

MISSION COMMAND: STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

Mission Command 2.0: From an Individualist to a Collectivist Model

Anthony C. King

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ABSTRACT: This article specifies the distinctive character of mission command in the twenty-first century by examining the generalships of Stanley McChrystal and James Mattis. These examples contrast the historical attention to immediate tactical tasks with today's application, which involves a deep and enduring interdependence between commanders across echelons so that decisions are closely aligned.

Adopted in the 1980s, mission command is the dominant command philosophy in American and, indeed, Western armed forces. US Army doctrine states “mission command is one of the foundations of unified land operations. This philosophy of command helps commanders capitalize on the human ability to take action to develop the situation and integrate military operations to achieve the commander’s intent and desired end state. Mission command emphasizes centralized intent and dispersed execution through disciplined initiative. This precept guides leaders toward mission accomplishment.”¹ By empowering subordinates to take local decisions in line with a superior’s intent, mission command accelerates decision-making while simultaneously maintaining operational unity. It is therefore seen as an optimal solution on a complex, fast-moving battlefield.

Originally developed by German General Helmuth von Moltke the elder based upon German military traditions, mission command reached fruition with Oskar von Hutier’s stormtroop tactics in the First World War and the Wehrmacht’s *Auftragstaktik* in the Second World War.² It is noticeable that studies of the Wehrmacht’s operations, in particular, informed the formal introduction of mission command into Western military doctrine in the 1970s and 1980s.³ While accepting the importance of historical precedents, however, it is also widely recognized that mission command today is not a mere imitation of twentieth-century practices. Operational, organizational, and technological transformations have ensured that—while continuities are certainly observable, especially at the level of principles—the actual practice of mission command is necessarily distinctive today. Mission command has evolved.

Anthony C. King, the chair of War Studies at the University of Warwick, recently authored *The Combat Soldier: Infantry Tactics and Cohesion in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (2013 Oxford University Press, 2013) and *Frontline: Combat and Cohesion in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford University Press, 2015). He is currently writing a book on divisional command which will be published next year.

1 Headquarters, US Department of the Army (HQDA), *Mission Command*, Army Doctrinal Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-0 (Washington, DC: HQDA, 2012), 1-1.

2 Bruce Gudmundsson, *Stormtroop Tactics: Innovation in the German Army, 1914–18* (New York: Praeger, 1989); and Robert M. Citino, *The German Way of War: From the Thirty Years’ War to the Third Reich* (Lawrence, KA: University of Kansas Press, 2005).

3 John T. Nelsen II, “Auftragstaktik: A Case for Decentralized Battle,” *Parameters* 17, no. 3 (September 1987).

This article argues the doctrine of mission command in the twentieth century referred to a very limited devolution of authority relating to immediate tactical tasks. By contrast, mission command today does not involve mere local, individual initiative but rather a deep and enduring interdependence between commanders across levels. Decisions are not simply devolved, as they were in the past, but collectively aligned and coordinated across and within echelons to ensure the coherence of the entire network. Mission command in the twenty-first century involves a new level of organizational integration requiring intense, professionalized teamwork between commanders. This article examines the legend and reality of mission command in the twentieth century and tries to demonstrate the distinctiveness of contemporary practices through an examination of the generalships of Stanley McChrystal and James Mattis.

Mission Command in the Twentieth Century

In his work on mission command, Martin van Creveld contrasts the practices of the imperial German army with those of the British Expeditionary Force. He describes the latter as “the most extreme a form as can be found” where “carefully laid plans rigorously and undeviatingly carried out are regarded as the one way to overcome the inevitable confusion of the battlefield.”⁴ The German army, by contrast, developed a highly decentralized system, which “sought to extend the spirit of free cooperation from the highest levels.”⁵ Subordinate commanders were given minimum objectives and then encouraged to improvise. Significantly, van Creveld highlights the individualism at the heart of this system, citing 1906 regulations: “Combat demands thinking, independent leaders and troops, capable of independent action.” Even more tellingly, van Creveld cites a key sentence from the 1908 regulations: “From the youngest soldiers upward, the total independent commitment of all physical and mental forces is to be demanded.”⁶ For van Creveld, German mission command was a decentralized, individualistic system in which, in order to respond to the confusion of battle, subordinate commanders were given freedom to act as they personally saw fit in relation to their immediate circumstances.

