

# 1 COMMAND IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

In the notes of his conversations with Philip Stanhope on 2 November 1831, the Duke of Wellington gave his assessment of Napoleon Bonaparte: ‘I used to say of him that his presence on the field made the difference of forty thousand men’.<sup>1</sup> Later, in 1836, he qualified this equation: ‘It is very true that I have said that I considered Napoleon’s presence in the field equal to 40,000 men in the balance. This is a very loose way of talking; but the idea is a very different one from that of his presence at a battle being equal to a reinforcement of 40,000 men’.<sup>2</sup> Napoleon was not worth a corps of soldiers; rather, his value as a commander lay in the intellectual and moral influence he exerted over his armies. Wellington famously argued that the principle skill of a commander lay in the art of deduction: ‘All the business of war, and indeed all the business of life, is to endeavour to find out what you don’t know by what you do; that’s what I called “guessing what was at the other side of the hill”’.<sup>3</sup> Napoleon, perhaps more than any other commander of his age, possessed an extraordinary ability to calculate these probabilities and to predict his enemies’ actions. In assessing the military significance of Napoleon, Wellington was, of course, making a wider point about the importance of command in

<sup>1</sup> Philip Stanhope, *Notes of Conversations with the Duke of Wellington*, 2 November 1831 (New York: Longmans Green and Co, 1888), 9.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 September 1836, 81.

<sup>3</sup> Louis J. Jennings (ed.), *The Croker Papers: The Correspondence and Diaries of the Late Right Honourable John Wilson Croker, LL.Dm F.R.S., Secretary of the Admiralty from 1809 to 1830*, Vol. III (1884), 276.

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war. A commander's ability to anticipate, to organize and to motivate was vital to the conduct of war. The outcome of battles and campaigns depended upon it.

Carl von Clausewitz invested command with equal significance. Command is a – perhaps, *the* – major theme of *On War*; the work seems primarily to have been written as a handbook of strategy for future commanders-in-chief. Indeed, while Clausewitz certainly also had Frederick the Great in mind, the third chapter of the first book, 'On Military Genius', is a thinly veiled encomium to Napoleon, 'the God of War himself'.<sup>4</sup> It identifies some of characteristics required of a commander in the age of modern war, which Napoleon fully embodied. While the politician concentrated on policy and, therefore, required highly developed powers of reason, the general operated in the arena of probability and chance. To survive in this opaque and confusing domain, a commander required two basic qualities: 'If the mind is to emerge unscathed from this relentless struggle with the unforeseen, two qualities are indispensable: *first, an intellect that, even in the darkest hour, retains some glimmerings of inner light which leads to the truth; and second, the courage to follow this faint light wherever it may lead.* The first of these qualities is described by the French term, *coup d'oeil*, the second is determination'.<sup>5</sup> Wellington associated command with vision. It is noticeable that light is recurrently drawn upon by Clausewitz as a metaphor of command. Commanders illuminate the darkness and, in doing so, they light the way for their soldiers; they act as beacons in two senses. It is obvious from Clausewitz's prose that he regarded command as indispensable to military operations. Military endeavours required a commander who identified clear and achievable goals, anticipated the difficulties and frictions they involved and, despite inevitable setbacks, was able to inspire the confidence of the troops.

### Command Crisis

Wellington and Clausewitz speak from a now-distant and foreign era. Much of what they wrote has become obsolete in all but historical

<sup>4</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 583.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

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terms. Clausewitz's comments on 'attacks on swamps, flooded areas and forests', for instance, are of little contemporary relevance. Yet, despite all the prodigious advances in military technology and the transformation of warfare itself, the observations of Clausewitz and Wellington about command remain as valid as ever. Even in the twenty-first century, military command remains of paramount importance. Battlefield success still relies upon generalship. Indeed, many of the fundamental skills of command remain the same as they were in the Napoleonic era. Above all, penetrating the fog of battle, commanders still need to be able to identify clear and achievable objectives and to calculate the probability of success. Command remains critical to military operations and combat effectiveness today.

