and killing of weapons-bearing Afghan males reinforced their sense of purpose. So, too, did the more intense pace at which they worked on their much shorter rotations. Basically, no one on any of McChrystal's Task Forces could afford the time for morale to sink.

In contrast, others' experiences were far messier. Some of this had to do with more frequent interactions with more Afghans, as well as fewer cut-and-dry missions. But also, across sister SOTFs and AOBs (the two echelons of command below the CJSOTF level), different SF, U.S. Navy's Sea, Air, and Land (SEAL) Teams, and U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC) commanders exhibited significantly different command styles, and the decisions they made had cumulative effects. For instance, it rarely took long after walking into a JOC or TOC to be able to gauge the overall mood: either key staff members were upbeat and willing to get work done or they were visibly ground down. As one MAJ explained, exhaustion from doing and thinking was very different from exhaustion caused by a commander who thwarted initiative or was inconsistent **and** too demanding.

Command—In Theory.

If we turn to the literature, how is command described? According to one definition, it is "the purposeful exercise of authority over structures, resources, people and activities . . . comprised of three, often reinforcing, components: authority, management and leadership."[44] Management "is primarily concerned

with the allocation and control of resources (i.e. human, financial and material) to achieve objectives," while leadership "deals with the purpose of the organization—'doing the right thing' versus 'doing it right'."[45]

For the British, command is said to be: "comprised of leadership, decision making, and control." In the United States, "In addition to leadership [which subsumes influencing people and decision-making], command also includes authority."[46]

As for how authority is exerted at the highest levels, Tom Ricks describes generalship as usually involving:

> being able to impose one's will on a large organization engaged in the most stressful of human activities. It is almost always driven by the twofold ability first to anticipate problems and devise solutions and then to get people to execute the resulting plans.[47]

Later on in *The Generals,* Ricks writes that "successful generalship involves first figuring out what to do, then getting people to do it. It has one foot in the intellectual realm of critical thinking and the other in the human world of management and leadership."[48]

Again, some consider managing and leading to be distinctly different things. Edward Kosner describes the difference this way: "A leader's job is to create and enunciate a vision and to inspire his followers to pursue it—'the vision thing,' as George H. W. Bush so famously put it. The manager's job is to make the vision tangible."[49] For Eitan Shamir, leadership is the "capacity to generate cultural change," and the methods leaders use to affect change include:

> What they pay attention to, measure, and control;
> Their reaction to critical incidents and organizational crisis;

Resource allocation;
Deliberate role modeling, teaching, and coaching;
Awarding rewards and status; and
Recruitment, selection, promotion, and communication procedures.[50]

Interestingly, while *The Economist* considers management to be "one of the most successful industries of the past century," thus making it a critically important component of organizations, it seems likely that, when given a choice, most people would far rather be inspired, challenged, taken seriously, and **led** than be managed.[51]

Contours of Command — In Practice.

Still, none of these descriptions quite does justice to what command actually entails. Ironically, anthropologist Clifford Geertz's self-description, written for as non-military an audience as it is possible to imagine, may come closest:

> Pitched early into things, I assumed, and I still assume, that what you are supposed to do is keep going with whatever you can find lying about to keep going with: to get from yesterday to today without foreclosing tomorrow.[52]

To be sure, as preeminent as Geertz was in anthropology, he commanded nothing but respect. In contrast, commanders in Afghanistan (and Iraq) were responsible for training, assessing, assembling, and then moving individuals, units, equipment, and weapons platforms against the enemy, in support of allies, and throughout their (or what was often someone else's) battlespace. They did so while contending with all

manner of time pressures: self-induced; situation-dependent; and, chain of command-driven.

As LTG (Ret.) James Dubik has described it:

> Strategic leaders must hold in their minds simultaneously the following: individual acts (the current present), the broader whole of collective potential reactions and response (the ever-unfolding present), and how both can be used to achieve the envisioned goal (the future).[53]

In Afghanistan (and Iraq), CJSOTF, SOTF, and AOB commanders did their best to think along each of these three time horizons, though they also had to nest the effects they were trying to achieve within those established by whoever was above them—which in turn required understanding or accurately interpreting what "Higher," or even more specifically, what their immediate boss wanted to have happen and/or was trying to achieve.

Commanders also had to synchronize what they were using as they tried to have effects. Yet, they themselves controlled very few assets. Flow was key. But so was knowing which instruments to bring to bear, in what order and combination, and from who to attain them. Tempo affected everything—from stress levels to being able to stream support when forces were in extremis.

Thus far, still, I am only outlining the perceptible **mechanics** of command. What commanders spent an inordinate amount of time doing was actually managing, and overseeing the management of, people—not hardware. This absorbed most of their attention, directly or indirectly. Or, to return to the interchangeability/indispensability paradox, one dimension of the conundrum commanders dealt with was that though

men and women under their command may have been their most important assets (since they couldn't do anything without them), they also couldn't let those they led feel as though they were ever **just** being used.

Beyond needing (or wanting) to feel purposeful, units and the individuals in them had to be able to be effectively synced so that the whole worked together as opposed to pulling apart or, worse, working at cross-purposes. Synchronizing and keeping everyone synced was the command team's job.[54]

In Afghanistan (and Iraq), commanders likewise had to contend with the fact that many of the pieces and parts under their command were rarely of uniform size. Components, to include units that appeared to be identical on table of organization and equipment (TOE) charts, shrank and expanded, especially when contractors and enablers were folded into the mix.

One way in which some commanders approached these challenges was to think of them as problem sets. A commander's job was to stay on top of problems: by stopping them, fixing them, preventing them, identifying them before they occurred, **and** by creating them for others—e.g., adversaries. Commanders liked to think prevention of problems was valued by "Higher," yet they also recognized that no one got credit (or was noticed) for preventing problems.

Keeping S- or J-1 through S- or J-9 shops synced also fell under a commander's purview. So did timing in the most personal sense. Everyone in command had to concern himself with multiple futures, to include his own. Commanders had to worry about their careers, their reputations, and their status vis-à-vis one another, which meant that among their ongoing challenges was to figure out how to enhance their position both militarily and personally, while also protecting

themselves and others, both literally and figuratively.

Basically, to command was to juggle multiple sets of trade-offs simultaneously. For instance, subordinates might engage in non-doctrinaire practices that they were convinced would help them establish rapport with their counterparts and/or the locals, but which the military overall considered to be detrimental to good order and discipline. Beards represent a great case in point. For 13 years and counting, beards helped distinguish SOF operators from others. As a consequence, by 2014 many SOF operators were convinced that Afghans used beards to identify which Americans to trust, respect, and/or fear. In operators' eyes that made beards a force protection measure, and not just a status symbol. However, because beards seldom sat well with General Purpose Forces (GPF) battlespace owners, this placed SOF commanders on the horns of a dilemma. Which would do them more good: building rapport with conventional commanders, which meant disallowing beards, or permitting their operators to do what those before them had?[55]

While a seemingly minor issue, more has always been read into "beards" than meets the eye. Indeed, beards point to what was perhaps commanders' most persistent challenge: contending with **others'** decisions and judgments. Commanders frequently had to redo, undo, or adjust decisions predecessors and subordinates made. Adjustments "here" then required readjustments elsewhere. The same happened with decisions that came down from on high. Commanders had to be able to quickly react to everything from Requests for Information (RFI) to only partially informed directives, though even silly directives could prove easier to deal with than questions posed by "Higher" for ambiguous or unstated, and thus suspect, reasons.

Or, as one S-3 put it, he spent his days juggling rubber and glass balls. Ultimately, his boss (the CJSOTF commander) had to have faith that his S-3 could accurately differentiate between which balls were rubber and which glass, or which problems the command team could afford to resolve later and which had better be addressed now.

This, actually, points to the crux of what rendered command so endlessly challenging—or difficult and uncomfortable for anyone who was not adept at reading and assessing other people's capabilities: who could commanders rely on, and for what? Especially as they worked along multiple timelines simultaneously.

The iterative aspects of command required that information be updated continuously. Dynamics to be monitored in Afghanistan included:

- dynamics internal to the command and its constituent units;
- dynamics internal to other military components in the battlespace—U.S. military, Coalition, Afghan;
- dynamics internal to Afghans, both locally **and** nationally; and then,
- the state of play among all of these and whoever else might be in the area.

This comprised an immense amount of forces to keep track of. And though paying attention to ever shifting dynamics among Afghans might seem as though it would have been a commander's top priority, few commanders at the O-4 through O-6 level interacted with Afghans (or the same Afghans) every day.[56] This is what their teams and operators did. Consequently, flows of information about what

was happening **among** Afghans, while critical, came highly filtered (as we will see in "CASE IN POINT: AFGHANISTAN," in this Letort Paper).

Information Flows.

In general, information flows serve either to stitch things together or to unravel them. Because, too, flows these days are continual, it is extremely difficult for anyone to control who is conveying what to whom once patterns get set, especially since informal flows always augment formal reporting. Officers who are good at command seem to work out ahead of time (or in short order) who they want conveying what to whom. To do so effectively, however, requires that they quickly learn whom they can rely on, and for what. How did commanders in Afghanistan and Iraq ascertain this?

Reputational vetting is SOF's premier extra-curricular activity. The academic literature has long recognized gossip (or the exchange of information about others) as a critical social lubricant. However, when there is no immediate way to know how much esteem to accord (or trust to place in) others, vetting hearsay itself becomes vitally important. At the same time, when someone knows he will be talked about the same way he talks about others, that helps keep him and everyone else more or less in line—**and** still striving. Since reputation is everyone's most precious commodity, this dynamic applies to, and is applied by, commanders and subordinates alike. However, it is especially attenuated for commanders who face a double bind given that what they do with their time can help make or break their reputations, and time is their scarcest resource.

Commanders' time is valuable for at least four reasons. First, no commander can possibly give sufficient, let alone equal attention to everything—not when there is a need to perpetually weigh expediency against effectiveness. Second, commanders **have** to delegate. However, what should they give up, and to whom? This may well be the most important decision they make since if they get this right, their decision will help set them up for success. However, if they get this wrong (concern number 3), they will not just have problems, but their mistakes will make **them** the subject of others' commentary, commentary that they then cannot control (concern number 4).

Again, everything commanders do telegraphs something, which is exactly why **how** a commander chooses to use his time, and what he chooses to do himself versus delegate, reveals more about him than virtually anything he might say.

Who Should Convey What To Whom?

Because messages are always being transmitted, commanders have to be adept at one of two things. They need to be good at determining what is important for them to learn about, know, or dig into first-hand versus what is nice but not essential to learn/know themselves. Or, alternatively, they have to be able to bank on being able to turn whatever they pay attention to into their advantage somehow.

Different styles suit different personalities. But everyone still faced the same dilemma: did they invest time in getting to know their personnel—in which case, to what extent, and down to what level? Or did they invest in cultivating other relationships instead, knowing that they could always elicit the information

they needed (or thought they might need) from their subordinates?

Timing always complicated this choice. For instance, say you had no prior Afghanistan experience and you were only slated to be in command in Afghanistan once, for one 8-month long rotation. One advantage you would have is that you could approach the country and the situation unemotionally, with fresh eyes and a degree of objectivity that those who knew the men for whom firebases were named would never have. But then: down to what level of local detail was it important for you to go? What should you bother absorbing and committing to memory? Especially when anything Afghanistan-specific was perishable and would be of little use in follow-on assignments.

To further complicate things, there is knowledge (as in, having command over facts, dates, and figures), and then there is understanding (having a "feel for" and/or being able to see patterns). Understanding can often mitigate a lack of detailed knowledge and, again, when you are the boss, your position should grant you the ability to count on others for what **they** know. However, when most of your subordinates are new to you, having to constantly ask them about things they think a commander should already be familiar with sends certain signals. Should you worry about how they read your asking them for information they think you should already know?

One obvious shortcut is to take the measure of key subordinates, and rely on **their** experiential knowledge. For this to work, however, their information needs to be up-to-date—since one pitfall with multiple rotations is that people sometimes think they know enough about location X because they spent time there previously, without appreciating how much things

there have changed. Or, as one commander put it: "'I was here in '08, I understand.' No—unless you know how it was yesterday, you *don't* understand."[57]

Unfortunately, there are no obvious remedies for most of these information-takes-time quandaries—many of which were compounded in Afghanistan whenever commanders oversaw units from sister organizations or other Services. Sometimes commanders' first experience with these other units, and thus their subordinate commanders, was only in Afghanistan.[58]

All such gaps generated the potential for crossed signals. For instance, one common justification offered for why operators at the team level were asked for more detail than made sense to them was because staffs at "Higher" command levels did not share their same awareness. Intellectually, most operators understood this. However, other types of queries frustrated, alienated, and even demoralized them. Why, for example, would a visiting GO with two O-6s in tow and an entourage of O-5s waste time on his all-too-short visit asking team members about something as tactical as where soon-to-be-delivered HESCO barriers would be placed? To operators, this kind of questioning reeked of micro-management. However, if we were to grant the visiting GO the benefit of the doubt, maybe he was plumbing something altogether different when he asked about the HESCO barriers. Maybe he had already visited enough locations that it didn't take him long to size up what he thought he needed to know, so that a question that seemed inane to those he was visiting served as a heuristic for him.

