

## Command

In the wake of the troubled campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, military decision-making appears to be in crisis and generals have been subjected to intense and sustained public criticism. Taking these interventions as a starting point, Anthony King examines the transformation of military command in the twenty-first century. Focusing on the army division, King argues that a phenomenon of collective command is developing. In the twentieth century, generals typically directed and led operations personally, monopolizing decision-making. They commanded individualistically, even heroically. As operations have expanded in range and scope, decision-making has multiplied and diversified. As a result command is becoming increasingly professionalized and collaborative. Through interviews with many leading generals and vivid ethnographic analysis of divisional headquarters, this book provides a unique insight into the transformation of command in Western armies.

**Anthony King** is Chair of War Studies in the Politics and International Studies Department at Warwick University. His most recent publications include *The Combat Soldier* (2013) and, as editor, *Frontline* (2015). He has acted as a mentor and adviser to the British Army and the Royal Marines for over a decade and worked as one of General Carter's special advisers in the Prism Cell in Regional Command South, Kandahar, in 2009–10.

# Command

## The Twenty-First-Century General

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## PREFACE

It would be convenient to claim that a book on command exemplified its own subject matter and that, with military precision, I followed a clear, coherent research plan from the very start. The reality was quite different. Having completed *The Combat Soldier* in 2012 (published the following year), I fully intended to return to the topic of warfare and the armed forces but only after I had completed a long-contemplated project on social theory and on the question of social change, in particular. In 2004, I had published a book on social theory which had advocated a ‘hermeneutic’, ‘interactionist’ and, ultimately, Durkheimian sociology against various individualist, idealist and realist currents in contemporary sociological thinking. My 2004 theory book raised an obvious question: how is it possible to explain long-range historical trends without recourse to the very underlying structural factors which I had explicitly denied in *The Structure of Social Theory*? It seems to me an interesting problem and one which I began to return to in 2012 and early 2013. As part of this work, I eventually published an article on the work of Gabriel Tarde as an early articulation of my thoughts on social change.

However, in the spring of 2013, it became clear that the British Army was reorganizing itself quite radically following the Iraq and Afghanistan interventions; it was re-investing in the division, a latterly neglected formation. It also became obvious that my own contacts in the British Army were particularly good at that time. It became apparent that I should reverse the order of the projects and commit myself to the study of the army division, not least because if I waited at

least three years until after the completion of the projected monograph on social change, it would be so much more difficult to re-establish the relations on which good ethnography relies. Consequently, relegating the social theory project, I chose to study the division, and specifically the divisional headquarters, with the encouragement of Hew Strachan.

By the summer of 2013, then, I had a topic. However, although I knew I was interested in the divisional headquarters, I had no real concept of what I wanted to study. Indeed, embarrassingly, it took me a year to determine that the project was even about command at all. I now look on my obtuseness with some amazement; what are military headquarters, after all, but machines for command? It seemed remarkable that it had taken me so long to understand that the project was about command. It took me many further months to develop a concept of collective command, which is the central argument of this monograph. Once I had a clear concept, the research fell rapidly into place, although there was a great deal of work to do in order to refine the theory and to collate sufficient evidence to make my claims remotely plausible – against some pretty well-founded objections from professional soldiers and scholars. The book's genesis was rather like a confused counter-insurgency operation than a grand Napoleonic campaign, then. I had no clue what I was doing at the beginning and only developed a clear concept of my objective retrospectively, after much struggle and many mistakes. This book emerged through a very messy, even confused, iterative process, eventually crystallizing into an account of military transformation which is, I hope, clear and interesting, even if readers disagree with the argument.

It was in the course of developing the project and, specifically, the argument for the rise of a command collective that the evident parallels with my previous works on the armed forces became clear. Indeed, the parallels with *The Combat Soldier* were entirely accidental but, although they potentially supported my analysis, somewhat disturbing to me when they became apparent. It is, perhaps, true that scholars eventually keep making the same argument over and over again. As my work on divisional command proceeded, it became clear that I was unwittingly writing a trilogy about contemporary military transformation. This trilogy started with my first volume on the armed forces, *The Transformation of Europe's Armed Forces*, published in 2011, followed by *The Combat Soldier* and to be completed by this current volume, *Command*. The central themes of this trilogy and

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each of its constituent volumes are professionalization and the transformation of Western armed forces in the twenty-first century. Each book attempts to highlight the distinctiveness of Western forces today in contrast to the previous century.

