

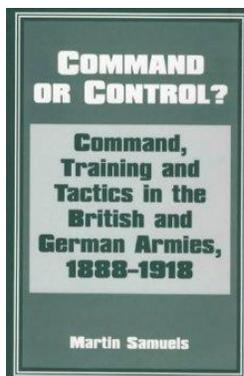


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## Past is Prologue: The Ability to Modify Strategic Doctrine While Still at War

Review by Reyes Z. Cole



Martin Samuels, *Command or Control? Command, Training and Tactics in the British and German Armies, 1888-1918*, Oregon. Frank Cass Publishers, 2003, 285 pgs, \$48.27.

Understanding that in military history “past is often prologue”, it would seem odd to return to a book on World War I to compare and contrast U.S. military efforts at adapting doctrine while at war. However, Samuels’s book shares some enlightening facts about how German and British forces attempted to modify strategic methods while embroiled in a trench warfare stalemate. This can be a lesson to today’s fight as U.S. forces must continually update and modify doctrine, leaving many feeling that the current U.S. Counterinsurgency (COIN) Manual is out of date in regards to operations in Afghanistan.

The Global War on Terror has been underway now for over ten years and at this point I would say the U.S. military strategic goals have not kept pace with enemy strategies, and the military has failed at the task of modifying doctrine while in the midst of fighting a war.

The Army has no plans to re-write the manual. However, the Marine Corps is diligently taking lessons learned from its past and present experiences and is preparing to re-publish a COIN manual that is more appropriate for the fight not only in Afghanistan but for future of COIN operations as well.

The connection between this book and the failure of the U.S. Military to update COIN doctrine for Afghanistan can be found in the speed in which German Forces were able to modify military doctrine in comparison with the U.S. and its doctrines for Iraq and Afghanistan. At the beginning of the war in 1914 the German High Command realized that “the German Corps was too large for its components to be employed to best effect.” By the end of 1915 they had modified their doctrine and organization to best fit their strategic goals. One year! The U.S. was involved in Afghanistan for over 5 years and the U.S. Military never updated FM 100-20 *Military Operations in Low Intensity Conflict* (at the time included COIN). It was not until more than 3 years into Iraq, with a failing strategy and tremendous pressure to get out of Iraq that the U.S.

published at blinding speed (1-year) the current FM 3-24 *Counterinsurgency*. Today this manual is over 5 years old, and we are still in Iraq; additionally no modifications have been made to the document for Afghanistan. The German's in WW I only waited 1 year to realize their doctrine was out of date and rushed to update it. The book continues to give examples of how many times the German forces changed doctrine based on new British, or failed German tactics and stratagems.

In *Command or Control* Samuels provides a comparative analysis of the German and British Armies between 1888 and 1918, focusing primarily on the development of defensive strategies. He posits and tests three hypotheses. First, the difference between the combat effectiveness of the German and British armies owed as much to the failings in British performance as to German superiority. Second, these differences in effectiveness were, in large measure, because the two armies held quite different philosophies of combat. Finally, these different philosophies of combat would be expressed most clearly in the command systems employed by the two armies.

To validate and test his hypotheses, Samuels compares the German method of decentralized control to the British ridged method of restrictive control and how each of these methods fared in different campaigns during WWI. This also relates to today's COIN Manual at it applies to efforts to move to decentralized operations. The COIN Manual states on page A-3 that "Small-unit actions in a COIN environment often have more impact than similar actions during major combat operations." However, history has shown that large scale operations continue, such as Operation Anaconda's 2002 attempt to defeat a major Taliban force and the recent Operation Moshtarak 2010, the huge USMC effort to re-take Marja. Both operations reflect that doctrine is useless unless senior commanders understand it and use it.

The Germans believed in war as chaos and accordingly as much latitude was given to the local commander on the ground as possible. This allowed for greater flexibility in trying and testing new tactics and stratagems that the Germans were able to replicate throughout their army. The book indicates that the Germans changed their strategic method of defense over 5 times and showed themselves to be masters at quick analysis of battlefield and enemy attributes. Most notable was the German manifestation of the elastic defense. This was a change in doctrine due to huge German losses during British bombardments of the forward trench line. The elastic defense, in essence, was to thinly hold the first line of defense and then allow the defenders to fall back as they saw fit, drawing in the British forces beyond the range of their artillery, and fully into the range of all the German artillery and massed reserve formations used to cut off and destroy the outgunned and exhausted British soldiers. The Germans learned from their mistakes and quickly incorporated new doctrines, the U.S. today has not.

The British rejected decentralization and relied on a strong frontal line believing the purpose of defense was to break up an attack, making it possible for a counterattack. Many in the British Army felt the dogma of British "restrictive control" to be a poor method of control, when compared to the flexible German forces. A veteran of the Boer war criticized the strategy saying, "it was mechanical discipline, absorbing all individuality, forbidding either officer or man to move or fire without direct command and throwing no further responsibility to the subordinate leaders". The book indicates only one time that the British seem to have changed stratagems, and one of those times was to merely copy the German tactic of defense. This turned

out to be a tragic failure for the British since the German tactic was based on how the British forces conducted an attack. Therefore, when the Germans conducted their attack by their own methods, the copied defense technique failed.

A key issue to consider, between COIN and this book, is whether changing military doctrine matters if political strategic goals are absent or misinformed. The book does not identify conflicts between military and civilian strategies. Some pundits say that the U.S. Government's desired end-states in Iraq and Afghanistan are unattainable. Regardless of whether this is true or not, the U.S. Military must continue to strive to ensure the latest and most up-to-date doctrine is in place during conflict, in the vain hope that military successes can at least influence political success, even if looks quite different than the U.S. Government's definition.

Samuel's book does seem to be a bit biased in favor of German positions and abilities. He overlooks Allied initiatives in the development of tanks and armored vehicles. Yet, his thesis seems to be validated; that decentralized control better enables a climate that empowers out of the box thinkers, thus better doctrine can be quickly adapted.

The conclusion of the book is what could be called the "Cliff Note" of the entire book. It is a quote from Colonel G.F.R. Henderson: "The study of war has done more for Prussia than educating its soldiers and producing a sound system of organization. It had led to the establishment of a sound system of command; and this system proved a marvelous instrument in the hands of a great leader. It was based on the recognition of three facts; first, that an army cannot be effectively controlled by direct orders from headquarters; second that the man on the spot is the best judge of the situation; and that intelligent cooperation is of infinitely more value than mechanical obedience".

The doctrine being used in Afghanistan was written for Iraq, and as often stated, Iraq is not Afghanistan. It does not make sense to use the same COIN Manual with, slight modifications in Afghanistan. The U.S. does not seem to have applied the same doctrinal scrutiny to Afghanistan as it did to Iraq - or do military leaders actually believe an Iraqi strategy will work in Afghanistan?

Warning, this book is not an easy read. It is filled with minute details that although provide essential background, can easily lose a reader's interest. Due to the technical information of the background details it may be hard for the average reader to remain engaged in looking for the strategic transitions that this review seeks to embrace. As U.S. forces preach decentralized operations, much of what we see today are top down driven "restrictive control" methods.

As irregular warfare activities such as counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, stability operations, foreign internal defense and unconventional warfare become more prevalent; leaders will have to understand how to change military doctrine while in combat. Many would say that that is like changing the fan belt on a moving car; but without the initiative to do so , U.S. forces could face failure by a more adaptive and responsive foe.

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*Irregular Warfare. The opinions expressed here are the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of Defense or Marine Corps.*

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