Even so, the degree of interest a GO or CO expressed in information that struck others as irrelevant, and their subsequent (mis)read of this as micro-man-

agement **could** matter—especially since any whiff of being micro-managed telegraphed distrust.

There were unintentional transmissions like this, and then there were intentional transmissions. Visits and battlefield circulations (BFC) served both purposes. They thus provide an interesting window into the choices commanders made.

Visits.

Often SF O-4s who served as team leaders before becoming staff officers considered the heavy SF command presence in Afghanistan to be totally unnecessary. From their perspective, operators required technical, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), air, and other forms of direct support. For everything else, teams could just as easily have been overseen from outside of Afghanistan:

> Command[er]s may think they need to be present to exert control, but to control what? Ironically, COs have no real control when an ODA is out in an isolated location. Actually, it's the commanders who depend on the ODA for information about what's going on. The ODA can tell COs anything, and they're unlikely to know or learn the difference.[59]

Yet, while commanders perhaps **should** have been able to take on faith what their subordinates reported, as Jim Gant's example suggests, they still did need to verify on occasion. Moreover, that could only be done in person.

Also, if one aim of a visit was to check up on subordinates, another was to take subordinate commanders' measure. Apparently, the first thing GEN Matthew Ridgway did on being assigned to Korea was to

overfly the country at 3,000 feet, meet with the South Korean president, **and** visit his battlefield commanders. He wanted to assess "their states of mind, asking himself each time, 'Is he confident, does he know what he is doing, does he know the terrain in his area'?"[60]

Or, consider GEN McChrystal's explanation for why he routinely went out to observe his operators conduct raids:

> over the past three years, I had learned to carefully watch the operators at work: After years' worth of daily raids, their instinctive movements and mood often told me more about the situation than they could describe back at base.[61]

Visits ensured that those in the field also understood a CO's command vision. Some commanders felt that simply issuing their command philosophy on paper was insufficient; they needed their troops to be able to answer and not just ask: "What would my boss do? What would my boss want me to do?" Particularly since the boss (as in the CJSOTF commander) might only see their O-3s once or twice over the course of a rotation.

COs needed their operators to keep asking themselves: "how does this contribute to what needs to be done according to the commander's intent?" Or, as one CO put it: "Teams shouldn't do stuff just because locals or someone asks for it and it seems like a good idea. It has to fit. It has to sync."[62]

Ensuring that everyone was on the same page, and would stay there, required dialogue. However—how much explanation did dialogue itself require? For instance, one former team leader described an operation that seemed to be a waste of time (or worse) from his ODA's perspective. The team was supposed to use

Afghan Local Police (ALP) they had helped recruit and train to hold a particular valley. Unfortunately, holding the valley set the ALP up for disaster. The ALP's best fighters were killed. Several were beheaded by the Taliban. Maybe, this officer now guessed, it was useful for his team and the ALP to have suffered those losses; maybe the team's position in the valley took the pressure off the district center or tied down the Taliban. But he still wondered: might not it have helped the ODA to have been told this at the time?

This raises the age-old question: what **do** operators need to know? To what extent should they be clued into the bigger picture?[63] Especially in an era of objectiveless warfare, when the big picture is demoralizing. Or, as one S-2 put it, how do you maintain morale when: a) it is Groundhog Day, b) the mission is nebulous, c) it is unclear what anything is adding up to, and d) you agree with the cynics?

Here we come to the not just perennial, but increasingly pressing challenge: what level of explanation **should** be offered to thinking Service members? The 21st-century twist is that the Services love to point out how smart today's Service members are. Yet—hierarchy can never work with wide-open information flows and total transparency. This is because most decisions (again) involve trade-offs, and people cannot be made to feel that **they** are what is being traded off. So, how forthcoming **should** 21st-century commanders be? **Should** operators be told that they have been given a lesser mission, are just plugging a hole, or are where they are because theirs is a less capable team?

One other purpose visits serve is to present COs with the opportunity (or burden) of listening to operators vent. Some of what a CO hears he will agree with, but cannot do much about. To what extent should he

commiserate? To what extent is he better off keeping his own counsel? Choices, again. Moreover, commanders face yet more choices when it comes to how they should best represent their subordinates' frustrations and concerns **up** the chain of command, since this is another of their obligations.

An additional 21st-century complication is that it is very difficult for commanders to make visits on the sly or without advance notice. GEN Marshall may have been able to urge his subordinate COs to roam around unannounced.

> Remembering his own experiences with the mud of France during the first war, the chief of staff suggested that commanders take road trips with no visible signs of rank on their vehicles. Without preferential treatment, they would find out for themselves what conditions actually are and take proper steps for correction of defects.[64]

However, this is extremely difficult if not impossible to do today when the only way in or out of most locations is by helicopter and security conditions are semi-permissive at best.

As for what pre-announced visits in Afghanistan (and Iraq) meant for those on the ground, operators could—nay, had no choice but to—prepare in advance for what to brief the visitor(s). Preparing to brief not only took time away from other tasks, but also introduced artifice. Ask most operators and they would say they would rather sit around and discuss, rather than have to formally "brief," what they know. Many also wondered who was fooling whom, and why they had to go through the motions; surely, a less formalized, more honest discussion would work better. But again, putting the best possible spin on the fleeting visits commanders made is that while every team might

think that it faced the most unique, difficult, interesting, or fill-in-the-blank challenges in the country, all of them confronted problems that were variations on a similar set of themes. What astute CJSOTF (and SOTF) command teams could gauge by listening to a briefing was: are subordinate commanders (in Ridgway's terms) confident? Do they know what they are doing? Do they know the terrain—and enough about the dynamics in their area of operations (AO)?

Because everyone is well schooled in **how** to brief, and because officers are supposed to know how to mentor and lead their men through briefings, briefings serve as yet another assessment device.

Operators were sometimes dismissive: what could anyone possibly learn after only a short briefing and quick tour? Or as one sergeant major (SGM) railed, why should he care what the O-6 had to say when the O-6 only bothered to visit for an hour; the O-6 should spend a couple of days; he should go out on a patrol or mission if he really wanted to understand what the teams were experiencing. To which a Battalion commander's response was that the SGM was being silly; teams have their own standard operating procedures (SOPs). Where would the SOTF or CJSOTF commander fit in close quarter battle (CQB)? The idea that anyone but actual operators (or enablers) should go patrolling **with** the team reflected little more than shortsightedness.

Interestingly, company commanders who themselves had recently been team leaders made a similar point about higher-ranking commanders swooping in for KLEs. In their view, these very important person (VIP) visits seldom helped. Instead, it was captains and their team members who needed to develop, maintain, and be able to get something from relations

they were cultivating with the locals. Whenever an O-5, O-6, or O-7 flew in to meet with the local Afghan Provincial Governor, that action undercut the O-3's authority.[65] At times, it was extremely useful for the O-3 to bring his Company or Battalion Commander to a meeting. But this was usually under the guise of being able to say to the Provincial Governor or Chief of Police: "I so value our relationship I wanted my CO to be able to meet you" and/or when very specific leverage was needed.

In sum, commanders both got to—and **had to**—make an endless number of decisions. For better or worse, everything they did could wind up being consequential. Some decisions were significant at the time. Others proved consequential only in hindsight. Preventing negative repercussions required discernment. It helped to be able to recoup from mistaken judgments quickly and/or to have the mental agility to turn inadvertent mistakes to an advantage somehow.

Fortunately, the military does an unparalleled job of stair-stepping experience, and thus builds commanders' ability to develop discernment. Ask capable field grade officers how they and those above them know what to do, and they answer that most of what officers at their level do should be intuitive. Commanders just know—thanks to the fact that at every level of command they have been given responsibility for the same three elements: money, equipment, and people.[66] With every echelon of command, they simply acquire more of each across a broader span. They also learn (or should learn) that they do not need to know how to do their subordinates' jobs; instead they need to know what their subordinates should be capable of, and they need to be able to determine how much to trust them, how to motivate them, etc.

When it works well, the ratcheted method by which the military builds competence not only instills confidence, but the ineffable usefulness of how the military does this should also underscore the structural significance of hierarchy.

However, developing good judgment depends on more than just time spent moving through positions. It also depends on the ability to read, vet, and assess people and situations quickly and accurately. Moreover, it depends on individuals' willingness to always reevaluate their assessments.[67]

CASE IN POINT: AFGHANISTAN

At every level, one finds the same command challenge: how much does a commander **need** to know, how much can or should he rely on others—and for what? Meanwhile, the "who should convey what to whom" question can be addressed in one of three ways:

1. By focusing on the **whos**—who is transmitting, who is receiving, and so on;
2. By focusing on the **means** of conveyance—e.g. via visits, video teleconferences (VTCs), emails, etc.; or,
3. By focusing on the **what**—the content of what is being transmitted.

At first glance, it might seem that **what** a commander needs to know should be dictated by, and be congruent with, geography and his span of control. However, when war is objectiveless, spans of control are hard to delineate. Indeterminacy is further compounded by multiple chains of command and other forms of churn.[68]

Two specific sources of tension co-exist. There is the tension that Eitan Shamir describes: "an inherent tension exists between the virtual world of the operational commander who constructs the frame and the physical world of the tactical commander who utilizes it," though this is a tension at least as old as command from a distance, and is something that clear communication helps mitigate.[69] The second tension is more idiosyncratic. It can be thought of as the difference between "knowledge in your head" and "knowledge in the world," with the former referring "to skills and facts that you must recall from memory, and the latter represent[ing] information that can be made easily available by the system you are operating."[70] Although this "knowledge in your head" and "knowledge in the world" distinction comes from the world of databases and the mechanics of sharing and retrieving information, it can be used to also describe the fidelity of information—information that is only as reliable as who it comes from; or, in the case of Afghanistan (and Iraq), who it comes **through**, since the source and the translator often represent two additional filters.

Reading Other People (Americans).

"The best leaders I've seen have an uncanny ability to understand, empathize, and communicate with those they lead. . . . Great leaders intuitively sense, or simply ask, how people feel and what resonates with them."[71] Here GEN McChrystal is describing what some refer to as emotional intelligence (EI), an ability or skill that has recently attracted considerable military attention.[72] Yet interestingly, one thing EI tilts against is the very thing command requires: judgment. EI calls for people to **suspend** judgment.[73] Yet,

discerning and then deciding how much trust to place in someone else's abilities and sensibilities is imperative for command.

Indeed, GEN McChrystal indicates as much when he comments that, "colorful, charismatic characters often fascinate people, even soldiers. But over time, effectiveness is what counts."[74] In other words, if you are not careful, it is easy to be fooled by powerful, yet superficial presentations of self.

Commanders are particularly prone. Here is why: the support system for those in command is designed to maximize their use of time. Attentive staffs do whatever is necessary to free up as much of a CO's time as possible, all with the aim of facilitating his decision-making. For instance, at the CJSOTF and even at SOTF levels in Afghanistan (and Iraq), COs did not have the same long waits for aircraft as subordinates did, and often had aircraft **at** their disposal. Their staffs also made all of their otherwise painful logistical co-ordinations for them.

Good staffs, meanwhile, were comprised of those who **wanted** to do this. The ideal synergy was that staff members anticipated the CO's needs and the CO appreciated their efforts. But this could also be distorting since with rank comes deference, and too much deference has the potential to turn anyone's head.

Deference up the chain can also mask character traits in subordinate commanders that are visible to others, but not to a CO. After all, from a CO's perspective, prized traits in subordinate commanders include conviction, confidence, and decisiveness, along with being smart and displaying good judgment. However, these very same traits are sometimes the hallmarks of arrogance—something that peers and others notice, but that ambitious, capable officers' immediate supe-

riors have little reason to notice. If a commander does not take the time or know how to read how his subordinates are **reading one another**, he misses this.[75]

Yes, trusted staff members can often speak useful truth to power. They can offer correctives and serve as repositories of reliable memory. But not even trusted subordinates can always fully speak their minds. At the same time, those closest to a commander are subject to being shaped in ways they are not always aware simply by being with the commander so much. For instance, COs I shadowed had little choice but to continually repeat themselves across multiple meetings, visits, and VTCs, which meant that close staff heard them say the same things over and over. Whether staff agreed or not, the conditioning over time became subliminal.