This argument has been very influential and, indeed, reproduced almost exactly in the most recent works on mission command from such authors as Eitan Shamir.⁷ He traces the evolution of mission command from the initial approach of Prussian Frederick the Great through the von Hutier “stormtroop” tactics in the First World War. Moreover, his discussion of Helmuth von Moltke the elder is important to understanding traditional concepts of mission command.⁸ Although von Moltke planned campaigns carefully with his general staff, he understood that once in battle, unexpected situations would arise.

Shamir notes “No discussion of Moltke’s style of command would be complete without the extraordinary description of him lying on a sofa

4 Martin van Creveld, *Command in War* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 166.

5 Ibid., 169.

6 Ibid., 170.

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

8 Ibid., 36–41.

calmly reading book while the army mobilized to fight Austria.” Indeed, J. F. C. Fuller claimed that von Moltke “abdicated his command.”⁹ Yet, the scale of operations and the limitations of communications prevented von Moltke from exercising direct command over his forces; *laissez-faire* was required. Consequently, having designed the campaign, von Moltke was forced to give his subordinate army commanders almost total license to operate independently in any crisis; they would be out of communication at decisive moments. Decision-making was not so much aligned as consciously decentralized. Local commanders acted by reference to their intuition in the light of their immediate situation.

Communications had improved enormously by the Second World War, but with mechanization, so had the pace of battle.¹⁰ Consequently, the Wehrmacht adopted a similarly individualist, Moltkean model of mission command where local commanders were empowered to act independently in broad reference to their senior commanders: “It has always been a particular forte of German leadership to grant wide scope to the self-dependence of subordinate commanders. . . . Generally, the German high commanders rarely or never reproached their subordinates unless they made a terrible blunder.”¹¹ Shamir admits that in the course of the Second World War, *Auftragstaktik* (mission-tactics command) suffered a decline. But he explains the German method of mission command was, perhaps, the central factor in Germany’s combat effectiveness in World War II: “Its de-centralised tradition facilitated organized and effective resistance even while the supreme command had all but collapsed.”¹²

Karl-Heinz Frieser’s work on the legend of blitzkrieg supports Shamir’s argument.¹³ While blitzkrieg was invented more or less by accident in 1940, mission command allowed local commanders to act on their initiative in response to their immediate circumstances without consideration or knowledge of the wider situation—for instance, as commander of 7th Panzer Division during the invasion of France, Erwin Rommel “explored new paths in the command of a Panzer Division,” which has been taken as the exemplar of mission command.¹⁴ Significantly, at the Meuse, Avesnes, and Arras, he acted all but independently of his corps and army commanders, Generals Hermann Hoth and Hans von Kluge, who often had little idea of his location. Indeed, Shimon Naveh has described Rommel’s method as “sheer opportunism.”¹⁵ In the German army, Rommel was certainly extreme, and other panzer commanders, such as Hermann Balck, were less cavalier in their application of classic mission command involving ad hoc improvisation in a highly decentralized system.

9 Ibid., 41.

10 Ibid., 50.

11 Ibid., 50.

12 Ibid., 52.

13 Karl-Heinz Frieser, *The Blitzkrieg Legend: The 1940 Campaign in the West* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2005).

14 Frieser, *Blitzkrieg Legend*; Kenneth Macksey, *Rommel: Battles and Campaigns* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997); Claus Telp, “Rommel and 1940,” in *Rommel Reconsidered*, ed. Ian Beckett (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole, 2014); Desmond Young, *Rommel* (London: Collins, 1950); Ronald Lewin, *Rommel as Military Commander* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword, 2003); and Dennis Showalter, *Patton and Rommel: Men of War in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Berkley Caliber, 2005), 200.

