

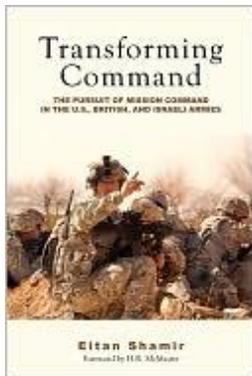


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Transforming Command

Book Review by Frank G. Hoffman



Eitan Shamir, *Transforming Command: The Pursuit of Mission Command in the U.S., British and Israeli Armies*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011, 288 pgs, \$24.95.

In the Foreword of this well executed book, Brigadier General H.R. McMaster, USA warns that American thinking about defense transformation and Revolutions in Military Affairs up until Iraq and Afghanistan had begun to eclipse the doctrine or command philosophy called “mission command.” “The orthodoxy of defense transformation,” he notes, “considered war as mainly a targeting exercise and divorced war from its political, human, psychological and cultural dimensions.” He goes on to associate the neglect of mission command with negative impacts on U.S. and coalition efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as Israeli efforts in Southern Lebanon in 2006.

Thus, *Transforming Command* is certainly timely. Partly in response to the effects of the transformation agenda promoted by former U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and partly in recognition of the leadership challenges posed by operations against today’s adaptive adversaries, the requirement for empowered and decentralized leadership is once again being recognized in the United States. The U.S. Army’s latest capstone concept, developed by General McMaster stressed “Future operations...must remain grounded in the Army’s long-standing concept of Mission Command defined as the conduct of military operations through decentralized execution based upon mission orders for effective mission accomplishment.” The Army goes on to emphasize disciplined initiative and prudent risk taking based on commander’s intent as key elements of mission command.

Likewise the U.S. Marine Corps has updated its Marine Operating Concepts with a chapter on Mission Command. It defines it as “A cultivated leadership ethos that empowers decentralized leaders with decision authority and guides character development of Marines in garrison and combat.” For the Marines, Mission Command “promotes an entrepreneurial mindset and enables the strong relationships of trust and mutual understanding necessary for decentralized decision making and the tempo of operations required to seize the initiative...”

This wonderfully researched and crisply written book will provide numerous insights to help counter the erosion of Mission Command in the American military. Eitan Shamir has been a research fellow with the acclaimed Dado Center for Interdisciplinary Military Studies, the IDF's premier think tank. He now is now serving with Israel's strategic doctrine office, which presumably can exploit the insights of *Transforming Command* in order to continue the IDF's momentum over the past several years.

Shamir's product blends military history, organizational theory and comparative cultural analysis. As its subtitle suggests, it focuses on comparisons between the American, British and Israeli militaries, with an emphasis on ground forces. It is another timely and topical product of the Stanford Security Series which has issued a number of cutting edge books recently (see my *SWJ* review of Dr. Jim Russell's related effort on military adaptation, *Adapting to the Utterly Unpredictable, the Entirely Unknown*).

This study is framed around a number of key questions:

- What were the American, British and Israeli traditions of command prior to their professed adoption of Mission Command?
- How did prior traditions and styles of command influence the adoption of Mission Command in these country's military institutions, and what other factors impacted its eventual introduction?
- How did each force adapt to Mission Command in theory and practice?
- How did each force vary in its theory and application?
- Was the adoption of Mission Command successful? Why or why not?

Shamir opens with a superb chapter on the origins and evolution of German command and control theory, and its evolution from storm troop tactics to the development of *Blitzkrieg*. Clearly, technology played a role in these developments, particularly the early introduction of radio to support mobile armored operations. "It was," Shamir observes, "a classic example of technology employed in the service of doctrine, rather than the all too familiar and unfortunate reverse dynamic." He goes on to note that the German's established a culture of professionalism, cohesion, personnel selection, education and training that matched their understanding of warfare. It is this culture that undergirds the concept of *Auftragstatik* or mission command. Contemporary military institutions, Shamir hints, have their own distinct cultures and experiences and adopting the German way of command poses challenges, which his subsequent chapters bring to light in detail.

Shamir's research shows that the implementation of Mission Command in all three militaries has been quite uneven. In fact he argues that in the case of both the Israeli and British cases, mission command and performance has regressed, largely as a result of American technological or organizational models. The British, far more comfortable with ambiguity than managerial leadership styles, detailed orders or dogmatic doctrines, have made the most of Mission Command. The Israelis are conflicted by strands in their historical experience, which has supported a great deal of creativity and improvisation in combat while simultaneously undercutting the educational reforms that would promote the professionalism that mission command requires. Israel's social culture still supports a citizen-soldier concept that is anti-

militaristic and anti-intellectual which undercuts professionalism and learning. Shamir's most telling criticisms deal with American shortcomings. While noting exceptions, he finds that

“In the twelve years that had elapsed since the First Iraq war and three successive field manuals espousing mission command had failed to bring about the desired results. A lack of trust and clear objectives coupled with a type of war the U.S. Army was unprepared for had come at the expense of mission command.”

It is clear that the IDF has successfully increased the professionalism and educational levels of its officer corps and has re-instilled its traditions and combat-tested ethos of creative improvisation and adaptation under fire. It is also clear that both American and British military institutions have a ways to go.

The book is not without a few debatable points. The Republican Guard did not escape “nearly unscathed” in 1991. Both American airpower and the U.S. Army's 24th Infantry Division (mechanized) made sure of that, but admittedly it was not destroyed. Furthermore, recasting Mr. Rumsfeld's conception of transformation as the deployment of small maneuvering forces relying on precision fires and enhanced intelligence is a post hoc creation. Nor did concepts like Effects Based Operations (EBO) ever achieve official status as doctrine in the U.S. military; they were operational concepts under refinement.

However, these comments do not detract from what is a valuable foundational study that should be taken seriously by senior military leaders, and it should spawn some serious follow on studies. The ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have required decentralized operations and the mastery of small unit operations by a generation of American and British officers and NCOs. These conflicts have also required extensive staffs employing vast amounts of information, imagery, and cultural intelligence—some of it provided by persistent overhead sensors and drones. Do these operations suggest we need to advance Mission Command further as the Army and Marine concept writers suggest? Are we using technology appropriately to support or hamstring Mission Command? What can we say about command and technology in modern warfare after a decade of hard evidence? What research has been gathered to buttress the Army concept of Network Enabled Mission Command? Have we established the educational systems to institutionalize the combat-tested lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan?

More importantly, to get to a critical component of Shamir's thesis, have we established the necessary personnel selection techniques, training regimens, incentives, and educational programs to support Mission Command in garrison and on the battlefield? Judging from Shamir's culturally-based assessment and the renewed interest in this topic in U.S. military circles, I suspect not.

This is an impressive, in-depth study and comparative analysis. *Transforming Command* shows that the introduction of *Auftragstaktik* has been uneven up to 2006. It is equally clear that mission command's relevance to today's ambiguous and distributed battlespace is even more critical now than ever before. For that reason, this book is commended to all serious students of military theory and all military training and education officials.

Frank G. Hoffman is a Senior Research Fellow at National Defense University's Institute for National Strategic Studies. He is a retired Marine Reservist and frequent contributor to Small Wars Journal.

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