MISSION
COMMAND

Reflections from the Combined Arms Center Commander

By LTG David G. Perkins
There has been a lot of discussion recently on the doctrinal adoption of mission command and the adaptations to the force that come with it. Army leaders have chronicled the development of mission command doctrine, the establishment of the Mission Command Center of Excellence at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., and the creation of the mission command network. These initiatives were begun to drive institutional adaptation within our Army necessary to meet today’s complex strategic environment.

While we need to continue discussing mission command in academic, leadership and other forums, we should recognize that our Army has a certain familiarity with mission command principles. Our entrance into Kandahar and Baghdad marked the beginning of a transition to decentralization and empowerment for our Army upon which we continue to build. Our collective experience with mission command has evolved over the past decade of conflict, and mission command has emerged as one of the central tenets underpinning how our Army currently fights.

We evolved out of necessity. To meet and exceed the operational tempo of our enemy required a requisite decentralization of the formal decision-making processes.
within our fighting units. Commanders recognized that initiative and adaptability, guided by a firm understanding of intent, allowed their units to operate at a much quicker pace.

A Philosophical Shift

As we collectively reflect upon our experiences in both Iraq and Afghanistan, we should consider how these critical lessons will shape how our Army emerges from this past decade of conflict. These lessons should be institutionalized quickly before the hard work and sacrifices of so many are lost. Mission command offers us the framework we need to institutionalize these hard-fought lessons. It is certainly not a new concept, and it is not without challenges, but it does offer the best scenario for how our Army fights in current and future operational environments.

The doctrine of mission command has been a part of our Army for years, and its inherent ideas—adaptability, agility and initiative—are as old as our Army. Mission command is, however, a philosophical shift that emphasizes the centrality of the commander and the decentralization of capability and authority in increasingly complex operational environments. It promotes disciplined initiative and empowers leaders to adjust operations within their commander’s intent.

The philosophy of mission command accomplishes what the terms battle command and command and control could not: the need for commanders to understand that, in today’s operational environment, the information coming from the lowest tactical echelon is as important as that coming from the highest strategic echelon. It’s a mind-set that allows commanders to push capabilities and responsibilities to the edge, thereby ensuring that our Army can operate at a pace equal to or faster than our enemy. To meet this objective, our Army needs to build upon and continue to grow the adaptive and agile leaders that have emerged from this past decade of conflict.

Disciplined Initiative

An example of mission command in action came with the 3rd Infantry Division’s (ID) march to Baghdad in early 2003. Although they certainly operated under a very specific plan of action to achieve the desired end state, more important than the plan was the commander’s intent underlying it. The unit conducted several limited objective attacks, or “thunder runs,” into Baghdad. The purpose of these missions was to create confusion within the Iraqi army and to establish bases from which to conduct further attacks into the heart of Baghdad. The V Corps and 3rd ID commanders ensured that their subordinate commanders fully understood that the ultimate purpose was to render the regime irrelevant to the remaining elements of the Iraqi army and to the greater Iraqi society. As those brigades fought their way into Baghdad, they saw an opportunity to maintain the initiative of the attack and continue pressure on the enemy. Instead of remaining in the regime district and slowing their progress, they continued moving downtown where they established a defensive position in the city center. The presence of the U.S. Army in the center of Baghdad struck a crucial blow to the regime’s claim of ownership over the city and proved it irrelevant over the rest of the country. Shortly thereafter, the regime collapsed and major fighting ended.

These thunder runs were successful because the corps and division-level commanders established clear intent in their orders and trusted their subordinates’ judgment and abilities to exercise disciplined initiative in response to a fluid, complex problem, underwriting the risks that they took. Their focus was not simply on the plan and the staff process that created it but also on their subordinate commanders’ execution of that plan and the conditions on the ground that necessitated adjustment. One of the strengths of our Army is our ability to power-down responsibility and decision making to our leaders on the ground, allowing them to exercise disciplined initiative within the commander’s intent. Looking back, it is clear that commanders were exercising the mission command principles then that our Army is adopting now.

Agile and Adaptive Leaders

Since those first thunder runs of 2003, our Army has operated in complex and challenging environments that have tested the adaptability and agility of our force. We have
operated in areas that require the simultaneous execution of combined arms maneuver in one area and the steadied, patient employment of wide-area security in another. Our leaders have partnered in intergovernmental, interagency and multinational environments, seeking to use the capabilities of those actors who operate outside their direct authority and control.

This was the type of environment we encountered as our Army began Operation New Dawn several years later. While the strategic consequences of the mission were just as important as the thunder runs, the human terrain looked much different. Command responsibility had evolved from one of homogenous units training and deploying together to one marked by modularity. Now, similar to other division-sized areas of operation, representatives from seven of the Army’s 10 divisions operated in northern Iraq, working together to achieve a common purpose. This was a challenging endeavor and required a renewed emphasis on building trust and relationships across the organization. Establishing trust was a performance multiplier, enabling organizations to move with incredible speed. Because of the strategic limitations placed upon our Army during that time, mission success also came through collaboration with and support of our interagency, intergovernmental and multinational partners. Developing solid relationships with these actors based upon mutual trust and understanding was crucial to ensuring lasting security and civil capacity in Iraq. These are the complex environments in which our Army will continue to operate in the future, making the institutionalization of mission command an ever more pressing requirement.

Our leaders have had to learn how to become adaptable and, more importantly, how to create adaptable units that can adjust to changes on the ground. The difference between a good battalion commander and a great one was the adaptability and agility of the unit or, to put it in more doctrinal terms, the degree to which those commanders exercised mission command principles. Those units that could easily anticipate and manage transitions were the units that commanders could trust to operate within their intent and at a pace needed to combat an evolving enemy force. They took great care to train adaptability in their units and rewarded agility in their soldiers. Likewise, our Army must take the same care to foster adaptive, agile leaders capable of operating in the rigorous, complex environments of today and tomorrow. Mission command offers our Army the framework on which to build that type of force.

As we continue this important discussion about mission command in our Army, we cannot lose sight of the valuable lessons we’ve learned over the past decade. These are lessons that have shaped our collective approach to command and should continue to shape how our Army emerges from these conflicts. Over the past two years, our Army has adopted mission command within its doctrine, established the Mission Command Center of Excellence at the Combined Arms Center, Fort Leavenworth, and applied mission command to its leader education curriculum. These were all important and necessary steps to establish the framework for institutionalizing mission command in our Army, but it will be our commanders who will execute these mission command principles each day and who will continue to shape the Army we build for the future.

As we continue to discuss mission command from this point forward, we should reflect on the command approach that our Army has used with such great success in Iraq and Afghanistan. These are the same principles and vision offered by mission command and will be the foundation for how our Army emerges from a decade of conflict.