



Adopting Mission Command: Developing Leaders for a Superior Command Culture by Donald Vandergriff.

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After having served in the US Army, Donald Vandergriff has been advising its leaders for nearly two decades. He is the author of three impressive books on combat performance and command¹ and is fully conversant with the relevant literature in his field.²

Vandergriff is deeply troubled by American command culture, which falls far short of what he considers ideal. He dismisses many US commanders as authoritarian bureaucrats who stifle their subordinates' creativity: "With the onset of advanced communications technology there is the recurring tendency for senior officers to micromanage their subordinates, rather than trusting them to accomplish the mission—and the mission is becoming increasingly ambiguous and difficult" (3).

Deploing directive command, Vandergriff advocates instead "Auftragstaktik," usually translated as "Mission Command," as the optimal remedy for US military ills. He praises Air Force Col. John Boyd, who derived his concept of the "OODA loop" (Observation, Orientation, Decision, Action) from German blitzkrieg doctrine. Mission Command comprises two key elements: first, commanders must identify a center of gravity (*Schwerpunkt*), against which to aim their Main Effort. Second, subordinate commanders must be allowed to exploit their intuition (*Fingerspitzengefühl*) to meet changing situations. For Vandergriff, Mission Command is always the best and most practicable form of decision-making.

Not surprisingly, given his use of technical German military terminology, the author highlights the Prussian Army under Helmut von Moltke the Elder and the Wehrmacht of the Second World War as the avatars of Mission Command. In stark contrast to the hidebound conformity of the US Army, German officer corps always valued intelligence, creativity, and independence:

their army valued the independence and innovation of their subordinate commanders over standardization.... The commander and his key staff worked as a team; a small headquarters helped to foster the team spirit. The decision-makers were normally the commander, Ia, and Ic [the operations and intelligence officers]. The decision cycle was quick, without much detail or staff analysis, although the underlying staff work and planning was both competent and detailed. (24, 37)

The German Army's combat effectiveness was facilitated by its adoption of Mission Command.

1. *The Path to Victory: America's Army and the Revolution in Human Affairs* (Novato, CA: Presidio Pr, 2002), *Raising the Bar: Creating and Nurturing Adaptability to Deal with the Changing Face of War*, 2nd ed. (Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace [Amazon], 2012), and *Manning the Future Legions of the United States: Finding and Developing Tomorrow's Centurions* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008).

2. Esp., William Lind, *Maneuver Warfare Handbook* (NY: Routledge, 1959; rpt. 2019), and Bruce Gudmundsson, *Stormtroop Tactics: Innovation in the German Army, 1914-1918* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1989), and, more recently, Jörg 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: U North Texas Pr, 2011), and Eitan Shamir, *Transforming Command: The Pursuit of Mission Command in the U.S., British, and Israeli Armies* (Stanford, CA: Univ. Pr, 2011).

By contrast, the US Army in the twentieth century was a poor cousin to its German opponents. It was organized on industrial, Taylorist principles prioritizing standardization, order, and hierarchy. It was heavily influenced by French ideas of the methodical, rationally organized battles of the First World War.

Centrally controlled, attritional doctrine made up for the lack of thoroughly trained and cohesive combat units and educated officers.... [S]ome senior leaders, such as First Army commander, Lt Gen Courtney H. Hodges, commander of the 1st Army, treated their subordinates with indifference amounting to contempt. (52-53)

Despite the reformation of the American Army after Vietnam under the guidance of Army Training and Doctrine Command, Vandergriff maintains that directive command remained its default setting. A rigid “task/conditions/standards philosophy” (61) stifled flexibility and innovation. The reduction and professionalizing of the army in the 1990s exacerbated this tendency: “The effect of the drawdown was to instill a strong professional conservatism and groupthink” (61). The author detects the same problem in the twenty-first century. Intuitive command has been displaced by decision-making procedures, so that managers have supplanted battlefield commanders (73).

The first half of the book is, then, a conventional celebration of Mission Command and a criticism of the US Army. Vandergriff changes tack in its second half. He offers a series of pedagogical exercises by which US military might inculcate Mission Command in its commanders. The principles of Outcomes-Based Training and Education and the Adaptive Course Model enhance a commander’s ability to make decisions in uncertain situations. Vandergriff also describes such interesting and valuable exercises as Tactical Decision Games and War-Gaming.

Adopting Mission Command is intended for serving military personnel and especially Directing Staff at officer training and educational institutions. It offers them practical guidance and concrete exercises to use in their teaching, as Vandergriff has done in advising the US military. The book will prove very useful to military educational establishments, which will almost certainly want to add it to their reading lists.

Ironically, although the book represents a very valuable addition to the literature on the challenge of military leadership and decision-making, it has a strong unintended mythic quality, affirming a legend deeply ingrained in US armed forces. Specifically, it canonizes the Wehrmacht. For Vandergriff, the German Army represents the ideal of Mission Command and professional military culture more widely. This is problematic, given its murderous and ultimately catastrophic campaigns.

The Wehrmacht did tend to empower battle group (Kampfgruppe) commanders at about the division level more than did the Allies, thus expediting tactical decisions. But there is little evidence that the Wehrmacht practiced Mission Command as Vandergriff describes it any more systematically than the Allies. In fact, subordinates typically did precisely what they were told, fearing harsh punishment and penal battalions for failing to do so. Erwin Rommel, though often identified as a proponent of Mission Command, never remotely practiced it. As 7th Panzer Division commander during the Battle of France (May 1940), he ignored his superiors and superseded his regimental commanders at moments of crisis. At the same time, Vandergriff rightly records the craven deference of senior Wehrmacht commanders to Hitler. They were certainly not practicing Mission Command when they forced their subordinates to enact his plans.

Conversely, the Allies sometimes implemented Mission Command. The author himself aptly cites the example of Maj. Gen. John S. Wood’s 4th Armored Division, which he plausibly argues

implemented a rapid, decentralized system of decision-making in the European Theater in 1944. Yet, Vandergriff refuses to admit that Mission Command in the twentieth century was a patchy and situational phenomenon, thus reinforcing a contemporary legend that Wehrmacht commanders were the masters; everyone else amateurs.

The book consequently plays into a second legend. Although the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan have been disappointing, few doubt the exemplary professionalism of the US armed forces at the tactical level. Remarkably, in 2006–7, an army dedicated to conventional manoeuvre warfare transformed itself in the face of catastrophic defeat into an adept urban counterinsurgency force.

The US Army and Marine Corps of the early twenty-first century are among the most effective military forces in history. Certainly, they are without peer at present. Yet in spite of—or perhaps, precisely *because of*—this fact, they are preternaturally self-critical, convinced they are deeply flawed and unworthy of their forebears, especially their former enemies in the twentieth century. In short, the US Army is suffering from an imposter complex and Donald Vandergriff's very useful book plays directly into its institutional psychopathology.