15 Shamir, *Transforming Command*, 51.

Jorg Muth makes a commensurate argument in his recent work on officer education in the American and German armies before the Second World War.¹⁶ He compares West Point unfavorably with equivalent German officer training. Right up to the 1940s, West Point instituted a crude pedagogy in which students learned only boorishness and conformity. Individualism was explicitly extirpated from the officer candidates as the US Army strove to impose discipline and a wooden respect for military hierarchy in its students. By contrast, the German army sought not simply to train its officers but genuinely to educate them. It sought to create knowledgeable and questioning individuals capable of creativity, flexibility, and adaptation. Against the Prussian stereotype, German officer training created thinking soldiers, encouraged to assert themselves and to improvise, not mere automatons. In the work of all these scholars, then, traditional twentieth-century mission command is understood to be an individualistic practice based on independence and intuition.

Mission Command in the 21st Century

Scholars have identified the character of mission command in the twentieth century in detail. They have also recognized a revision of mission command today acknowledged in discussions of the Israel Defense Force and its recent operations. In conventional operations up until 1973, simple devolved mission command worked well for the IDF. Then, an individualistic doctrine proved effective. On the basis of it, the IDF developed a highly pragmatic officer class, oriented to practice and to experience, not to theory.¹⁷ The IDF operated on an ad hoc personal basis. In the twenty-first century in Lebanon, the West Bank, and Gaza, however, this system of mission command has become increasingly inadequate. As war has become more complex and Israel's enemies more sophisticated, "it has now become clear that the practical soldier is no longer enough."¹⁸

In a recent article coauthored with Uzi Ben-Shalom, Shamir draws a divide between classical twentieth-century mission command and contemporary practice. For these authors, contemporary mission command involves more than just Moltkean deregulation: "Mission command require[s] a certain quality of education and a common language."¹⁹ Yet, the Israeli officer corps never developed a genuinely professional ethos. The education of the IDF officer corps has always been markedly inferior especially to their Western peers. Consequently, "the result is something opposed to mission command, since commanders operating in this spirit would act in accordance with their own understanding—not the mission."²⁰ As an individualist practice, the IDF has proved classical twentieth-century mission command is, in fact, increasingly unsuited to the special demands of contemporary

16 Jorg Muth, *Command Culture: Officer Education in the U.S. Army and the German Armed Forces, 1901–1940, and the Consequences for World War II* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2013).

17 Avi Kober, "What Happened to Israeli Military Thought," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 34, no. 5 (2011): 708, doi:10.1080/01402390.2011.561109.

18 *Ibid.*, 723.

19 *Ibid.*, 111.

20 Uzi Ben-Shalom and Eitan Shamir, "Mission Command between Theory and Practice: The Case of the IDF," *Defense & Security Analysis* 27, no. 2 (2011): 112, doi:10.1080/14751798.2011.578715.

operations. Indeed, in many cases, the IDF have descended into directive, centralized command of the most extreme type as they lose faith in their own mission command system.

With his discussion of the IDF, Shamir implies the practice of mission command today has evolved considerably. While he is aware of these changes, however, he does not define the term with any precision, especially in relation to Western forces. Indeed, Shamir's monograph mainly focuses on the failure of British and American forces to implement mission command on operations in the last three decades, preferring long established dirigiste systems. Similarly, although Jorg Muth focuses on the prewar period, he adopts a compatible position. He simply assumes the American Army is still committed to a directive command system. Scholars have, therefore, recognized that mission command is in transition, but they do not examine their evidence in sufficient depth to define the scale or the character of the change.

In fact, mission command no longer refers to mere devolution and individual license typical in the twentieth century but to the ever-closer integration and interdependence of commanders. Crucially, mission command today involves increasing interaction and synergy between commanders. For contemporary mission command, education and shared concepts are required so commanders at every level are oriented to the systemic effects of their local decisions. In contrast with the individualistic practice of the last century, mission command today involves collectivism with commanders united around common definitions and a shared consciousness.

