



Executive Summary

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

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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.

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