Indeed, the recent campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan have demonstrated only the enduring importance of command to military operations. In response to the disappointments of those campaigns and proving the continuing validity of Wellington's and Clausewitz's interventions, command has been the object of intense scrutiny over the last fifteen years, in both America and Europe. Concern, even calumny, about the failures of command has been frequent and strident. Of course, much of the debate has focused exclusively on civilian leadership. The Bush and Obama administrations have been roundly criticized for their strategic incompetence in their respective 'Wars on Terror'; Bush foolishly invaded Iraq, fomenting a sectarian civil war which has de-stabilized the Middle East,<sup>6</sup> while Obama precipitately withdrew from the theatre, facilitating the rise of ISIS and the collapse of Syria.<sup>7</sup> Yet, military command and individual generals have themselves been the object of widespread and deep public concern. For many commentators, military command has demonstrably and specifically failed in the last decade. Generals stand accused. In an increasingly multi-polar and mediatized world, they have been unable to identify or to execute coherent strategies. They have failed to display precisely the qualities which Wellington and Clausewitz most prized in a general. Rather than illuminating the darkness, they seem to have been as confused by recent conflicts as their political masters.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Ricks, *Fiasco: the American Adventure in Iraq* (London: Penguin, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> David Kilcullen, *Blood Year: Islamic State and the Failures of the War on Terror* (London: Hurst, 2016).

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These criticisms have predictably been most pronounced in the United States, where an entire genre has developed criticizing generalship.<sup>8</sup> This literature is far too voluminous to consider at any length. However, the work of Tom Ricks exemplifies many of the criticisms. As a leading war correspondent and military journalist, Ricks has been particularly excised by the problem of military command itself – and its failings. His monograph on command, *The Generals*, begins with a pointed dedication, ‘For those who died following poor leaders’, and an epigraph, ‘There are no bad soldiers, only bad generals’. The implication is very clear. The ‘fiasco’ in Iraq could not be blamed on Bush and Washington alone; America’s generals were culpable too. Consequently, Ricks examines American generalship from the Second World War to identify individual failings and recurrent structural problems. Thus, Tommy Franks, Ricardo Sanchez and George Casey are subjected to very severe personal admonition.<sup>9</sup> Yet, the malady is deeper. For Ricks, America’s command problems have constituted a profound corruption of the system which General George Marshall had implemented in the Second World War. Crucially, although a number of US officers have been relieved from duty in the course of the post-9/11 wars in Iraq

<sup>8</sup> E.g., Seymour Hersch, *Chain of Command: the road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib* (London: HarperCollins, 2009); Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (London: Pocket Books, 2004); Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (London: Pocket Books, 2003); Bob Woodward, *State of Denial* (London: Pocket Books, 2006); Tom Ricks, *The Gamble* (London: Penguin, 2009); Fred Kaplan, ‘Challenging Generals’, in Robert Taylor, William Rosenbach and Erik Rosenbach (eds), *Military Leadership* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2008); Greg Jaffe, *The Fourth Star: four generals and the epic struggle for the future of the US Army* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009); Linda Robinson, *Tell Me How This Ends: General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way out of Iraq* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008); Fred Kaplan, *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2014). Dan Bolger, *Why We Lost: a general’s inside account of Iraq and Afghanistan* (New York: First Mariner Books, 2015); Paul Yingling, ‘A Failure in Generalship’, in Robert Taylor, William Rosenbach and Erik Rosenbach (eds), *Military Leadership* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2008); Harry Laver and Jeffry Matthews (eds), *The Art of Command* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2008); Eliot Cohen, *Supreme Command* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2002); Kimberley Kagan, *The Eye of Command* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006); Eliot Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: the anatomy of failure in war* (New York: Vintage, 1991); Andrew Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: how Americans are seduced by war* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Andrew Bacevich, *Washington Rules: America’s path to power* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Ricks, *The Generals: American military command from World War II to today* (London: Penguin, 2012), 413.

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and Afghanistan, in most cases, according to Ricks, these reliefs have been primarily political, initiated and enacted not from within the military but by civilian leaders and the White House itself. There has been only one exception. During 1st Marine Division's advance on Baghdad, James Mattis, the divisional commander, relieved one of his Regimental Combat Team commanders. Precisely because it was so unusual, the sacking 'made page-one news'.<sup>10</sup> However, Ricks claims that for the most part commanders have not been relieved because the armed forces have been too weak, self-interested or cowardly to remove their own officers. The Service Chiefs have devolved themselves from their professional responsibilities with disastrous results.