Two Case Studies

Although a transformation is clearly recognized, there is a lack of detailed analysis about mission command today. This is somewhat anomalous since, with the long-running campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, there is extensive evidence on which to draw. In Iraq and Afghanistan, modern mission command was repeatedly demonstrated by a number of commanders. Indeed, the practice is thoroughly ingrained into the US Army and Marine Corps. There is an embarrassment of evidence. This article draws upon some of this material. In an article of this length, however, the empirical analysis must be limited. Consequently, it is impossible to prove a transformation of command definitively. The argument must, perforce, be indicative.

In this situation, rather than provide a generalized and descriptive narrative, two particularly well-documented case studies will illustrate this transformation of command: Lieutenant General Stanley McChrystal, commander of Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) in Baghdad (2003–2008), and Major General James Mattis, commander of 1st Marine Division during the invasion of Iraq (2003). McChrystal and Mattis practiced mission command in Iraq, constructing novel systems of command for the challenges of contemporary operations. They commanded very different organizations. The 1st Marine Division conducted conventional maneuver warfare; JSOC, counterterrorism missions. Consequently, identifying a compatible practice of command in both headquarters would seem to be evidentially significant.

Moreover, both generals have another advantage: McChrystal has written extensively about his headquarters while the United States Marine Corps has documented Mattis's command. Consequently, it is possible to develop a sufficiently detailed understanding of their command methods. These cases not only constitute valid evidence of the revision of mission command but also exemplify its precise character. Of course like all samples, McChrystal and Mattis may be outliers, which cannot be refuted here. Since the two studies corroborate each other, however, they suggest the transition might be a much wider phenomenon—mission command has become an increasingly collective practice.

McChrystal's writings describe how, like other organizations, the armed forces have been radically challenged by new global threats. In particular, the hierarchies, developed in the twentieth century for industrial warfare and in which classical mission command emerged, have become increasingly obsolete. Twentieth-century warfare was complicated, involving the coordination of massive forces. This task was administratively demanding—a mistake could be catastrophic—but missions were relatively simple. In contrast, twenty-first century military problems have become heterogeneous and, above all, complex: “the number of *interactions* between components increases dramatically—the interdependencies that allow viruses and bank runs to spread; this is where things quickly become unpredictable.”²¹

In Iraq, McChrystal discovered traditional methods of command were ill-adapted for complex operations and constructed a new network: “We had to unlearn a great deal of what we thought we knew about how war—and the world—worked. We had to tear down familiar organizational structures and rebuild them along completely different lines, swapping our sturdy architecture for organic fluidity, because it was the only way to confront a rising tide of complex threats.”²²

The most important element in this network was McChrystal's command team itself. Here, traditional models of leadership had become obsolete and obstructive: “The heroic ‘hands-on’ leader whose personal competence and force of will dominated battlefields and boardrooms for generations had been overwhelmed by accelerating speed, swelling complexity, and interdependence.”²³ Yet, the mission command McChrystal introduced was also quite novel. In order to realize this intent, McChrystal did not merely devolve decision-making authority to subordinates who acted on their own initiative. He had to create a “shared consciousness” which “helped us understand and react to the interdependence of the battlefield.”²⁴

One of the central means by which McChrystal created shared consciousness was the daily Operations and Intelligence Brief, at which representatives from every involved agency would share their assessment of the campaign. This brief was “a relatively small video teleconference between our rear headquarters at Fort Bragg, a few DC officers and our biggest bases in Iraq and Afghanistan. Quickly, though, that audience

21 Stanley A. McChrystal with Tatum Collins, David Silverman and Chris Fussell, *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement* (New York: Portfolio / Penguin, 2015), 57.

22 *Ibid.*, 20.

23 *Ibid.*, 231.