Assessing the Situation: Managing Information.

Other inadvertent distortions came with the sheer volume of the information flow. Because there was always too much information for any one individual to fully take in, the flood meant a lot always needed to be edited out.[76]

Because there were not enough hours in the day to read everything that should be read, commanders needed to rely on others to do their reading—and editing—for them. Take situation reports (SITREPS) for example. In Afghanistan, these were submitted daily from every echelon of command. That turned their production into a routine and, for many, a chore. Some commanders took minimal interest in writing or editing SITREPS. Others viewed them as an opportunity to set themselves apart and/or as a means to shape "Higher's" view.[77]

In the same way that not everyone invested the same amount of effort in writing or editing SITREPS, those tasked with monitoring events for the CO (when he was asleep, in transit, etc.) could miss or overlook minor but still significant developments.

Triage was inescapable. But what might have led some staff to also be a bit too cavalier with what they did or did not think important enough to cull and then convey was their tacit assumption that, really, anyone could pull whatever information was needed from someone, somewhere, if and when it was truly needed.[78]

But—was such an assumption correct? One problem with electronic information that everyone "knows" is easily retrievable is that smart people self-censor; they purposely leave out whatever they do not want becoming part of the permanent, retrievable record. There is nothing particularly new about this. However, depending on who is (or is not) on a distribution list, information also does not flow quite as smoothly or as openly as is assumed. A third problem is that the rampant use of email can short-circuit whatever might be gained by instead having to have an actual conversation, whether in person or by phone.[79]

However, perhaps the most significant drawback to the ceaseless flow of electrons (apart from the extent to which electrons tether everyone to computer screens) is that the volume itself can help convince commanders that they really do have a "feel." In some ways this, too, is nothing new, since as Herman Wouk wrote of Leyte Gulf during World War II:

> So far had the art of communication advanced, so powerful were the transmitters, so swift the coding, so deliberate the movements of fleets traversing long dis-

tances at twenty or twenty-five miles an hour, that the far-off high commands could watch this entire battle like Homeric gods hovering overhead, or like Napoleon on a hill at Austerlitz. The Battle of Leyte Gulf was not only the biggest sea fight of all time, it was unique in having all these distant spectators; unique, too, in the flood of on-the-spot facts pouring out of transmitters and cryptographic machines.

It is interesting, therefore, that nobody on the scene, or anywhere else in the world, really knew what the hell was going on. There never was a denser fog of war. All the sophisticated communication only spread and thickened it.[80]

Or, as one CO in Afghanistan put it, "tactical GOs can't see all the terrain. 'Why aren't you going over there?' Well sir, there's a cliff you can't see."

Again, none of this is particularly novel. Tom Ricks, for instance, quotes a Vietnam-era general who noted that:

In Vietnam many low-level commanders were subject to a hornet's nest of helicopters carrying higher commanders calling for information, offering advice, making unwanted decisions and generally interfering with what squad leaders and platoon leaders and company commanders were trying to do.[81]

Nevertheless, one by-product of the military's ever-improving ability to monitor itself is the sense that micro-management **has** intensified. So, too, has the hustling of expertise.

Vetting Others: Expertise.

Who has actual expertise, who doesn't, and in what exactly looms especially large given the degree to which CGs have increasingly come to rely on outside experts for advice, and sometimes for cover.[82] Tom Ricks suggests that:

> the addition of SAMS [School of Advanced Military Studies] graduates to the ranks of lieutenant colonels and colonels may have reinforced the trend among generals toward tactical orientation, by making the senior officers believe—falsely—that they did not need to think and read deeply about their profession, because the Army was producing officers who could do that for them.[83]

As Ricks goes on to write:

> It is not difficult to find experienced officers who are uneasy with how today's generals operate. 'They have somewhat abdicated their role in developing their intent or guidance, their vision,' concluded Army Col. Dale Eikmeier, who served as a strategic planner in Iraq. 'They've subcontracted that out to staff officers to come up with an intent or guidance for them.'[84]

But, as Fred Kaplan makes clear in *The Insurgents*, GOs haven't just restricted themselves to advice from uniformed advisors.[85] As he notes of GEN Odierno, "wherever Odierno went . . . he brought [Emma] Sky along. . . . Odierno was once asked by a fellow general officer what he got from her. He replied, she helps me with the *why*."[86]

At least Emma Sky had prior familiarity with the Middle East. The same cannot be said for many other experts who might claim expertise about counter-

insurgency (COIN) or counterterrorism (CT), but who, prior to 9/11, had never previously spent time on their own in Afghanistan (or Iraq), and spoke no local language.[87]

Among the dangers that inhere in commanders' growing reliance on others for regional expertise is that without having familiarity with the topic, subject, or area themselves, how are they supposed to be able to gauge how expert any "expert" really is?[88]

By way of example, I sat through one battalion level briefing about local tribal dynamics. The individuals doing the speaking knew the material: names, place names, tribal connections, the broad pattern of population movements, and so on; they clearly had mastered the facts. But theirs was a mechanistic mastery, as if once they had been told which interactions to focus on they were smart enough to collect and assemble that data. Yet, there was no indication that they could see any dynamics beyond those they had been asked to follow. No matter how much new data they might gather, it was clear they did not intuitively grasp the nature of Afghan (or tribal) politicking.

While these three briefers **were** more knowledgeable than their peers, and earned their peers' respect as a consequence, at least their peers did not unduly defer to them; their advice was not going to be sought on matters beyond what they had been tasked to pay attention to. In contrast, credentialed outside experts brought in to Afghanistan (or Iraq) were often asked for advice well beyond whatever firsthand knowledge they might possess. Since "subject matter experts" were just as prone to the seductions that come with deference as anyone in uniform—and maybe even more so when senior military commanders were soliciting their opinion—how many could then resist straying beyond what they actually did know?

The economy of prestige deeply affected access to top commanders and vice versa. For instance, once someone reached a dominant position as an advisor, they typically stayed there since, if GENs X, Y, and Z made use of them, they were clearly presumed to know their stuff. It is quite possible that such individuals did provide the best possible advice. But another dynamic was also generally at work: those who allowed themselves to be considered "experts" also tended to be gifted at being able to read what GENs thought they needed to learn.

In fairness, and as this Letort Paper has tried to describe, commanders at all levels were always strapped for time. It thus made sense for them to rely on those who could cut to the chase with confidence to include which linguists and cultural advisors that CGs, especially, listened to.[89] The more Westernized an interpreter and/or cultural advisor was, the easier they were for CGs (or for anyone Western) to understand, and the better these particular Afghans appeared to be at cross-cultural translation.[90] However, as less adept seeming interpreters liked to point out, fluency in educated English typically meant an individual had spent considerable time **outside** of Afghanistan. Often, but not always, this signaled (to anyone paying attention) that they were probably not as plugged into local politics as someone with deeper local ties, but a broken accent.

Because money and prestige flowed from having the commander's ear, from traveling with the commander, etc., interpreters/cultural advisors became more than just proprietary about access—they became de facto gatekeepers.

In many regards, such dependencies were unavoidable.[91] Nor were all of them detrimental.

For instance, it was extraordinarily illuminating to travel with one CJSOTF commander who had an extremely close relationship with his cultural advisor who he also used as his interpreter. Together, they spent their time visiting Afghans, leaving it to the CO's command team to make the types of command and BFC visits described earlier.[92]

In fact, the way this particular CO (whom I'll call CO X) checked up on how well or how poorly his subordinate commanders were performing was to ask the Afghans he visited for **their** assessment. In many regards, this was the perspective every SF CO should have sought. However, few had the contacts CO X did, or, quite frankly, the desire to visit Afghans every day. Nor could anyone have developed the same relations he had—and certainly not over the course of just one or two rotations. Instead, to do what he did required having been in Afghanistan at the outset of the war, returning over and over to the same area, **and** having a cultural advisor who would keep him well-informed during those times when he was away from Afghanistan.

By 2013 or 2014, it was too late to build either the reputation or the connections necessary to operate the way CO X did, but CO X was rare for an additional reason: he genuinely enjoyed tending to his network, and behaved quite atypically for someone of his rank.

For example, when meeting with Afghans, CO X would speak little, ask occasional "tell us what you think" questions, offer encouragement rather than direct advice, nod frequently, and demonstrate engagement by thoughtfully plucking raisins or nuts slowly, one by one, from the tray in front of him (platters of nuts and raisins being as ubiquitous as cups of tea). CO X's body language was always relaxed. Yet through-

out, he was poised, ready to offer an expeditious favor as soon as he determined the moment (and the favor) was right. Sometimes this might involve arranging medical care for someone who was sick or hurt; sometimes it meant promising that his Civil Affairs teams would deliver humanitarian assistance. The key was to always offer something tangible and never leave a meeting without having promised a favor that could be delivered within a few days. This is how he banked goodwill. His subtext was: "I did for you; you know I did for you. You know I can. You know I will. So, take care of my guys."

By promising to deliver only what he knew he could, CO X set himself apart from other Americans in Afghan eyes while, from his perspective, every favor he could do bought his operators that much more freedom of maneuver.[93] To accomplish this, though, required that he travel non-stop. He also had to make frequent return visits to lots of people—both to remind them that he had done them favors, and to remind them that he was poised to do them more.

Thanks to this non-stop circulation, CO X was able to traffic in, correct, and, to a certain extent, control information. By alluding to what other Afghans had told him, or who he was visiting next, he let Afghan generals, politicians, warlords, and former warlords know just how many other Afghans he was visiting, which made everyone he visited want to then keep him in their loop, too.

The fact that CO X's cultural advisor, Z, was integral to setting up these meetings and to translating during them granted CO X further latitude to be reflective rather than reactive over the course of a conversation. Because Z was with CO X all the time, CO X knew he could count on Z to remember who had said

what about whom. Between them, they could thus adjust whatever they thought they knew according to what they learned since they were continually gleaning new information. In CO X's view, "every time you think you've got something figured out, along comes something that proves you don't. Some things we just don't understand. We have to find the Afghans who do."[94]

Did CO X end up being too dependent on Z? Perhaps. But unless or until an American commander can be both linguistically and culturally fluent **and** plugged into formal and informal power flows on his own, it is hard to conceive of an alternative—which is why being able to accurately assess not only Americans is a critical skill.[95]

Assessing the Situation: Understanding Politics.

What CO X managed to do at the national level, astute operators and officers tried to do at the district and provincial levels. Good teams did round robins of KLEs and used these and other methods of collecting information to try to keep up with the pick-up sticks nature of Afghan politics.

As one GO described Afghanistan in 2014, it was a "tactical mosaic."[96] Or as another commander with extensive Iraq experience reflected, "Unlike Iraq, everything is so local that it isn't possible to find a lever to turn that can shift the whole thing—or a critical mass. There *is* no whole thing or critical mass."[97]

Although SF soldiers have long been lauded for their linguistic and regional expertise, SF's actual skill in Afghanistan (and Iraq) did not lie in either linguistic or cultural fluency. Instead, it rested in teams' abilities to stitch together entities that had not previously and

might not otherwise work together, thereby enabling the sum of the parts to act as a more effective whole than would otherwise be possible.

Arguably, **the** challenge Afghanistan posed to SOF teams was that they could never find or create enough effective and/or trustworthy Afghan partners. Here, fluency in Pashtu or Dari or deeper local familiarity would not have helped. No question, knowledgeable Afghan hands had a considerable head start when it came to understanding intra-Afghan dynamics. But astute commanders were surprisingly effective at inspiring some analysts and operators to **want** to figure out who, as in which Afghans, within their AO, could do what to whom—when, where, and with what.

As one Battalion commander put it, he did not want his teams to try to get a District Chief of Police or other political appointee removed simply because that individual was hard to work with or no good. Instead, he wanted his teams to figure out **why** that individual had been appointed in the first place, and by whom; who benefited from his being there? As this CO explained, incompetents might be kept in office because that permitted local power brokers to continue to do as they pleased; sometimes weak individuals were emplaced **because** someone (or multiple someones) needed a person in that position **to be** weak.