*Command* is plainly concerned with warfare and the armed forces. However, while the book tries to explore the lifeworld of command in ethnographic detail, it is obvious that the work is concerned with much more than military command. It is concerned with organizational and social transformation much more widely, with the military taken as a focus of analysis. Indeed, in the course of completing the book, the question of command and leadership became more salient than I could ever have imagined when I started work on it. In the last decade, the West has descended into an ever-deepening crisis. Economically, Western Europe and the United States have yet to recover from the banking collapse of 2008; debt repayments continue and, in most countries, the economy has not yet returned to pre-crash levels. At the same time, inequalities between the richest and the poorest have widened to generate increasing popular resentment against elites, generally. The economic crisis has been compounded by increasing strain over immigration, which has affected Western populations differentially. Whether legal or not, this immigration has ignited intense reactions. Finally, the campaigns in Afghanistan and especially Iraq, which are widely presumed to have been failures, have compounded the alienation, not least because in Europe the current immigration crisis is a direct result of Western policy towards Iraq, Syria and Libya. Political leaders are seen to have failed to protect European citizens from unsustainable waves of immigrants. This multifarious crisis has encouraged the resurgence of extremist political views, especially – but not only – on the right. In Europe, far-right groups, like Marine Le Pen's *Front Nationale* and *Alternative für Deutschland*, have gained significant electoral support. In the United States, the irresistible rise of Donald Trump reflects the same frustration, fear and resentment.

The West is suffering a series of multiple shocks of an order which may perhaps eventually match the Thirty Years War, the end of the *Ancien Régime* in the late eighteenth century or the Depression of the 1930s. The West is, then, afflicted by a genuine crisis which is not internal to the political system. However, although the political system and especially the current model of political authority and leadership

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have not caused this crisis, they have played a contributing role. Specifically, the crisis has been exacerbated by popular frustrations at the perceived failures of political leaders to listen to ordinary people and to address their concerns about the economy and migration. This frustration was demonstrated palpably in the United Kingdom when, on 23 June 2016, the EU Referendum was held. On that day, 52 per cent of those who voted chose to leave the EU. In fact, in England, the proportion of those voting out was far higher. In Boston, Lincolnshire, for instance, 75 per cent of the electorate voted against the EU; barring London and a few metropolitan areas, England overwhelmingly demanded Brexit. Although predicted by some of the polls, the result – especially its scale – shocked the British political establishment and, indeed, many public and private institutions in the United Kingdom which were committed to Europe.

The concerns of those who voted out were real but the rhetoric which surrounded the Brexit campaign was instructive. A loathsome yet critical figure here was Nigel Farage, who, amid a series of lies and distortions both about the EU and also what Brexit would achieve, made a very important claim: ‘We want our country back’. In stark contrast to the Remainers’ anodyne campaign, the phrase brilliantly evoked the popular mood. For Farage, an exit from the EU constituted a reaffirmation of traditional national, Parliamentary sovereignty, in which the United Kingdom once again had total authority to make and enforce its own laws and policies. Farage rejected globalization and the unelected elites located in multinational corporations, and especially in Brussels, who manage and promote it. Politically, Farage wanted a return to an ideal of twentieth- or even nineteenth-century democracy.

On 8 November 2016, in an almost unprecedented act, the US elected Donald Trump, a billionaire businessman, to the presidency. There were evident affinities between his election and Brexit. His rise has been predicated on the apparent failure of the Washington system to protect normal working Americans from the economic and migratory depredations of globalization. Trump promised to re-assert American political sovereignty, cleansing it of the foreign influences which have putatively infected and corrupted it: ‘to make America great again’. The connection between the two plebiscites was widely noted. Indeed, on 24 August 2016, Nigel Farage gave a speech at a presidential rally for Trump in which he drew an immediate parallel between Brexit and the Trump election: ‘We did it – we made June 23 our independence

day when we smashed the establishment. We reached those people who have never voted in their lives but believed they could take back control of their country, take back control of their borders, and get back their pride and self-respect'. He advocated that Trump's supporters form a 'people's army' and do the same in the United States. Trump responded: 'On June 23, the people of Britain voted to declare their independence – which is what we're also looking to do, folks – from their international government'. Populist politicians across the West are increasingly envisioning a return to a political past, when national authority was invested in an elected representative body.

The dislocations, which have been precipitated by globalization, have to be recognized. For many, especially those at the lower end of the socio-economic scale, they have been very serious. Moreover, many of the criticisms of national government articulated by Farage and Trump are valid. Indeed, some of Farage's concerns about the EU are well-founded. The EU has failed to manage the economic crisis since 2008; much of southern Europe is still in a desperate condition, with conditions seen to have been imposed by Germany. It has also failed to manage the current immigration crisis. The Commission is inefficient and has been involved in an unfortunate level of corruption. Confronting a crisis it was never constructed to face, the EU has failed to manage the situation. However, the proposal of Farage and Trump that history can be underdone and that it is possible to return to a previous and apparently more comforting political form is deluded and dangerous. It is incorrect to believe that the EU is a simply supranational organization whose purpose has been to rob properly independent nation-states of their sovereignty. Rather, the EU has evolved as a complex, multi-layered political structure in response to the needs and wishes of its member states themselves, to comprise of inter-governmental, supranational and regional levels. Precisely because the EU has become so central to each of the member states, it is not always easy to discern where domestic state institutions end, especially in foreign and home offices, and where the EU begins.

Sovereignty, and therefore political power and authority, has become highly complex and diffuse in twenty-first-century Europe – and in the international order more widely. The international system is no longer Newtonian, consisting of only a few elements whose causal interrelations are relatively simple and predictable. The EU and the global order itself have become a quantum political reality. They are

infuriating as such. Yet, while sovereignty has been shared and political decision-making diffused outwards across borders, it does not represent the end of the nation-state or the end of national sovereignty. Rather, national sovereignty is no longer as absolute as it once was. It has been relativized, distributed and shared. Even within individual nation-states, a disaggregation of power is observable as government and individual departments operate through new configurations and alliances.