24 *Ibid.*, 202.

grew”; “In time, people came to appreciate the value of systemic understanding. O&I attendance grew as the quality of information and interaction grew. Eventually we had seven thousand people attending almost daily for two hours.”²⁵

McChrystal saw the briefing as the principal means of generating shared consciousness and therefore exercising a new form of mission command. Indeed, he actively adopted certain practices to encourage this sense of collective participation and shared cognition: “I adopted a practice I called ‘thinking aloud’ in which I would summarize what I’d heard.” “Thinking out loud can be a frightening prospect for a senior leader” as it risks exposing ignorance and uncertainty. Yet, in the context of JSOC, it had a salutary command effect: “The overall message reinforced by the O&I was that we have a problem that only we can understand and solve.”²⁶

McChrystal recognized that even as a commander, he could not know everything:

“Being woken to make life-or-death decisions confirmed my role as a leader, and made me feel important and needed—something most managers yearn for. But it was not long before I began to question my value to the process. Unless I had been tracking the target the previous night, I would usually know only what the officers told me that morning. . . . My inclusion was a rubber stamp that slowed the process, and sometimes caused us to miss fleeting opportunities.”²⁷

Accordingly, McChrystal implemented a heightened form of mission command in JSOC, empowering commanders at the local level to prosecute missions—but always in line with the collective consciousness of the organization. McChrystal specifically drew on the example of British Naval Commander Horatio Nelson who

“had told his commanders ‘No captain can do very wrong if he places his ship alongside that of the enemy,’ but that broad authority could have gone terribly wrong if he had not spent decades cultivating their individual qualities as decision makers, and if they had lacked an overall understanding of the force and the battle as a whole. This was Nelson’s equivalent of shared consciousness, and it was only because of that his captains could thrive as empowered agents in a chaotic mêlée.”²⁸

Although McChrystal mentions the “individual qualities of decision-makers,” it is important to note that he does not use Nelson as an exemplar of *laissez-faire* mission command. On the contrary, in Iraq, McChrystal created a federation of commanders, linked together in a closely integrated network, able to cue actions reflecting the collective goals. His subordinates exercised their individual qualities as decision-makers precisely insofar as they were already members of an integrated team: “The term ‘empowerment’ gets thrown around a great deal in the management world, but the truth is simply taking off constraints is a dangerous move. It should be done only if the recipients of newfound authority have the necessary sense of perspective to act on it wisely.”

25 Ibid., 164, 168.

26 Ibid., 229.

27 Ibid., 202.

28 Ibid., 215.

To distribute command authority accordingly but to retain simultaneously unity of command, McChrystal developed a policy of “Eyes On, Hands Off.” He monitored his subordinates, confirming they were acting in line with his intent without seeking to manage them. McChrystal both liberated his subordinates and drew them into an ever closer relationship with him and their colleagues. In this way, decision-making at every level was closely synchronized. Using a new lexicon of terms like “shared consciousness” and “empowerment,” McChrystal adapted and advanced existing concepts of mission command. In place of individual license, he created a professional team whose members were mutually oriented to collective intentionality.

It might be argued McChrystal was only able to adopt this distinctively collective system of command because of technological imperatives. He enjoyed the most advanced communications and information system of any US commander in history. In fact, while digital communications and surveillance were certainly not irrelevant to McChrystal, his command method cannot be reduced to mere technology. On the contrary, digital technology potentially allowed McChrystal to operate a highly centralized, directive system precisely because real-time, high-fidelity video feeds were available to him. By contrast, he actively constructed a confederated system. He employed technology not to oversee his subordinates but to unite their activities and to coordinate their decision-making, forming a tightly articulated but flexible network. The technology was not employed to eliminate individualism—as it could have been—but rather to develop an integrated command community.

Although the operational conditions in which Mattis was working were quite different, he did something very similar with the 1st Marine Division. Instructively, while McChrystal’s command system exploited the most advanced digital technology available to US forces, Mattis’s division notably lacked information technology. It was eventually supplied with Blue Force Tracker equipment, but the division constructed its own ad hoc communications system before the operation with procured commercial videophones, video teleconference suites, and Iridium phones.²⁹ The relative paucity of the 1st Marine Division’s information and communication technology suggests that while digital communications have certainly assisted the revision of mission command, it cannot be reduced to them. Contemporary mission command represents a transformation in professional expertise and practice, not merely available technology.