This particular CO did his best to get his subordinates to think in terms of predictive analysis—and to appreciate the fact that Karzai and those around him exhibited clear political genius. For instance, whenever Karzai put an individual into a position of power, he set the conditions to ensure a rival could undercut or contest that power. It was therefore up to the Battalion to study the entire suite of changes that were made whenever a personnel change occurred—to include

in areas outside their AO; looking at just a single po-
litical appointment never revealed enough, not when
Karzai's method was to position and reposition every-
one so that he could retain sufficient leverage over just
enough people.[98]

Thinking in these terms came naturally to some
commanders, and to some of their operators and ana-
lysts. Others got it once it was explained. But for yet
others, the nature of Afghan politics was not the least
bit logical. They therefore needed to be talked through
the multiple "if . . . then" steps required to get from "**if**
we can divert, interrupt, or stop the flow of patronage,
goods, or services from this particular powerbroker
over here, **then** that will do X, Y, and Z to these other
powerbrokers over there."

Meanwhile, the fact that at least some SF command-
ers could appreciate the nature of Afghan-style poli-
tics, and could do so on their first deployment without
speaking either Dari or Pashtu, should turn one piece
of accepted wisdom on its head: being steeped in the
local language and culture may not be as necessary
for assessing foreign situations as has been assumed.[99]
Instead, **affinity** (and developing a "feel for") may be
far more important than "expertise," which often only
consists of a command over information.

Complicating Factors.

Some might contend that anything the U.S. military
sought to do in Afghanistan would have generated an
inherently wicked problem given the neighborhood,
the local culture, tribal politics, etc. Elsewhere I have
written about the problems that arise when there is no
Declaration of War, and in the "OVERVIEW" of this
Letort Paper I cited issues associated with a lack of

objectives.[100] But certainly, fighting by coalition introduced a further set of complications, especially when troop-contributing countries each pursued different agendas (and strategies) and brought with them different caveats about what their soldiers could and could not do.

Coordination and deconfliction with ISAF forces absorbed considerable command time, energy, and manpower.[101] So did working with interagency partners, conventional U.S. forces, and others. Contending with so many different players required continual adjustments and readjustments, especially as units — and augmentees — rotated in and out of theater on separate schedules. Endless churn inspired everything from apathy on the part of some, to an almost frantic need by others to make their mark, especially if they were on what might be their one and only combat rotation. Consequently, there were a host of legitimate (and not just self-interested) reasons for different component commanders and their staffs to try to influence, manipulate, or pitch, persuade, and out-pitch each other. The fact that some referred to what went on as "stakeholder fratricide" should speak volumes.

One unfortunate source of parochialism was (again) that too many individuals had too little to do beyond focus on work that consisted of sitting in front of computer screens. Literally, and not just figuratively, this reinforced myopia. At the same time, there were so many different entities spread across the country and/or housed in their own camps on larger bases that mixing across United States, never mind ISAF forces, was minimal.[102] Self-segregation then made it that much easier for people to fixate on and pursue their own agendas, particularly when they regarded Afghanistan as a giant training area or

opportunity—an ideal place to test equipment, improve SOPs, and acquire critical combat skills.

While some, or indeed most, participants and/or observers might attribute Coalition disarray to the lack of an overarching strategy, my contention is that without **a singular hierarchy** no leader could have afforded to "**let** 100 arguments/Courses of Actions bloom" and expect anything of lasting value to emerge.

Or, to rephrase this: it is important but incomplete to think that simply developing a coherent strategy is all that will be required to do better in the future. This is because **developing** is too easy; smart staffs excel at being able to develop and produce smart papers. Take, for instance, GEN Dempsey's "Mission Command" *White Paper*. It is full of clever writing and compelling-sounding sentences. For example, "Tempo is our ability to operate at the speed of the problem." But—what exactly does this mean?[103]

Or, "The global application of integrated, discriminate military power in all domains calls for us to organize and conduct networked operations, where any force element can support or be supported by any other."[104] Which employs a lot of buzzwords, but who exactly bears the responsibility for orchestrating this?

Or, "Subordinate echelons must be allowed to own their own 'white space'"—which leaves unexplained how far white space might extend or the extent to which those who own their own white space would also get to control their own assets (consisting of what, we don't know).[105]

On the face of it, it is hard to argue with the sentiment behind Mission Command. But try to figure out how to operationalize what GEN Dempsey's *White Paper* describes and the tenets begin to feel more like

platitudes than anything practicable. For instance, what kind of structure is needed for Mission Command to be executed as the Army conceives it? And does such a structure currently exist?

The honest answer is probably "not quite." Certainly, no such structure existed in Afghanistan (or Iraq). Nor can or will a war-winning structure exist without first returning to first principles about hierarchy.

SINGULAR HIERARCHY + OWNERSHIP

The gist of the argument to be presented in this section is that a firm, clear hierarchy is essential to pursue any military endeavor effectively.[106] Corollary to this is that whoever is in charge also needs to know he will "own" his problem (e.g. Afghanistan, Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria [ISIS], etc.) until he has resolved it or until he is removed on the unlikely chance that the objectives he sets he cannot meet.[107]

"Singular hierarchy" shouldn't, but probably would, require a serious reexamination of civil-military relations—a topic to which this Letort Paper will return in passing in the section "FURTHER THOUGHTS AND OTHER APPROACHES." The aim here is to simply suggest that there may be more than just a correlation to the fact that big egos clashed during World War II, but with GEN Marshall in command, his "team of rivals" was able to successfully define objectives **and** defeat the enemy.[108]

Ethnographic Truths—Part 2.

In *Command Culture*, Jörg Muth writes that:

> The sharpest and most devastating weapon the U.S. Army could possess today in the War against Terror is not a new computer system, a sophisticated unmanned aerial vehicle, or a smart artillery shell; it is rather a carefully selected, aggressive hard-core Battalion or brigade commander who was exposed to a large dose of military history, is trusted by his superiors to conduct his own operations, and oversees them wherever the bullets fly.[109]

I would add to Muth's formulation that a commander should also be able to read people, vet information, and assess situations—and, I would submit, know something about the adversary.

It is also hard to disagree with Muth when he writes that the U.S. military has a distinct weakness for technology. But—what about its penchant to train, to practice, to improve, and to train some more?[110] The U.S. military's drive to conduct after action reviews and then re-set is a key strength which has nothing to do with technology per se, but helps explain why, before Rangers conduct something like a night Company Live Fire exercise, they conduct days' worth of practice runs, and a week's worth of platoon live fires (conducted day **and** night). It is also why the Battalion commander will participate in every hotwash with every platoon after every iteration—to model the ethos that performance can always be tweaked and improved, and total commitment matters.

Another core U.S. military strength lies in the layering of effects. Consider, for example, how SF teams prepare to train foreign forces. Teams determine what

needs to be achieved (both from the U.S. and the host nation's perspectives), then work backwards to build into the plan of instruction (POI) how they want the training to "build," with the proviso that training should always teach more than just "shoot, move, and communicate" skills. It should reinforce for foreign forces the value of **wanting** to conduct training, and should instill an appreciation for why planning to do training and why attending to logistical details matters.[111]

If design and attention to logistical detail are one clear upside to the American military personality, the relentless drive to **make things** better is another. Units will tweak or fix and re-engineer anything they can. Nothing showcases this better than the robust supply, communications, and logistics systems erected in two broken countries—Afghanistan and Iraq—half a world away from the continental United States.

However, the downside to the American propensity to engineer is that while certain kinds of processes lend themselves to continual improvement, others do not. Certain things about humans **cannot** be re-engineered. Instead, they need to be accommodated and **used**.[112] This brings me to hierarchy.

Hierarchy.

Humans are status-seeking social animals. By definition, status contests upset the status quo—if not permanently, then temporarily. In conditions of extreme flux or turmoil, people will turn to whoever or whatever they think they can rely on: a leader, elders, the state, or some entity that they hope will take charge to protect them and restore order.[113]

The clearest evidence that these observations hold true cross-culturally, and therefore describe an inescapable dimension of the human condition, is the fact that status competitions can be found under all systems of governance and in all types of society.[114] Pecking orders emerge in every kind of group setting—in prisons, on juries, and among hostages. In some cases, hierarchies are formalized, which means they are fixed—and whoever is in charge will remain in charge until the rules or someone else successfully says otherwise. In other instances, leadership is impermanent, and whom people look up to depends on which skilled individual they need to turn to at the time (e.g. a master hunter, healer, elder, etc.). Clear, too, is that the human default is to only defer to those whom you want or must defer to; to avoid those you don't want to defer to (if you can); and to elicit deference (should you choose to) from those who rank beneath you.

We see these principles at work especially vividly during wartime among soldiers who **want** to follow leaders who know what they are doing; who project confidence, courage, and vision; who have integrity; and who are fair, principled, and also consistent, in the sense that followers, peers, and superiors always know where they stand with them.[115]

In the popular imagination, hierarchy might seem to imply that everyone is always striving for dominance all of the time. But reality belies this since one effect of hierarchy is to establish order and reinforce orderliness. Or as Alison Fragale, who studies organizational behavior, once told a *Wall Street Journal* reporter, "For all the egalitarian talk, people really like hierarchy. It is extremely functional in order to complete tasks. Without a leader, a lot of time is wasted

with mutual deference but eventually a hierarchy will form."[116]

Or, as Jeffrey Pfeffer puts it:

> hierarchy is a fundamental structural principle of all organizational systems . . . hierarchy is not only a general feature of many if not most systems, but, in fact, makes complexity — including complex, coordinated social and physical arrangements — possible.[117]

For thousands of years, militaries have made productive use of hierarchy; what makes an up-or-out system like that of the U.S. military so interesting is that it manages to stoke competition within while simultaneously freezing direct contestation. Indeed, one of the strongest arguments made on behalf of hierarchy lurks in one of GEN McChrystal's comments about leadership, which, at the end of a long career, he still considers to be the sine qua non of organizational success. In *My Share of the Task*, McChrystal describes what he used to tell junior leaders in the 82nd Airborne Division:

> Switch just two people — the Battalion commander and command sergeant major [CSM] — from the best Battalion with those of the worst, and within ninety days the relative effectiveness of the Battalions will have switched as well.[118]

What is telling about this example is whom GEN McChrystal chooses to switch out: the Battalion commander and CSM. In doing so, he has not chosen just any two people. Instead, he has chosen individuals at the top of their respective hierarchies.

To be sure, no one today has suggested that the military abandon hierarchy. But there are suggestions

that it should be flattened. Even former GOs like GEN McChrystal argue that more should be made of networks, as if networks are capable of commanding or controlling anything.[119]

My research — and his example, actually, as a leader who his subordinates **wanted** to follow — suggest the opposite. To wage war effectively, the military not only needs **a** hierarchy, but it needs a **singular hierarchy** to prosecute the war. Otherwise, the competition **among** hierarchies — that is rampant today — will continue to do a disservice to those commanders who expect **their** commanders to **be able to command**.

Singular Hierarchy.

In *Transforming Command*, Eitan Shamir notes that, "Although military organizations rely on a centralized, narrow span of control that creates tall structures, they are becoming increasingly differentiated due to the increasing number of specialized units."[120] This leads Shamir to conclude that with more specialization, more coordination will be required. However, we should wonder, is coordination sufficient?

For GEN George C. Marshall 70+ years ago, the answer was a resolute "no."

> 'I am convinced,' the army chief of staff told the officers assembled in the crowded conference room on December 26 [1941] 'that there must be one man in command of the entire theater — air, ground and ships. We cannot manage by cooperation. Human frailties are such that there would be emphatic unwillingness to place portions of troops under another service. If we can make a plan for unified command now, it will solve nine-tenths of our troubles.'[121]

Or, same war, different perspective:

> The core of Franklin Roosevelt's malignant military genius lay in these simple rules: to pick generals and admirals with care, to leave strategy and tactics to them, and attend only to the politics of the war; never to interfere in operations; never to relieve leaders who encountered honorable reverses; and to allow all the glory to those who won victories. When Roosevelt died, the supreme command in the field was virtually the original team. This steadiness paid dividends. Shake-ups in military command can cost much momentum, *élan*, and fighting effectiveness. The shuffling of generals by Hitler was our plague.[122]

Among the many things singular hierarchy would demand and enable is vision, as well as unity of command **and** effort.

With a singular hierarchy, there would be no room for "indifference creep." More significantly, the time devoted to having to try to negotiate with fellow-Americans would be dramatically cut. As previously mentioned, SF commanders in Afghanistan (and Iraq) often found themselves having to work hard at relations with conventional battlespace owners whose goodwill they needed so that their teams could conduct operations. When relations were tense or less than amicable, SF commanders would joke that visits to conventional commanders required utilization of their unconventional warfare skills. However, even when relations were good, SOF commanders and their staffs still had to expend considerable effort on building and cementing rapport with fellow Americans.[123]

While there is every indication that collaboration works best during a crisis (at least for as long as the crisis lasts), peers **are** competitors. Consequently, in

a collaborative environment, if someone does not want to be forthcoming or does not want to assist, who can make him? Contrast this with what would be achieved if there were a singular hierarchy and a sole commander, as well as a single overarching staff: now someone (or a set of someones) would be responsible for knowing what all components were up to. It would also then be up to that command staff to delegate and thereby keep parties de-conflicted.