The command crisis in America may be the most internationally prominent because of the country's superpower status. Yet, it is far from unique. On the contrary, equivalent discussions are evident in Europe and no more so than in the United Kingdom. Indeed, British concerns about military command have reached a level of intensity in the last decade which may even have exceeded American interventions. There are some evident reasons for this. Britain's armed forces have not only been committed to complex expeditionary counter-insurgencies, with all their attendant ambiguities and contradictions, but they have been deployed in support of an American-led mission. As a medium-sized military power and America's closest ally, the United Kingdom felt impelled to contribute to costly foreign missions in Iraq and Afghanistan which were not in the immediate national interest. Caught between alliance obligations and public scepticism, the United Kingdom's campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq have been fraught with controversy from the very start. Public concerns about the quality of military leadership have been radically compounded. Over the last decade numerous publications have appeared published by leading scholars, journalists and officers criticizing British commanders.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 405.

<sup>11</sup> E.g., Tim Edmunds and Anthony Forster, 'Out of Step: the case for change in the British armed forces', *Demos* 2007; Paul Cornish and Andrew Dorman, 'Blair's wars and Brown's budgets: from Strategic Defence Review to strategic decay in less than a decade', *International Affairs* 85 (2) March 2009: 247–61; Paul Cornish and Andrew Dorman, 'National defence in the age of austerity', *International Affairs* 85(4) July 2009: 733–5; Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War: contemporary strategy in historical perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Richard North, *Ministry of Defeat* (London: Continuum, 2009); James Fergusson, *One million bullets* (London: Bantam, 2008); Stephen Grey, *Operation Snakebite* (London: Penguin,

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The public disquiet about political and military leadership, of course, reached its apogee in Britain on 6 July 2016 with the long-awaited publication of the Chilcot Inquiry into the Iraq War. The inquiry had sat for seven years, longer than the military intervention itself, to produce a 2.6-million-word report. It is the most comprehensive statement of command failure yet to be produced. The report admonished Tony Blair for rashly committing the United Kingdom to follow the US into Iraq before properly assessing the necessity for military action and its likely outcome. Yet, military commanders were also reprimanded for their failure to respond to the changing situation in Basra, to communicate the dangers to their political leaders and for committing themselves to a simultaneous campaign in Helmand in breach of defence planning guidelines. For instance, Air Chief Marshall Jock Stirrup, the Chief of the Defense Staff, in the crucial

2009); *The Economist*, 'Losing Their Way', 31 January 2009, [www.economist.com/node/13022177](http://www.economist.com/node/13022177); *The Times*, 'The Officers' Mess', 9 June 2010, 2; David Betz and Anthony Cormack, 'Iraq, Afghanistan and British strategy', *Orbis*, Spring 2009, 319–36; Theo Farrell and Stuart Gordon, 'COIN Machine: the British military in Afghanistan', *RUSI Journal* 154(3) 2009: 18–25; Peter Mansoor, 'The British Army and the Lessons of the Iraq War', *British Army Review* 147, Summer 2009: 11–15; Daniel Marston, "'Smug and Complacent?'" Operation TELIC: the need for critical analysis', *British Army Review* 147, Summer 2009: 16–23; Andrew Mackay and Steve Tatham, 'Behavioural Conflict: from general to strategic corporal, complexity, adaptation and influence', *The Shrivenham Papers*, 9 December 2009, 31; Paul Newton, Paul Colley and Andrew Sharpe, 'Reclaiming the Art of British Strategic Thinking', *RUSI Journal*, February/March 155(1) 2010: 47; Public Administration Committee, *Who Does UK National Strategy?*, [www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmpubadm/435/43502.htm](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmpubadm/435/43502.htm); Anthony King, 'Military Command in the Last Decade', *International Affairs* 87(2) 2011, 377–96; Anthony King, 'Understanding Helmand: British military campaign in Afghanistan', *International Affairs* 86(2) 2010: 311–32; Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Tim Bird and Alex Marshall, *Afghanistan: how the west lost its way* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011); Robert Egnell and David Ucko, *Counter-Insurgency in Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Jonathan Bailey, Richard Iron and Hew Strachan, *British Generals in Blair's Wars* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013); Christopher Elliott, *High Command: British military leadership in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars* (London: Hurst, 2015); Sons of the Iron Lady, 'Donkeys led by Lions', *British Army Review* 150, 55–8. [www.wapentakes.co.uk/donkeys.pdf](http://www.wapentakes.co.uk/donkeys.pdf); Frank Ledwidge, *Losing Small Wars: British military failure in Iraq and Afghanistan* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011); Ben Barry, *Harsh Lesson: Iraq, Afghanistan and the changing character of war* (London: IISS, 2017); John Kiszely, *Anatomy of a Campaign: the British fiasco in Norway 1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