Like McChrystal, Mattis consciously implemented the doctrine of mission command, laid out in Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1, *Warfighting*.³⁰ “His style of command is a function of the mission concept from army and marine maneuver warfare laid out in *Warfighting*. He follows those tenets ‘to a T.’ It is all about intent and guidance. Everything that can possibly be done by direct communications with commanders should be done that way—through his intent and guidance. Opportunities are fleeting and you have to make sure that commanders are in a position not to have to second guess their decisions (i.e. to require

29 Michael S. Groen, *With the 1st Marine Division in Iraq, 2003: No Greater Friend, No Worse Enemy* (Quantico, VA: History Division, Marine Corps University, 2006), 83–86.

30 Headquarters, Marine Corps (HQMC), *Warfighting*, Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1 (Washington, DC: HQMC, 1997), 50.

direction from above).”³¹ Indeed, Mattis consciously understood himself to be implementing the precepts of mission command: “Commander’s intent is straight out of Marine Corps doctrine, as written by Al Gray, 10 years ago. It demands a higher level of discipline.”³²

The commander’s intent was central to Mattis’s method of command.³³ Crucially, Mattis established speed as the center of gravity for the 1st Marine Division in his intent and impressed its importance upon all his subordinates; indeed, one of his regimental team commanders was removed precisely because he failed to implement this principle. Unless the division could quickly react in Baghdad and depose Saddam Hussein, the operation would deplete its supplies and potentially generate regional and international political opposition.

Moreover, the commander’s intent was only as effective as Mattis’s subordinates understood, accepted, and implemented it. Following the precepts of *Warfighting*, it was here that Mattis demonstrated his greatest skill.³⁴ Mattis invested great effort in creating a command fraternity able to enact his intent. Before deploying to Iraq, Mattis issued his “Commanding General’s Staff Guidance” to his regimental and battalion commanders, his division principals, and special staff. The guidance was also communicated orally in a series of visits to his units; indeed, the guidance constituted his notes for his briefing. It is a deeply interesting document which provides a privileged insight into the way he built a command team in the 1st Marine Division.

One of the most important principles was the equality of all commanders in the division. Radically, Mattis stressed: “All of us are [Marine Air Ground Task Force] MAGTF leaders.” Unusually, Mattis believed all commanders, at whatever level, were distinctive. They constituted a special status group within the division, unified by their decision-making responsibilities. He worked hard to create a special relationship with each of his subordinate commanders down to battalion and even company level. Later in the guidance, he elaborated upon the point: “Accused of making subordinate commanders my equal—that is good—I stand guilty. I don’t need to call the plays so long as the plays will gain my endstate/intent. I don’t want subordinates on a string like puppets, but I expect them to energetically carry out my intent.”³⁵

An officer who was a battalion commander with the 1st Marine Division in Iraq and subsequently worked on Mattis’s staff noted the difference: “With the relationship commander to commander, you have responsibility. You are placed there for the commander. He gives you his will, personality, force—and trust. That was not his relationship with his staff. It is much more demanding to work for him as staff. It was a privilege to be both. But he had a different relationship with his staff.”³⁶

31 Colonel Clarke Lethin, (assistant chief of staff, G-3, 1st Marine Division), interview with author, July 19, 2016.

32 General James Mattis, interview, January 23, 2004.

33 Michael L. Valenti, *The Mattis Way of War: An Examination of Operational Art in Task Force 58 and 1st Marine Division* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: US Army Command and General Staff College Press, 2014), 48.