Would having a singular hierarchy mitigate all competition? Hardly, but if deliberative speed was considered a necessity during World War II—"The very speed of modern war demanded summary judgment, however harsh it was; Marshall had too little time to agonize over decisions"[124]—then imagine the costs that have been sunk in efforts made to **coordinate** to collaborate today; this makes an absolute mockery of deliberativeness.[125]

Of course, another consequential benefit to a singular hierarchy would be to eliminate seams that canny adversaries learn to exploit.

Singular Hierarchy + Ownership.

As just described, one rationale for a singular hierarchy would be to enable everyone to cut to the chase faster. A second is captured in the slogan, "one team, one fight." For as many times as one heard this line in Afghanistan (and Iraq), in reality the only way to make such a concept real is for the commander heading the effort to be given the opportunity to do so from beginning to end. No retiring. No cashing in before the war has been won.

Among the many pay-offs a "singular hierarchy + ownership" approach would yield is that the com-

mander and his command team would have every incentive to craft a strategy that: 1) could actually be executed—particularly since they would be the ones responsible for executing it; but 2) in such a way as to get them back home in as little time as it takes to complete the job, 3) with no prospect of their having to return to finish the job at a later date. Even better, with their reputation(s) on the line and with no ability to cast blame elsewhere, the command team would have little choice but to fully invest in **all** of the forces under its command since these would now be **its** forces.

Ownership would not just recalibrate commitment throughout the force (top-down, bottom-up, and laterally), but with greater continuity would come greater familiarity—familiarity with the problem set, with the adversary, with local allies, and among subordinate units.

Continuity and familiarity would redound in numerous ways. Officers would no longer need to try to sell themselves to "Higher" quite so relentlessly. Nor would talented S-2s have to spend so much of their time countering others' intelligence reports and analyses, which occurs whenever different shops look through different soda straws, and when everyone has a different conception of the mission and therefore concentrates on different things.

As Antonio Giustozzi noted, one consequence of the churn already underway in Afghanistan in 2007 was that "The actual impact of different strategies is difficult to assess, not least because changes occurred so frequently that there was no time for the outcome of a particular approach to become obvious."[126] Similarly, it is hard to read David Cloud and Greg Jaffe's account about the four-starred generals who presided over the effort in Iraq (Chiarelli, Casey, Abizaid, and

Petraeus) and not question the assessment that GEN Casey's approach was doomed. Or that GEN Chiarelli's approach was fatally flawed. Perhaps the problem was less that either man was wrong than that neither was granted sufficient time or command authority to effect the strategy he thought most appropriate.

Consider, too, what churn permitted our putative "host nation" allies to do. One could easily substitute "Afghanistan" for "Iraq" in the following:

> An Iraqi general once related how it was easy to handle a new American commander working on a 1-year timeline. First, he said, you would decline to meet with him, or simply not show up. Next, you could have a series of sessions at which you resisted the changes he was recommending. In the third phase, you would begin to agree but argue over implementation. Finally, about 8 months into the talks, you would slowly begin making his desired changes. By month 10, he noted, the American commander's focus would shift to his impending redeployment, and the pressure was off. Then, at month 13, the American commander's successor would sit down for a cup of tea, and the cycle would begin again.[127]

Of course, serial turnovers did not just work against us with allies or adversaries. Churn also undermined the confidence American troops should have been able to place in **their commanders**.

Again, GEN McChrystal may reveal more than he intends in the following passage (in which he describes a visit he made to a platoon in Zhari at the platoon leader's invitation):

> Any progress I could see from a wider view of Afghanistan was impossible to discern from their mud-walled world. War has often been that way. Like leaders before me, I was asking soldiers to believe in something their

ground-level perspective denied them. I was asking them to believe in a strategy impossible to guarantee, and in progress that was hard to see, much less prove. They were asked to risk themselves to bring improvements that might take years to arise. Although war is a product and instrument of national policy, that reality feels distant and theoretical to the soldier leaning exhausted against a mud wall. As a commander, I was asking them to believe in me. Whether they did was often hard to judge.[128]

However, the unasked question is: Why should they have believed in GEN McChrystal when he was just going to be one of a succession of generals placed "in charge"?[129]

Other Issues.

Again, one reason **some "one" needs to be in charge** is so that all those beneath him are clear on where they belong in his pecking order and where they belong vis-à-vis one another. Talk to GENs' aides and others who are privy to GO interactions. Many find the jockeying and skirmishing they see GOs do behind each other's backs deeply troubling. Some attribute this to GO culture. Or, as I heard one senior NCO say in Afghanistan:

officers have a coded, indirect way of talking to each other in reference to their protégés. Even if someone else's protégés are thought to be no good, no one does anything because payback will affect *their* protégés. It's all about building networks and protégés who will protect and help make their COs' reputation.[130]

There is a very deep irony in the fact that those engaging in this kind of indirect gamesmanship do so

on behalf of earning more stars so that they can be directive. Some see an institutional pathology at work in GO behavior, and:

> an organizational culture that discourages subordinate dissent or disagreement. Although high levels of assertiveness are espoused in the Army, in practice, neither the subordinate nor the leader typically expects direct, tough pushback to a leader's thoughts or ideas.[131]

But—if a leader were truly confident, why **would** he fear dissent or disagreement?[132] As for what would lend a leader confidence, how about being sure of his position and of the objectives? As for what might serve as a check on arrogance, that could and should be **reputation**.

Here is where I can begin to connect the dots. Under a "singular hierarchy + ownership" construct, the war would belong, in reputation, to one man and his staff. It is hard to imagine a heavier, more sobering burden.[133]

Let me quickly mention two other things "singular hierarchy + ownership" would mitigate before turning to my final contention that nothing is more likely to promote or protect diversity of thought than "singular hierarchy + ownership."

First, shortsightedness, as Bernd Horn has written:

> Within the military there seems to be a lack of patience and a perpetual rush to get things done 'now' . . . there seems to be a plethora of false deadlines. As a result, often the necessary intellectual rigour is absent. Good enough to meet the remit becomes essential.[134]

Unfortunately, expedience rewards shallow work. Second, it also tends to reward it too soon. For instance, as several writers have noted, GEN Petraeus courted fame, or at least renown, long before he became a GO. According to David Cloud and Greg Jaffe, after only 3 months in Haiti, Petraeus co-authored an article, "triumphantly titled 'Winning the Peace'," in which he:

> argued that 'in detail of planning and degree of coordination the effort to stand Haiti back up after taking it down broke new ground. . . . An environment conducive to political, social and economic development has been created in Haiti.'[135]

Cloud and Jaffe characterize this as an "exuberant overstatement," particularly since Petraeus's "three-month tour was not enough time to make any lasting improvements, and when the last U.S. troops left the island a year after Petraeus, conditions rapidly deteriorated."[136]

But expedience encourages careerists to fudge in other ways as well. For example, Tom Ricks describes and then cites from a report commissioned by GEN Westmoreland after the My Lai massacre, which:

> pointed toward a new model of officer that was emerging . . . "an ambitious, transitory commander—marginally skilled in the complexity of his duties—engulfed in producing statistical results, fearful of personal failure, too busy to talk with or listen to his subordinates, and determined to submit acceptably optimistic reports which reflect faultless completion of a variety of tasks at the expense of the sweat and frustration of his subordinates."[137]

Careerism did not start in Vietnam, as Ricks notes, and as anyone who has read Anton Myrer's saga, *Once*

An Eagle, knows. One change that **is** noticeable since Myrer's day, however, is the non-maturing effects of combat. Let me explain. The anthropological term for being suspended in a zone where normal rules do not apply is liminality. What liminality is supposed to do is move individuals from the state they were in to a different, more mature stage of life. Sadly, this does not describe what the past decade and a half has wrought for many veterans, who have been subject to the moral wear and tear of having to build rapport with bad or questionable allies over the course of multiple Groundhog Day-like rotations.[138]

At the best of times, a certain romance attaches to being able to skirt the law and break the rules, which is what working with warlords and corrupt power brokers in Afghanistan both required and enabled. "Dealing in the gray," as operators call it, **is** seductive. Case in point, again: Jim Gant who, as some who knew him are quick to point out, did not really operate all that differently from other team leaders (though some of his infractions were more egregious).

Combine "dealing in the gray" with a lack of objectives, however, and corrosiveness is bound to set in. For instance, upon turning over team command in 2004, Gant told his team: "We will never win in Afghanistan. . . . But know—now and always—that does not matter. That is an irrelevant fact. It gives us a place to go and fight, it gives us a place to go and be warriors. That's it."[139] Several years later, after still more time spent in Afghanistan, Ann Scott Tyson concedes (or boasts) that "Jim was fighting not for his country but for his family, his men, and his tribe."[140]

There is no way to know whether a "singular hierarchy + ownership" rubric might have prevented the torquing of someone like Jim Gant. But under a

"singular hierarchy + ownership" rubric it is hard to imagine that someone like him would have shot to rockstar status in quite the way he did, or would have been permitted—nay, enabled—to break as many laws as he did. Certainly, at a minimum, he would have known why he was fighting.[141]

Here is where, again, GEN McChrystal is revealing as he points out that sound mental health depends on knowing you can count on certain things. For instance, the philosophy he applied at Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC): "Our discipline of schedules, processes, and standards did not reduce adaptability or creativity. It was the foundation that allowed for it."[142]

Or consider the example described earlier: life on forward operating bases (FOBs) freed soldiers to do nothing but concentrate on work. Classically, the military goes to extraordinary lengths to try to take care of soldiers' physical (and, today, family readiness) needs. Yet, curiously, over the course of the past decade and a half it has not provided those it is grooming for command with the type of leadership **they** most need. It has not optimized the one thing it always has as its disposal. Instead, it has made a hash of hierarchy.

Variation.

Despite what many assert, being able to master the complexities of 21st-century warfare, as it ricochets among tribal shatter zones and as it gives rise to "little green men," does not require that every or even most officers acquire master's degrees, let alone a doctorate. Instead, the breadth and depth that future COs need requires a certain turn of mind first and foremost.

As James Q. Wilson put it several decades ago:

> a major responsibility of an executive is not only . . . to infuse the organization with value, it is also to discover a way by which different values (and the different cultures that espouse those values) can productively coexist.[143]

Or, from what I have seen, what commanders most need to be able to do is to read people, vet information, assess situations, value variation, **and** judge worth accurately.

Appreciating how to best take advantage of variation within the force is critically important. Otherwise, as Jeffrey Pfeffer has written: "The ego-based bias in favor of those who look, act, or in other ways remind people of themselves makes eliminating discrimination in organizational career processes both difficult and unlikely.[144] Or, as Tim Kane notes: "All of the services use processes for designating, distributing, evaluating, and promoting their human capital that are designed *not* to value heterogeneous talent [italics in original]."[145]

Today, diversity has come to mean two of this color, three from that heritage, or four soldiers who are transgendered. Yet, the heterogeneity commanders most need is in mental aptitude and affinities.[146] Unfortunately, until diversity in mental agility receives more sustained attention and is emphasized, the easy fallback will likely remain superficial variation.

To be sure, seeking, encouraging, and protecting subordinates who have a penchant for solving problems differently poses its own set of command challenges. Also, no matter how important it is for commanders to learn to appreciate variation, "appreciation" alone will prove insufficient.[147] This is

because a true "democracy of ideas" is never possible when there are multiple hierarchies. With multiple hierarchies, too many individuals compete at the highest levels. That competition in turn leads to too many turf battles and too much tribalism. Lineages of acolytes themselves begin to compete. Worse may be the underside of competition: risk aversion—with ideas especially.

Or to come at this from a slightly different angle, consider what a "singular hierarchy + ownership" rubric should make possible. First, **the** (not **a**, but **the**) CG would gain nothing if he could not craft and execute a war-winning strategy. Instead, he would only stand to lose—the commander in chief's confidence, reputation, **everything**. Imagine if he then knew that he had numerous subordinates who thought differently enough from him that he could be sure they wouldn't just generate as many different courses of action as possible, but would also constructively sharp shoot each other, and him. Under the "one team/one fight" and ownership-for-the-duration rubric, his staff and his subordinate commanders would be responsible for identifying achievable objectives. Under this rubric, only the problem set—the nature of the adversary and what would be required to attain a decisive win—would determine the parameters of the thinkable, not whatever anyone might second-guess his preferences to be.