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period between 2006 and 2010,<sup>12</sup> was singled out for special censure by the Chilcot Inquiry.<sup>13</sup> He recommended an option of drawdown in Basra in 2006, unaware that a British withdrawal would have disastrous consequences for the city and severe reputational consequences with American allies: ‘ACM Stirrup’s proposed remedy of continued drawdown and managing public opinion did not mitigate the risk of strategic failure he described’.<sup>14</sup> The public criticism of a senior British officer was almost unprecedented.

Although its predicament may have been more accentuated than most, the United Kingdom is by no means alone in Europe in having suffered a command crisis in the last decade. Similar disquiet has been evident in the Netherlands,<sup>15</sup> Denmark,<sup>16</sup> France<sup>17</sup> and Germany.<sup>18</sup>

Western command is suffering a legitimisation crisis, then; indeed, for some, generalship has palpably failed. However, despite all the often bitter complaints about generals over the last fifteen years, not one commentator, whether civilian, academic or military, has questioned the enduring relevance of military command. On the contrary, the central presumption underlying all these interventions is not that military command has become irrelevant in the twenty-first century but, on the contrary, that command remains as indispensable to military effectiveness as it ever was. The condemnation of a legion of failures does not in any way suggest that generalship is obsolete today. On the contrary, command is regarded as vital to military success in the twenty-first century as it was in the Napoleonic wars. Generals have been calumniated not because their utility is now questioned but, on the

<sup>12</sup> Tony Zinni and Tony Koltz, *Leading the Charge: leadership lessons from the battlefield to the boardroom* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 51.

<sup>13</sup> [www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/247921/the-report-of-the-iraq-inquiry\\_executive-summary.pdf](http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/247921/the-report-of-the-iraq-inquiry_executive-summary.pdf), 106.

<sup>14</sup> [www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/247921/the-report-of-the-iraq-inquiry\\_executive-summary.pdf](http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/247921/the-report-of-the-iraq-inquiry_executive-summary.pdf), 105.

<sup>15</sup> Mirjam Grandia Mantas, *Deadly Embrace: the Decision Paths to Uruzgan and Helmand* (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Leiden, 2015), 181.

<sup>16</sup> [www.theguardian.com/film/2010/jun/03/armadillo-danish-documentary-afghanistan](http://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/jun/03/armadillo-danish-documentary-afghanistan).

<sup>17</sup> Pascal Vennesson, ‘Cohesion and Misconduct: The French Army and the Mahé Affair’, in Anthony King (ed.), *Frontline: combat and cohesion in the twenty-first century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>18</sup> [www.spiegel.de/international/germany/kunduz-bombing-affair-german-colonel-wanted-to-destroy-insurgents-a-669444.html](http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/kunduz-bombing-affair-german-colonel-wanted-to-destroy-insurgents-a-669444.html).

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contrary, because they have failed to fulfil their duty. Generals have been criticized precisely because they have lacked the acuity advocated by Wellington and Clausewitz. Even today, command retains the primacy with which Wellington and Clausewitz invested it in the early nineteenth century.

### The Transformation of Command

There is little doubt that military commanders have made very considerable mistakes in the last decade. There have been many cases of poor decision-making; a coherent strategy has often been lacking and campaigns have been periodically mismanaged. Yet, while in no way excusing these individual errors, generals have found themselves in an unenviable predicament. Since the turn of the century, generals have confronted distinctively challenging operational and organizational conditions. Indeed, command itself has been undergoing a significant transformation. In many cases, generals, attuned to twentieth-century expectations, have struggled to adapt to the new conditions in which they have been ordered to operate.