34 HQMC, *Warfighting*, 51.

35 James Mattis, “Commanding General’s Staff Guidance,” 1st Marine Division, Camp Pendleton, August 14, 2002, 4.

36 Interview with a marine, March 15, 2016.

Specifically, Mattis sought to replace a traditional military hierarchy with a unified team. Indeed, Mattis employed sporting metaphors to communicate unity. Rather than directing operations from above, he saw himself as a coach or perhaps a quarterback calling plays from within the action, a first among equals rather than a superior. Naturally, commanders in this team were not equal; however, mission command was anything but a license for subordinates to do as they pleased: “Don’t screw with higher commander’s intent, missions, tasks.”³⁷

In order to generate a common consciousness among his commanders, Mattis exploited standard planning methods such as the drill Rehearsal of Concept (ROC). Of course, Mattis was in no way unique in using sandtables, tactical models, or Rehearsal of Concept drills to prepare his troops for battle. Models of this type had been used at the division and corps level since the First World War and their use at higher levels can be traced back to the late-eighteenth century. But Mattis dramatically intensified their significance, consciously seeking to draw his commanders together as a decision-making community.

Before the operation began in Iraq, the 1st Marine Division conducted a series of Rehearsal of Concept drills.³⁸ In August 2002, when the division was first warned they were possibly deploying to Iraq, Mattis decided to conduct a rehearsal maneuver on a scale model of Iraq constructed in front of the “White House,” the division’s headquarters building, with over 6,000 Lego blocks representing every vehicle in the division. After arriving in Kuwait, the marines completed two additional drills in the desert on February 7 and 27, 2002, using two large Olympic swimming pool sized model sandpits made with bulldozers.³⁹ Commanders wore distinctively colored football jerseys with the unit’s call sign to distinguish the units from each other.

On the basis of these drills, Mattis and his staff were able to draw definite deductions about plausible and impractical schemes of maneuver—for instance, after formulating the invasion plan the division learned Task Force Tarawa would be assigned to their area of operations with a mission of securing its lines of communication around Nasiriyah. Mattis opposed the order on the basis of the Lego drill:

“Adding Tarawa, which was crossing in front of the divisional line of march and stopping in the middle of it; it was going to conflict with [Regimental Combat Team One] RCT-1. It was going to create friction. We knew that was going to occur but we didn’t know how much. We had covered that one though. When we saw Task Force Tarawa briefing their move to the [Marine Expeditionary Force] MEF, I said: ‘You won’t be able to do that. We are on the main effort and you are now on the same road at the same time.’”⁴⁰

This was an important episode: it showed the drills also allowed leaders in the division to anticipate and practice decision-making. By anticipating alternative scenarios, the two jersey drills allowed the 1st Marine Division to predict when a decision might have to be taken and, therefore, accelerating or even eliminating decision-making

37 Ibid., 4.

38 Groen, *With the 1st Marine Division*, 109–12, 126–8.

39 Lethin interview.

40 General James Mattis (commanding general, 1st Marine Division), interview with author, June 4, 2016.

during the actual operation. The identification of decision points was indispensable to the application of mission command because the points effectively presented subordinate commanders with anticipated decisions. Subordinate commanders were already cued to the kinds of situations they would face, the sorts of decisions which they might have to make, and the way that General Mattis and the division wanted the decisions to be made. The “commanders knew the second and third order effects of their possible decisions, based on the commander’s intent and guidance.”⁴¹

The ROC drills impressed Mattis’s intent upon commanders collectively orienting them to a coherent pattern of action even when they were not copresent. In order to facilitate accurate and coherent decision-making in line with the commander’s intent, the 1st Marine Division also deployed nominated staff officers to those decision points in Iraq: “We gamed out where the friction points were likely to be. Myself and Colonel Kennedy performed that function of the division. We would be at the friction point, for instance, when the Division was splitting on its line of march. I was free to roam to a friction point when they needed someone there to assist.”⁴²

Mattis’s method of command was by no means original. Indeed, Mattis himself has denied he was doing anything novel at all. Most of the techniques he employed like his intent, building a command team, and using models were all well-established practices; however, Mattis intensified these methods to such a degree that the mission command he exercised in Iraq was of a different order to the ad hoc decentralization typical of the twentieth century. His subordinates did not act on their individual initiative or instinct. Their decision-making was facilitated insofar as they were all bound together in a highly developed team with a shared understanding of the operation. In many cases, the decisions subordinates “made” were in fact already anticipated and collectively agreed upon in the course of the ROC drills. As Mattis emphasized, this system of mission command demanded far more discipline and professionalism; it no longer involved mere individual freedom and independence. It stood in direct contrast to the Moltkean tradition.