Of course, it is always possible that a CG with this much leeway might still surround himself with subordinates who would have their own reasons for letting (or leading) him to believe he is smarter than they are, and so always knows best—to which the obvious corrective would be: commanders should only ever be chosen wisely. GEN Marshall, for example, did not

succumb. However, the fact that generals under him did suggests that some additional checks would be required.[148]

FURTHER THOUGHTS AND OTHER APPROACHES

As James Q. Wilson writes in *Bureaucracy*:

All complex organizations display bureaucratic problems of confusion, red tape, and the avoidance of responsibility. These problems are much greater in government bureaucracies because government itself is the institutionalization of confusion (arising out of the need to moderate competing demands); of red tape (arising out of the need to satisfy demands that cannot be moderated); and of avoided responsibility (arising out of the desire to retain power by minimizing criticism).[149]

This seems an apt description for what many O-4s, O-5s, and O-6s (and others) have experienced over the past 15 years, something that, in theory, a "singular hierarchy + ownership" approach should obviate. As for the one dimension that Wilson did not consider—time—the rubric should actually help with this, too.

The military **could** exert more control over time than it does. However, it cannot do so when, as we have seen, there is a continual pull for information from the field, or when commanders do not feel they can afford to step back and fully digest the information that bombards them. This especially troubles some senior NCOs who **want** officers to be able to think big and reflect; in their view, this is what commanders exist to do.

Meanwhile, because time **in** command is so compressed, officers only get so many chances to make no mistakes **and** to make their mark. Or, to return to the glass ball/rubber ball analogy: if there isn't much an O-4, O-5, or O-6 commander can do during his one 8-month rotation **except** to try to avoid mistakes, why should he treat the war as a glass ball and his career as a rubber ball? He has every incentive instead to treat his career as the glass ball, and the war as something he can dribble to his successor.

Limited command time also makes it extremely difficult to be creative. At the tactical and operational levels, bursts of creativity occur. However, at the strategic level, more than just bureaucracy impedes imagination since, typically, those who rise in the system do so by learning what is or is not likely to gain them acceptance by "Higher." The conditioning begins early. Or as a captain pointed out in a class many years ago: lieutenants don't know enough to realize what isn't possible; MAJs, LTCs, and COLs do, and so they self-censor.

The press of time also causes senior leaders to be in a perpetual hunt for silver bullets, a hunt that helps explain the rapid lionization of individuals like Jim Gant. It also helps explain why efforts like VSO were conducted countrywide in Afghanistan despite being suitable only for certain locales. Or why "three cups of tea" became a mantra for how everyone should build rapport.

"Next new things" that promise a shortcut and/ or easy mass production are understandably alluring, especially since whether they actually address the problem at hand only seems to matter in retrospect and/or should they fail outright. For instance, GEN Dempsey's "Mission Command" *White Paper* cites

the decision cycle of observe, orient, decide, and act, (OODA loop)—which may have been a brilliant tool for re-conceptualizing air-to-air dogfights. But the idea of creating "situations wherein one can make appropriate decisions more quickly than one's opponent," only—maybe—works when confronting near-peer competitors who either already think like us or whose decision-making we know we can accurately predict.[150] Thus far, no evidence suggests that we can out-adapt non-peer non-Westerners. More to the point, as important as getting inside the adversary's decision cycle might seem, doing so does not address how to get the adversary to undo himself.

Nor do we seem to be any closer to cracking the code on the method that GEN McChrystal describes his strategic hero, ADM Horatio Nelson, using: "His genius was to organize the force into a lethal machine, bring the enemy to battle on his terms, and then unleash the apparatus on the enemy."[151] While GEN McChrystal certainly did organize his Task Forces into lethal machines, and unleashed them on the enemy, no U.S. entity has brought an enemy to battle on **our terms** in a shooting war since World War II.[152] Nor does it seem that anyone is being encouraged to try to do so.

War used to be the great simplifier. People went to war to **resolve** irresolvable political differences (or to work out ethnic enmities, religious hatreds, etc.). Today we do not use war in these ways. Instead, we treat it like a wicked problem, forgetting that wicked problems themselves can be simplified—though doing so requires that a decisive leader make a hard choice rather than try to pick his way through a tangle. Hard choices used to belong to supreme commanders. Unfortunately, without a supreme commander and with

no one in charge, decisiveness has devolved so that no one bears responsibility for needing to be decisive today.[153]

Many might argue that how a war is conducted is a political responsibility, and thereby belongs to the President. Others believe that supreme command must always rest with civilian leaders. But Herman Wouk offers an interestingly different perspective when he limns his fictional German general in *The Winds of War*:

> Winston Churchill, in a revealing passage of his memoirs on the functioning of his chiefs of staff, expresses his envy of Hitler, who could get his decisions acted upon without submitting them to the discouragement and pulling apart of hide-bound professional soldiers. In fact, this was what saved England and won the war.
>
> Churchill was exactly the kind of brilliant amateur meddler in military affairs that Hitler was. Both rose to power from the depths of political rejection. Both relied chiefly on oratory to sway the multitude. Both somehow expressed the spirit of their peoples, and so won loyalty that outlasted any number of mistakes, defeats, and disasters. Both thought in grandiose terms, knew little about economic and logistical realities, and cared less. Both were iron men in defeat. Above all, both men had overwhelming personalities that could silence rational opposition while they talked. Of this strange phenomenon, I had ample and bitter experience with Hitler. **The crucial difference was that in the end Churchill had to listen to the professionals**, whereas the German people had committed itself to the fatal *Fuhrerprinzip* [emphasis added].[154]

If we pay attention to Wouk's General Armin von Roon, one conclusion it should lead us to is that GOs actually have a **duty** to **demand** "singular hierarchy

+ ownership" **once** the decision to deploy troops has been made.

Some civil-military relations scholars might scoff at such a notion, but this is one among many reasons that civil-military relations deserve a serious 21st-century rethink.[155] First, defense intellectuals cannot contend that warfare has become so complex that only professionals can wage it, and then assume that a civilian commander in chief who lacks deep military knowledge will not become overwhelmed or, worse, paralyzed by its complexity. Second, chronic defer-ence on the part of military leaders when it comes to the civilians they say are responsible for making policy enables them to shirk.[156] Not **having** to be fully responsible—not having to own the war—makes it far too easy for them to shift blame after the fact. Yet, after the fact is far too late for the O-4s, O-5s, and O-6s who get stuck having to try to set objectives for their units in year X of an objectiveless war.

Final Thought.

Since today's O-4s, O-5s, and O-6s are the only pool from which tomorrow's senior leaders will come, pay-ing attention to what has shaped them **should** matter. But so, too, should a parallel issue. The military has not yet been rent asunder by what has consumed so many other institutions: namely, whether the institu-tion should cave, cater, or stand strong when it comes to shifting societal mores.

All one need do is look at the turmoil underway in and around other venerable organizations—like most religious bodies—to see where splits can lead, though the U.S. military does retain at least one considerable advantage over any other institution. There is still only

one template for how to build a professional military capable of projecting force—and that is via hierarchy.

A second advantage the military has in the face of changing social mores is that the challenges today's youth present are the same challenges youth have always presented. Young people typically dislike authority, favor egalitarianism, and try to avoid too much structure.

This, too, returns us to certain givens about human nature. Although not enough is known about Generation Y, evidence suggests that Millennials are little different from preceding generations with one notable exception: their willingness, and even eagerness, to communicate whatever they feel like with whomever they choose.[157] Tellingly, what young Service members signal whenever they go straight to the top, bypassing the chain of command, is that they really do believe everyone is equal.[158] The challenge this then presents the military is how to convey to them (and to future generations) that what all uniformed personnel should want is, actually, **well-led hierarchy** that will provide them with clear objectives **and** the prospect of a decisive win.[159]

As for what constitutes "well-led," those selected for command should not only **want** to unleash the talent that exists beneath them, but should have a proven record of knowing how. They should be astute judges of affinities, and should be able to read, vet, and assess people and situations quickly and accurately.

Significantly, nothing about today's youth suggests they would balk at leaders with these kinds of aptitudes. Just the opposite. Who **doesn't** want leaders who ask people to think, rather than just defer?

ENDNOTES

1. This Letort Paper is a revised version of an unpublished report originally written for and submitted to the U.S. Office of Net Assessment (ONA) by the present author in October 2014, on completion of a project on "the challenges of command."

2. Sydney J. Freedberg, Jr., "How To Get Best Military Leaders: CNAS Says Split Warriors From Managers," Breaking Defense, October 25, 2013, available from *breakingdefense.com/2013/10/how-to-get-best-military-leaders-cnas-says-split-warriors-from-managers/*.

3. Maybe a teaching hospital during an epidemic comes closer, but even during infections and epidemics, hospitals deal with patients individual by individual—there is no broader objective.

4. David Barno, Nora Bensahel, Katherine Kidder, and Kelley Sayler, "Building Better Generals," *CNAS Report*, Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, October 2013.

5. For instance, the Office of Net Assessment (ONA)-sponsored "Military Officer of 2030" Summer Study—held in 2003 (in Newport, RI)—urged much the same thing.

6. Michael J. Colarusso and David S. Lyle, *Senior Officer Talent Management: Fostering Institutional Adaptability*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, February 2014.

7. Tim Kane, *Bleeding Talent: How the U.S. Military Mismanages Great Leaders and Why It's Time for a Revolution*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

8. Martin Dempsey, "Mission Command," *Army*, January 2011, p. 43.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

10. Eitan Shamir, *Transforming Command: The Pursuit of Mission Command in the U.S., British, and Israeli Armies*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011, p. 156:

In a final analysis, despite espousing, educating, and train- ing their armies to practice Mission Command principles, the Americans, British, and Israelis proved unable to escape their defining command traditions. The Israelis provide an interesting case study as they had originally practiced Mis- sion Command but have hitherto been unable to recreate the experience due to changes in their social fabric and culture as well as their perception of the threats surrounding them.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 53, citing Daniel Hughes.

12. Jörg Muth, *Command Culture: Officer Education in the U.S. Army and the German Armed Forces, 1901-1940, and the Consequenc- es for World War II*, Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2011, p. 40.

13. *Ibid.*, pp 36-37.

14. Freedberg, Jr.

15. Although the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) threat has helped, and could continue to help, curtail "garrison-ization."

16. In both cases, too, we not only helped change the form of government, but our adversaries morphed. For instance, ac- cording to some scholars, the composition of the Taliban initially included more homegrown accidental guerrillas than hard-core jihadis; our policies helped change those ratios. In Afghanistan, our chief counterterrorism (CT) focus then shifted from al-Qaeda to the Haqqani Network, while in Iraq we empowered the for- merly disempowered. Certainly, our presence altered the human terrain in Vietnam, but it did not give rise to so many different actors.

17. An issue addressed in Zahid Nawaz Mann, "The Nature of Insurgency in Afghanistan and the Regional Power Politics," *Master's Thesis*, Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, June 2010.

18. Martin Van Creveld, *The Sword and the Olive: A Critical His- tory of the Israeli Defense Force,* New York: PublicAffairs, 2002.

19. Comment made by a U.S. Army Ranger, June 2014.

20. U.S. Navy's Sea, Air, and Land (SEAL) Team officers and Special Forces (SF) officers echo the same.

21. James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It*, New York: Basic Books, 1989, p. 133: "It is easier to allow front-line operators to exercise discretion when only one clear goal is to be attained. The greater the number and complexity of these goals, the riskier it is to give authority to operators."

22. Cynics might go so far as to question whether anything that we have engaged in since Korea should even be called "war" since, with no taking and/or holding of ground or enforcement of serious population control measures, all actions (to include the assassination of Osama bin Ladin) have been non-determinative. A better description might thus be: contestation punctured by violence and the fitful (rather than continuous) application of military force.

23. Stanley McChrystal, *My Share of the Task: A Memoir*, New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2013, pp. 349-350.

24. This becomes all the more attenuated when there is no strategy, see Wilson, p. 197:

> debates over what many agencies should do and how they should do it are continuous, and so the maintenance of support for the agency is a never-ending, time-consuming process of negotiating and then renegotiating a set of agreements with stakeholders who are always changing their minds.

25. McChrystal, p. 181. Or, to return to the issue of Mission Command, consider McChrystal's plight in light of Shamir's assessment: "The practice of Mission Command requires clearly defined objectives, resources, and constraints," see Shamir, p. 94.

26. As one officer said of McChrystal, echoed by others:

He made the most complex problems seem solvable at all levels. He would listen and analyze. His attitude was 'what makes you think you can't do something?' He never meted out punishment in public. He was never afraid to engage you at any rank. Five small meals and staying lean takes great mental discipline—if you want to be hard you have to live hard. He didn't fall into the trappings.