Generals may have struggled to command campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan but senior officers have become increasingly aware of the new challenges they face. Indeed, some generals have suggested that the very practice of command is in transition; in the face of increased operational and organizational complexity, decision-making has begun to evolve. Consequently, alongside the vivid discourses on command failure, a second sub-literature has begun to appear in the last decade on the transformation of military command itself. Tony Zinni's book, *Leading the Charge*, published in 2009, is a highly pertinent example of this emergent genre. Tony Zinni served for forty years in the US Marine Corps, including tours in Vietnam in the late 1960s.<sup>19</sup> He retired as a four-star general, having served as the Commander of US Central Command. As a result of his long military experience, he has been exercised by command failures in the last decade. Significantly, Zinni does not criticize or blame particular civilian or military leaders in his book, nor does he deconstruct the contradictions in Western strategy

<sup>19</sup> Tom Clancy with Anthony Zinni, *Battle Ready* (London: Pan, 2005).



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or in civil–military relations. Rather, he attributes much of the current crisis to more fundamental organizational problems in leadership itself.

Specifically, Zinni claims that leadership is currently in transition. The practice of generalship has changed and, in many cases, the problems of the last decade have been the result of a failure to respond to these new challenges: ‘Virtually all organizations are becoming too complex and involved for single, directive approaches to leading’.<sup>20</sup> Existing command models, derived from the twentieth century, have become increasingly obsolete in the face of new global problems. Precisely because organizations and operations have become more complex and dispersed, traditional, heroic models of leadership, designed for vertically integrated organizations, have become obsolete.

Zinni argues that, if there is to be any improvement in the quality of military command, a new model of ‘participatory leadership’ is required which actively seeks to engage with and maximize a network of peers and subordinates: ‘We no longer build a leadership hierarchy in a cutting edge modern organization. Instead, we build leadership *networks* that make the business of leading institutionalized and multi-directional. Leadership is no longer only vertical, working from the top down. It is distributed, pervasive, invited from all members, and instilled in the culture of successful enterprises’.<sup>21</sup> For Zinni, because of the increasing complexity of operations and the expanding span of command, the armed forces must embrace participatory leadership: ‘Leaders who are organizing combat commands, like leaders of organizations everywhere, have realized that our fast-changing world requires new approaches and new thinking’.<sup>22</sup> Team-building is now essential. Zinni maintains that certain leadership characteristics are requisite in the current era. However, ‘good character alone is no longer enough to define a good leader’; he defines eleven new characteristics which will allow the new leader to understand the situation and to collaborate with others so that problems can be resolved collectively. For Zinni, command has become a collaborative, joint enterprise.

Zinni’s work is certainly significant and it has attracted a wide readership. However, in the English language, General Stanley

<sup>20</sup> Tony Zinni and Tony Koltz, *Leading the Charge: leadership lessons from the battlefield to the boardroom* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 51.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 101–2.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

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McChrystal has surely made the most important contemporary statement about the changing character of command in the twenty-first century. McChrystal commanded the US Joint Special Operations Command in Iraq from 2003 to 2008 and subsequently commanded NATO's International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan in 2009–10, before being relieved by Barack Obama in controversial circumstances. McChrystal is widely admired as one of the finest military commanders of the current era. His two recent publications, *My Share of the Task* and *Team of Teams*, document this reformation of command.

*Team of Teams* is particularly relevant here. It situates McChrystal's personal experience of Joint Special Operations Command in Baghdad in a wider historic context to show that the evolution of this command was consistent with general patterns of organizational transformation in the twenty-first century. In particular, McChrystal claims that the hierarchies which were developed in the twentieth century for industrial warfare have become archaic in the face of hybrid opponents. According to McChrystal, twentieth-century warfare was complicated; it involved the coordination of massive, homogeneous forces. This was administratively demanding – and a mistake could be catastrophic. By contrast, in the twenty-first century, military problems have become 'complex': 'Being *complex* is different from being complicated. Things that are *complicated* have many parts but those parts are joined, one to the next in relatively simple ways ... Complexity, on the other hand, occurs when the number of *interactions* between components increases dramatically – the interdependences that allow viruses and bank runs to spread; this is where things quickly become unpredictable'.<sup>23</sup> The elements of a complex system are heterogeneous, interconnected with each other in multiple ways.

While commanding in Baghdad, McChrystal discovered that the armed forces, which he had known throughout his career, were ill-adapted for complex, multi-dimensional operations. They were configured for mass two-dimensional fights: 'In the course of this fight, 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

<sup>23</sup> Stanley McChrystal, *Team of Teams* (London: Penguin, 2015), 57.