In Iraq, McChrystal and Mattis explored new frontiers of command under different operational conditions. Although they based their methods of command on existing doctrine, they were, in fact, developing novel practices of command. Specifically, both sought to create a dense federation of commanders who shared a common understanding and were closely united around the commander’s intent. Decision-making was, therefore, collectively preconceived, aligned, and coordinated.

The McChrystal and Mattis methods of command were significant developments of traditional Western concepts of mission command. Although the principle of decentralized decision-making and improvisation remained important, the practices involved articulating different command levels and required a high level of professionalism—commanders at each level were committed to a common understanding of the operation. Consequently, McChrystal and Mattis did not enact mission command by reference to their own immediate situation but

41 Ibid.

42 Lethin interview.

rather by reference to the shared intentions of the wider force reinforced by careful collective preparation, anticipation, and imaging reinforced by constant interaction, communication, and feedback. Ironically, mission command today requires intensifying the professional bonds between commanders at each level so they are acutely attuned to each other; it requires an accentuated shared consciousness. In this way, apparently instinctive individual decisions are actually increasingly informed by the collective, systemic expectations.

Although among the most gifted commanders of their generation, McChrystal and Mattis were not unusual in implementing this intensified system of mission command. Many other commanders in Iraq and Afghanistan engaged in similar practices—for instance, Mattis's superior Lieutenant General David Mckiernan, the Combined Forces Land Component commander, implemented a very similar system. As he prepared his forces for the invasion of Iraq, Mckiernan was careful to anticipate decisions through the use of ROC drills and other techniques. He was diligent in communicating his intent to his subordinate corps and division commanders, including Mattis, to ensure unified and coherent decision-making at every level. In particular, Mckiernan was careful to engage in a series of face-to-face meetings with Lieutenant General James T. Conway, I Marine Expeditionary Force, and Lieutenant General William S. Wallace, V Corps, to rehearse their passage of lines and to anticipate when a command intervention might and might not be necessary.⁴³ McChrystal and Mattis were not unusual.

Moreover, recent developments have only accentuated the methods McChrystal and Mattis pursued. The US Army is currently implementing a division-level system of mission command whereby a networked main division headquarters remains in the continental United States, while tactical command posts deploy. Mission command has many advantages, reducing the vulnerability and logistical footprint of the division's headquarters; however, a dispersed command system of this type requires higher levels of discipline, professionalism, and teamwork from commanders and staff. Precisely because it is now radically distributed, local decision-making cannot be autonomous. Rather, local commanders must continually align their decision-making with the rest of the force to ensure coherence across tactical, operational, and strategic levels. Mission Command 2.0 does not involve merely decentralizing vertical hierarchy, but in fact, integrating a complex and heterogeneous network.

Conclusion

Mission command is indisputably a central precept in Western military doctrine today; it is the professed method of command. It is also true that when Western forces institutionalized mission command into doctrine, they drew heavily on historical examples, especially from the Wehrmacht in World War II. While recognizing continuity, this article argues the changing character of operations and the expansion of the span of control facilitated by new technologies deepens and intensifies mission command into a highly distinctive phenomenon.

⁴³ I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers who served on Mckiernan's staff for this example.

In particular, while traditional mission command might be characterized as an individualistic system, giving local commanders temporary independence to make immediate tactical decisions, Mission Command 2.0 relies on a dense federation of commanders. It is highly collective. It aligns and coordinates decisions across command echelons. It unites commanders into dense, professional communities, whose members are intimately and constantly attuned to each other's intentions and situations. Ironically, to increase the tempo and accuracy of decision-making, Mission Command 2.0 involves not the increased independence of subordinate commanders but radical interdependence.