27. McChrystal, p. 385.

28. David Cloud and Greg Jaffe, *The Fourth Star: Four Generals and the Epic Struggle For the Future of the United States Army*, New York: Crown Publishers, 2009, p. 245.

29. Kane, p. 10.

30. Thomas E. Ricks, *The Generals: American Military Command from World War II to Today*, New York: The Penguin Press, 2012, p. 451.

31. In no small part, too, because ownership would subsume accountability.

32. McChrystal, p. 95. Later, on p. 343, McChrystal writes:

I remain convinced that a single leader, most appropriately a talented civilian willing to spend at least several years in the job, with authority to direct and coordinate all military, governance, and development efforts, would have been the best step toward unifying our war effort. But that fall, no such person existed.

33. Ann Scott Tyson, *American Spartan: The Promise, the Mission, and the Betrayal of Special Forces Major Jim Gant*, New York: William Morrow, 2014, p. 59.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 206.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 211.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 344-345.

37. *Ibid*.

38. The Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) is a SF A-team commanded by an 0-3 (Captain [CPT]). The Advanced Operational Base (AOB) oversees the Company of 6+/- ODAs commanded by an O-4 (Major [MAJ]). The Special Operations Task Force (SOTF) oversees the Battalion (of 3 +/- AOBs) commanded by an O-5 (Lieutenant Colonel [LTC]). The Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force (CJSOTF) oversees the SOTFs commanded by an O-6 (Colonel [COL]). Commanders at the AOB, SOTF, and CJSOTF levels did not only command SF ODAs, but also sometimes SEAL platoons and Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC) Marine Special Operations Teams (MSOTs). Marines and SEALs likewise ran SOTFs and AOBs.

39. Ironically, too, though very little of Special Operations Forces (SOF) organizational structure mirrored that of the adversary, the U.S. military overall did do a good job of mirroring life in Afghanistan (and Iraq) in at least one regard: many uniformed personnel never left their compounds. Instead, they shuttled between their workspace, the dining facility (DFAC), and metal or plywood containers where they slept. This made American Service members (both men and women) akin to privileged Muslim females—engaging in scant manual labor (locals and contractors took care of that), while outings consisted of going shopping at the Post Exchange (PX) or in on-base "bazaars." Meanwhile, it was up to the Afghans who worked on base to fill the role of strange (as in non-familial) males—prohibited from entering the inner sanctums (e.g. operations centers or intelligence shops), and being kept from interacting with Americans in their living quarters.

Of course, one glaring difference between life on U.S. compounds and in Afghan homes was that there were no children on bases. That, and most Americans spent the bulk of their workday (or night) in fluoresced chilled air.

40. For the sake of simplicity, and because no women are ODA, AOB, SOTF, or CJSOTF commanders currently, I will use "he" rather than "he or she" throughout most of the remainder of the Letort Paper.

41. Another effect was, of course, massive corruption.

42. McChrystal, p. 117.

43. At least anecdotally, Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) and Task Force operators appear to have seen Afghans in a starker light than did many of their SOF brethren.

44. Colonel (COL) Bernd Horn, "A Reflection on Leadership: A Comparative Analysis of Military and Civilian Approaches," *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 3, 2014, p. 232.

45. *Ibid.*, pp. 233-234. Or as "Schumpeter: Leading light," *The Economist*, August 9, 2014, p. 57, notes in a column about Warren Bennis: "Managers are people who like to do things right. . . . Leaders are people who do the right thing. Managers have their eye on the bottom line. Leaders have their eye on the horizon. Managers help you to get to where you want to go. Leaders tell you what it is you want."

46. Shamir, p. 9.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

48. Ricks, pp. 11, 43.

49. Edward Kosner, "Edward Kosner: Obama the Management Failure," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 9, 2014.

50. Shamir, p. 23.

51. "Schumpeter: Measuring management," *The Economist*, January 18, 2014, p. 69.

52. Richard A. Shweder, "Clifford James Geertz 1926-2006: A Biographical Memoir," Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences, 2010, p. 11.

53. Lieutenant General (LTG) James M. Dubik, "On Becoming a Strategic Leader," *Army*, January 2013, p. 17.

54. The command team consists of the ranking officer (the commanding officer [CO]), his senior warrant officer, and his command sergeant major (CSM) (or sergeant major [SGM]).

55. Ironically, on bases where SF staff are clean-shaven, it is contractors who sport the kinds of beards that operators once grew.

56. There were exceptions—one of whom will be described in the next section of this Letort Paper.

57. "Of course, the opposite is also true: just knowing what happened yesterday is hardly sufficient either." Comment made by SF officer in Afghanistan, January 2014.

58. Which begs the question: why split Companies or Battalions and divvy their components out to other Companies and Battalions? These "swaps" created huge command headaches for both the giving and receiving AOBs and SOTFs.

59. Comment made in January 2014 by an SF O-4.

60. Ricks, p. 181.

61. McChrystal, p. 239.

62. Comment made by SF officer in Afghanistan, July 2013.

63. According to the popular literature, Millennials in particular ask, "Why?" and feel they need to understand the purpose behind what they are asked to do. Anecdotally, Millennials and those they work for in the military agree: Millennials are far more likely to "buy in" if the "why" is explained.

64. Ed Cray, *General of the Army: George C. Marshall, Soldier and Statesman*, New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000, p. 245.

65. Some suggest that too much attention from high-ranking American and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) commanders has also helped over-inflate Afghan political appointees' sense of their own importance.

66. While this is certainly true for the Army and Marine Corps, it is not necessarily true for the Air Force—where pilots have much less opportunity to develop their management skills. In contrast, recent fieldwork undertaken for another project suggests that the surface Navy would **seem** to be at the other end of the spectrum when it comes to its senior surface warfare officers (SWO), since every ship's CO will have served as an executive officer (XO) on that same vessel. However, the view from below in the SWO community is that while in theory ships' Captains **should** be highly skilled at managing humans, in practice O-6s are far more interested in maintaining the ship, and view the humans on board as secondary.

67. One under-addressed question is: Is this ability to be reflectively, judgmentally accurate about people a trait or a skill? My contention is that individuals are either wired to be able to read other people, or not. However, it is not clear what the military thinks, which is surprising. For an institution that heavily invests in treating everything as trainable, it expends pitifully little effort on helping people improve their ability to read, vet, or assess others' skills. Negotiation classes, yes. Cross-cultural interactions, yes. But reading your own people?

Perhaps this lapse is attributable to the emphasis on leadership, with its distinct "**follow** me" bias. Alternatively, maybe the military believes it is sufficiently successfully Darwinist: those who rise have these abilities; otherwise, they would not rise. Unfortunately, such circular logic can reinforce unhealthy patterns, particularly when those who have risen make poor choices about the leaders who will follow them.

68. For more on the deleterious effects of rotations-as-churn, see Andrew Aswell, "Calming the Churn: Resolving the Dilemma of Rotational Warfare in Counterinsurgency," *Master's Thesis*, Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, December 2013. For a thesis written since the initial drafting of this Letort Paper, see William Krebs, "Depth vs. Breadth: Talent Management for Special Warfare," *Master's Thesis*, Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, December 2016.

69. Shamir, p. 126.

70. Michael Matthews, *Head Strong: How Psychology is Revolutionizing War*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 192. Matthews believes the "military engineering psychologist" can play "a critical role in helping designers decide what information should be in the head or in the world." I am dubious.

71. McChrystal, p. 392.

72. From the ONA-sponsored "Military Officer of 2030" Summer Study, 2003: "Not only do officers need to understand—but they have to want to understand—what drives, motivates, and explains others. Without having to be told, they need to think about things from others' points of view."

73. For more on emotional intelligence (EI), see Jonathan Post, "Thickening the Global SOF Network," *Master's Thesis*, Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, December 2013.

74. McChrystal on charisma is interesting, especially since he certainly benefited from the mystique that others manufactured around him; see McChrystal, p. 393:

> performance usually became more important than the advantages of innate traits. Later in my career, I encountered some figures who had learned to leverage superficial gifts so effectively that they appeared to be better leaders than they were. It took me some time and interaction—often under the pressure of difficult situations—before I could determine whether they possessed those bedrock skills and qualities that infantry platoons would seek to find and assess in young sergeants and lieutenants.

75. Those who favor 360-degree evaluations might think they will help catch this. But ironically, 360-degree evaluations can have the unintended effect of convincing those who already aren't very good at reading people that: a) they don't need to worry about this (the evaluation will do it for them), and/or b) there is no need to pick up on their subordinates' read of each other (since the evaluation will catch this, too).

76. Shamir is writing about the Vietnam era, but this is just as true today:

> Centralized control was practiced and decisions were made on the basis of quantitative information gathered through the new communication and information technologies. . . . Satisfying system requirements for analysis necessitated vast amounts of information.

See Shamir, p. 64.

77. Astute commanders also had to be mindful of what **didn't** belong in a situation report (SITREP), though sometimes what they left out had unintended consequences: "Higher" might then think that something that should be done wasn't being done, and both parties could get unnecessarily agitated and "spun up."

78. In some instances, managing information substitutes for managing or achieving effects. Although, in an information-saturated world, equating managing with achieving might not be wrong, particularly since more and more people seem to believe a "story" we construct will be the story we can convince others to buy. I disagree.

On a separate note, weekly versus daily reporting might lead to fewer distortions in perceptions about gains achieved.

79. The information architecture in 2014 was still problematic, with too many different domains that could not be accessed from one another. It seems puzzling that this still had not been "fixed," though perhaps it had not been fixed because with electrons serving as the informational coin of the realm, the more you could protect yours, the more significant your status—clearly. In suggesting this, I do not mean to imply that operations security (OPSEC) is not important. But there may be more to the information architecture conundrum than meets the eye.

80. Herman Wouk, *War & Remembrance*, Boston, MA: Little Brown and Company, 1978, p. 1255.

81. Ricks, p. 331.

82. Fred Kaplan, *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013, p. 260:

As part of his information operations campaign, Petraeus asked McMaster to bring together twenty experts—fellow officers, embassy officials, and prominent academics—to form what he called the Joint Strategic Assessment Team. The stated rationale of the team was to help the commander decide on a new strategy. In fact, though, Petraeus already had a new strategy; the team's real purpose was to rally buy-in for the strategy from critics and institutions whose support Petraeus knew would be politically useful.

83. Ricks, p. 358.

84. *Ibid*., p. 445.

85. In numerous cases, outside experts were "found" and recommended by staff members.

86. Kaplan, p. 253.

87. Elsewhere I have questioned counterinsurgency (COIN) or CT "expertise" since principles sufficiently broad to be applied anywhere amount to bromides and little more. To achieve "fit" requires knowing something more about the problem, the people, their tangled history, etc. than a flying visit, or even a succession of flying visits, provide.

88. A problem throughout academe and beyond.

89. For a variant of this and the problems that flow from policymakers' inability to effectively or accurately vet non-Americans, see Donald Reed and Matthew Upperman, "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Selecting and Vetting Indigenous Leaders," *Master's Thesis*, Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, December 2013.

90. Also, to qualify as an interpreter who could be used for sensitive/classified work invariably meant that they were a U.S. citizen.

91. Despite our absolute dependence on interpreters and cultural advisors in both Iraq and Afghanistan, far too little attention has been paid to their impact in the field, never mind to policy.

Even less attention has been paid to the role they have been able to play on behalf of themselves or other local actors. Also, virtually no attention has been paid to how to speak effectively in order to be able **to be** translated. Ironically, those Americans who seem to have the most empathy for Afghans may be hardest for Afghans to translate since too much earnestness (like too much tentativeness) is hard to translate from one language to another.

92. Which also reflected his trust in those who were in key positions on his staff: e.g., his Chief of Staff, S-3, etc. who "ran" his command and communicated with him via texts when he was out of the office.

93. To those reading this who might think we need more CO "Xs," consider: one reason he was so effective is because there **weren't** any other commanders like him.

94. Comment made by SF officer in Afghanistan, June 2014.

95. This should be considered a requisite skill for SF officers and a desired skill for SOF officers. Whether it is imperative for conventional force commanders might be thought questionable—until one reflects back on who proved to be superlative commanders during World War II and their ally—and adversary-reading skills.

96. Major General (MG) Scott Miller in Afghanistan, July 2013.

97. Comment made by SF officer in Afghanistan, July 2013.

98. To cite one example of how many layers required peeling back: Karzai appointed one particular tribal leader from the Battalion's area of operations (AO) as his Minister of Water and Power even though this particular warlord had no technical competence in either field. The calculus Karzai used was presumably geo-political, involving this particular Minister's ties to Iran, cross-border inter-tribal politics, **and** watershed issues. But Karzai also needed to ethno-politically re-balance his cabinet after other recent personnel shifts. Meanwhile, appointing a warlord who was not technically competent or even knowledgeable was clever because Karzai could then send his own senior technical

adviser to offer "advice," thereby keeping tabs on the Minister while, at the same time, Karzai's "agent" could begin to lay the groundwork for the Minister's eventual fall.

99. Those who enjoyed this the most also enjoyed making as much of serendipity as they could, which meant knowing how to take advantage of serendipity—all of which required as many different Afghan contacts as possible, and the ability (and desire) to speak with them frequently.

100. See Anna Simons, Joe McGraw, and Duane Laucheng-co, *The Sovereignty Solution: A Commonsense Approach to Global Security*, Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011.

101 . Among the many challenges for ISAF SOF commanders was the fact that ISAF deployments amounted to on-the-job training for many units—that meant they had a different impetus than "winning." Heading ISAF SOF staffs was particularly challenging since these were international; there was nothing organic about them; individuals were continually being replaced by new personnel—and this was on top of having to juggle relations with the Afghans who ISAF SOF units were in the business of advising.
The amount of time spent liaising, coordinating, and smoothing out differences among all the various components took up a significant part of the day for lots of people.

102. This was most evident in DFACs, where Coalition forces self-segregated by country.

103. General (GEN) Martin E. Dempsey, "Mission Command," *White Paper*, Washington, DC: Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, April 3, 2012, p. 4.

104 . *Ibid.*, p. 3.

105. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

106. John Lehman, "John Lehman: More Bureaucrats, Fewer Jets and Ships," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 10, 2013:

While the fighting forces have steadily shrunk by more than half since the early 1990s, the civilian and uniformed bu-

reaucracy has more than doubled . . . Today, more than half of our active-duty servicemen and women serve in offices on staffs.

Among Lehman's four recommendations:

clear lines of authority and accountability, now dissipated through many bureaucratic entities, must be restored to a defined hierarchy of human beings with names.

107. I continue to use "he" here because we appear to still be years away from a female being vaulted into the commanding general (CG) slot in a warzone.

108. The fact that there was terrain to seize surely helped. But it is also not clear that General (GEN) Marshall, or GENs Eisenhower, Patton, etc. would have agreed to engage in warfare had there been no terrain to seize, or had they not been able to consider terrain (and populations) an objective. Such a statement is counterfactual, I know, but one that should raise additional questions about 21st-century sensibilities. For more on these, see Anna Simons, *21ˢᵗ Century Cultures of War: Advantage Them*, Philadelphia, PA: Foreign Policy Research Institute, April 2013. Bottom line: **we** have changed our attitudes. What war **could be** has not changed.

109. Muth, p. 210.

110. Which is not to say the "Five I's" or certain other militaries do not share this as well.

111. For a description of how SF does this (when it does this well), see Simon Powelson, "Enduring Engagement Yes, Episodic Engagement No: Lessons for SOF from Mali," *Master's Thesis*, Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, December 2013.

112. Individual improvement is, of course, always possible—otherwise basic training would never work. But: a) basic training doesn't re-make everyone, and b) it certainly doesn't re-make everyone alike. The more important point is that while it might be possible to change the dynamic between any two or more individuals, the parameters for **how** humans interact are fairly set.
Or, to channel what a Marine infantry platoon leader said to me in a different context: "if people have changed so much over

time, why do we still read Clausewitz and Sun Tzu? Why does anyone think they're still relevant?"

113. Of course, not all people want this, since some revel in (and profit from) turmoil.

114. Charles Stross, "A sci-fi visionary on why the children of tomorrow are the NSA's biggest nightmare," *Foreign Policy*, August 28, 2013, writes:

> We human beings are primates. We have a deeply ingrained set of cultural and interpersonal behavioral rules that we violate only at social cost. One of these rules, essential for a tribal organism, is bilaterality: Loyalty is a two-way street. (Another is hierarchy: Yield to the boss.) Such rules are not iron-bound or immutable—we're not robots—but our new hive superorganism employers don't obey them instinctively, and apes and monkeys and hominids tend to revert to tit-for-tat strategies readily when they're unsure of their relative status. Perceived slights result in retaliation, and blundering, human-blind orgs can bruise an employee's ego without even noticing. And slighted or bruised employees *who lack instinctive loyalty, because the culture they come from has spent generations systematically destroying social hierarchies and undermining their sense of belonging,* are much more likely to start thinking the unthinkable [italics added].

115. A description borrowed from the ONA-sponsored "Military Officer of 2030" Summer Study, 2003.

116. Toddi Gutner, "Why You May Be Deferential To Peers—but Not Your Boss," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 28, 2014.

117. Jeffrey Pfeffer, "You're Still the Same: Why Theories of Power Hold over Time and Across Contexts," *The Academy of Management Perspectives,* Vol. 27, Iss. 4, November 1, 2013, p. 272.

118. McChrystal, p. 391.

119. GEN McChrystal may think he put together a network—which he did via liaisons with other organizations. But as far as his subordinates were concerned he was their undisputed leader and clear boss; **he** set the standards; he axed people when they

didn't or couldn't meet those standards. Notably, it was only **his** organization conducting the strikes; everyone else assisted with them.

120. Shamir, p. 15.

121. Cray, p. 272.

122. Wouk, *War & Remembrance*, p. 1152.

123. This is one reason astute commanders make liberal use of liaisons—to coordinate, but also to stay apprised of what others are up to. The flip side to liaisons serving as conduits is that they can end up being considered "spies" when relations are rocky.

124. Cray, p. 7. Of course, cynics might contend that the fact there seems to be no need for truly deliberative speed today proves that combatants might take fighting seriously, but the "war" in Afghanistan **as** a war has not been taken seriously enough by Washington.

125. At a minimum, a singular command structure and direct lines of authority would also obviate much of the time spent on video teleconferences (VTCs) and in other forums posturing and talking about the importance of collaboration—time that could be better invested in a more honest (and direct) exchange of information and perspectives. One SF officer in Afghanistan in July 2013 observed:

> This war has totally gutted a good prior working relationship or trust with command. You have to be able to call the CO and ask questions on the phone—not over the radio so that, thanks to flat comms [communications], everyone can hear. Probably bad decisions are made because of a reluctance to pick up the phone and an overall lack of confidence in relations between command and the team on the ground.

126. Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan 2002-7,* London, UK: Hurst Publishers Limited, 2007, p. 195.

127. Ricks, p. 456.

128. McChrystal, p. 379.

129. And here I am not referring to his unexpected removal, but what would have been the usual general officer (GO) turnover.

130. Comment made by a noncommissioned officer (NCO) in Afghanistan, July 2013.

131. Stephen Gerras and Leonard Wong, *Changing Minds in the Army: Why It Is So Difficult and What To Do About It*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, October 2013, pp. 21-22.

132. For an example of what should be possible, here is a description from Cloud and Jaffe, p. 105:

> Many officers in Casey's position would have felt threatened by the high-flying Abizaid, who at the time was the youngest general in the Army. Casey chose to embrace the newcomer . . . Abizaid was a different kind of officer who sought answers to problems that most officers didn't see. Instead of focusing downward on his troops, he thought about how forces such as radical Islam were transforming the Middle East and could create new problems for the United States.

Worth noting, too, is luck, timing, and the braiding of careers—working together in Bosnia had "turned Casey and Abizaid into close friends," p. 105.

133. Of course, subordinate commanders would likely continue to jockey their way up the command track. Certainly, command during World War II was never friction or ego-free. Yet, the quip that honesty starts at the top helps make the broader point I am heading toward: **there needs to be "a" top**.

134. Horn, p. 245.

135. Cloud and Jaffe, p. 100. It is tempting to see all sorts of foreshadowing in this, particularly when looking at various hagiographic accounts about the Surge.

136. *Ibid*.

137. Ricks, pp. 311-312; Although the best characterization, and one that many would still find relevant, is the one sentence summary (made by COL Malone, an Army infantry officer turned social psychologist and one of the report's authors): "Duty, honor and country" had been replaced by "Me, my ass and my career."

138. For more on other aspects of how the last decade of war has affected combat veterans (to include society's responses), see Simons, *21st Century Cultures of War*.

139. Tyson, p. 109.

140. *Ibid*., p. 212.

141. Unless, of course, the entire command team turned rogue and sought to stay in Afghanistan indefinitely.

142. Tyson, p. 164.

143. Wilson, p. 105.

144. Pfeffer, p. 275. The remainder of Pfeffer's paragraph:

Rosabeth Kanter's (1977) apt phrase, 'homosocial reproduction,' describes what is most commonly observed in organizational hiring, promotion, and review processes (even in academia): the bias toward similarity. It is of course possible for people to strategically present their similarity to those in power by dressing, speaking, expressing attitudes, and acting in ways that remind powerful others of themselves.

For a vivid military example, consider Clay Blair's assessment of Don Faith, an Army O-5 during the Korean War in Ricks, p. 169:

Eight years after OCS [Officer Candidate School], leading a beleaguered regimental combat team in Korea, he knew how to look like a commander. 'On the battlefield, Faith was a clone of Ridgway: intense, fearless, relentlessly aggressive, and unforgiving of error or caution'. . . . Yet for all that. . . Faith did not really know how to command.

145. Kane, p. 128.

146. Ray Fisman and Tim Sullivan, *The Org: The Underlying Logic of the Office*, New York: Twelve, 2013, p. 53: "Any organization has to have both stars and guardians, carefully balanced." Or, as we wrote in the ONA-sponsored "Military Officer of 2030" Summer Study, 2003:

> taking note of those who excel in chaotic situations does not mean that risk-averse officers don't have essential roles to play. Some positions should only be filled by painstakingly reserved and detail-oriented individuals. We would submit that auditors, for instance, or nuclear engineers should be of this type.

147. This is something we noted in the ONA-sponsored "Military Officer of 2030" Summer Study, 2003.

148. One possibility is that rather than CGs convening councils of GOs, or turning to outside experts who are likely to defer because deference is built into how GOs are treated, they need to hear from councils of O-4s to O-6s (as well as from senior NCOs). Let subordinates and peers choose those whom they consider to be unsettlingly, pragmatically smart. Facilitate discussions with no GOs present. Scrub names and identifying information from the transcript. Submit it. Maybe even circulate it.

Even more prudent would be to elicit from O-4s, O-5s, O-6s, and senior enlisted what sorts of checks **they** think would or wouldn't work, and what would or wouldn't be needed when it comes to "singular hierarchy + ownership." Perhaps they would want to jettison the whole idea and offer something in its stead that could guarantee coherent command.

149. Wilson, p. 374.

150. Dempsey, "Mission Command," *White Paper*, p. 4.

151. McChrystal, p. 148.

152. Consider the contrast, see Cray, p. 241; here Cray is describing a meeting in the Oval Office on November 25, 1941:

The assault would come as early as the following Monday, December 1, the president estimated, 'for the Japanese are notorious for making an attack without warning. The question is how we should maneuver them into the position of firing the first shot without allowing too much danger to ourselves.'

153. At least not as of the time of publication.

154. Herman Wouk, *The Winds of War*, Boston, MA: Little Brown and Company, 1978, pp. 290-291.

155. For instance, see Cloud and Jaffe, p. 136:

The civilians set the policy and it was the military's job to execute it. Every senior commander struggled with how far to go in offering advice on policy issues, but in Iraq, where bad policy decisions were driving the insurgency, finding the right balance was especially tough. Should he [Abizaid] emphasize the positive assessments coming from his subordinate commanders? Or should he focus on the deep policy disagreements he and his commanders had with Bremer and others in the administration? Was that really his job? There were no clear answers.

156. Case in point number 1: When GEN McChrystal writes, "As a professional soldier I was committed to implementing to the best of my ability any policy selected by civilian leadership," see McChrystal, p. 352, one has to wonder—any policy?! Case in point number 2, see Kaplan, p. 127:

Rumsfeld respected a certain amount of pushback; he'd been puzzled why so many generals cowered at his criticism. (Most of these generals, in turn, wondered if Rumsfeld didn't grasp the American officer corps's post-MacArthur allegiance to the principle of civilian control, which made them disinclined to talk back to a secretary of defense.)

157. Described in greater depth in a report I co-authored and turned into the N-1, U.S. Navy, see Anna Simons and Anita Salem, "21st Century Retention Challenges for the Navy: Generational Changes, Attitudinal Effects, and their Impact on Operations," Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, October 2014.

158. Or that they are indispensably special.

159. Otherwise, not **understanding** or not being clued in as to why they are being asked to do what they are doing may prove increasingly rankling to some members of the younger generation who could turn out to be more vocal, or more prone to going to the media, than their elders ever were; Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden may simply be harbingers.

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