It is at this point that the wider relevance of this study of military command and especially a theory of collective command might become relevant. The army division is, in comparison to the nation-state or the EU, only a very small and simple organization. However, like those organizations, the process of globalization has forced a radical reconfiguration of its structure. In response to this new organizational structure and the new operations in which the division has emerged, a new and highly professionalized practice of command has begun to be institutionalized, which I have called ‘collective command’; commanders have shared decision-making authority, integrating subordinates, staff and partners into the process of leadership. The appearance of collective command in the division seems to be suggestive. In particular, just as command has been distributed in an army division, so may political power be in the process of dispersion in the twenty-first-century state. The EU represents precisely this disaggregation and redistribution of authority and power. Even more than Foucault knew, power is becoming capillary, running along a complex arterial system of multiple interconnections. Sovereignty is shared; in order to exercise independent national sovereignty, cooperation with other states is required. Paradoxically, to maximize national sovereignty, it is increasingly necessary to share it.

Accordingly, although the likes of Farage and Trump exaggerate the pristineness of twentieth-century sovereignty, political leaders are certainly no longer in control of government in the way they once were. They must interact, collaborate and cooperate with other leaders internationally and increasingly transnationally in order to achieve their political goals. They must form partnerships and networks. In this way, although their jobs are quite different, there is a similarity between today’s political leaders and their generals. Successful political leaders often have to operate with partners and allies, tying intricate transnational systems together. They must be more adept at collaboration,

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cooperation and diplomacy. This certainly means that they cannot just stop immigration or the economic crisis – if they ever could. However, this new paradigm of political leadership does not represent the collapse of representative democracy – although it complicates it dramatically. It certainly cannot be cured by a return to the past. States can disengage from each other to reaggregate their putatively pristine power only at great cost, as the UK discovered as it negotiated Brexit. Political leaders, more than ever, need to be able to construct alliances and teams, coordinating agents, partners and proxies not only in their own states but in others. Political power has become collective, dispersed and distributed.

Farage and Trump offer a quite different vision of leadership as a solution to the crisis of globalization. In line with their return to an apparently simpler past, these individuals promote an atavistic ideal of leadership. In particular, although Farage has recurrently resigned when threatened with any role involving political responsibility, they advocate a millenarian image of politics which involves the appearance of a pure political leader, untainted by the establishment and political party. They see the solution to the complexity of global politics in the personality of an individual saviour, mobilizing ethno-nationalist resentments. In his narcissism, Donald Trump seems to believe that he represents the incarnation of political – and perhaps cultural – purity, capable of independently redeeming America from the forces of globalization. The simplicity of the political message and the security it promises are evidently attractive to many people.

Yet, it may be an illusion. The age of the individual leader, to use Yves Cohen's word, seems to be over. The complexity of today's world system may require a more subtle model of leadership, especially if democracy is to be preserved. In the west, heroic, individual leaders seem to be less helpful. Indeed, messianic leaders of this kind might be regarded with deep suspicion. Rather, the intricate interdependencies between democratic states recommend a more modest and collaborative politician. International order demands professional and competent leaders, capable of building consensus and coordinating alliances and teams, deferring and disseminating authority to deputies and subordinates. It may require politicians who are capable of, what Max Weber called, the 'strong and slow boring of hard boards' together. It is here that the analysis of divisional commanders, perhaps, becomes illustrative. For all their allure, politics today may not require the egotistical charisma

of the most famous twentieth-century generals, like Matt Ridgway, Bernard Montgomery or Erwin Rommel. It may prefer the apparently more mundane, professional skills of defining a mission with precision and, then, building a command team to accomplish it. The best leaders today may not be heroes or saviours but teachers, coaches and team players. Command collectives, not individualists, may be needed. This book tries to tell the story of the emergence of a new kind of leadership for the twenty-first century.

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It is probably appropriate and perhaps necessary that authors are held solely responsible for their work – and receive the credit for it. Even the most dedicated writer would find motivation difficult if no personal recognition was to be gained from the Sisyphean effort of writing. Yet, one does not need to be a sociologist to know that, in the end, a work of any length is a collaborative rather than individual effort. There is no doubt that this book could never have been written without the assistance, guidance and support of numerous individuals, to each one of which I am deeply indebted.

I started the research for this book in the spring of 2013, while I was a Visiting Fellow at All Souls College. It is, therefore, predictable that Hew Strachan, who held the Chichele Chair in the History of Warfare at that time, played a crucial role in encouraging me to take on a study of the divisional headquarters, even though I had absolutely no clue of where it would lead. Yet, our discussions in his rooms, when he persuaded me it was both viable and potentially relevant, were the catalyst for this project.

Once I began the project, I quickly became reliant upon the British Army, who supported the project and facilitated access throughout, even though they were bemused at how long it could take to write a book. I am grateful to Charles Heath-Saunders at the Ministry of the Defence for managing the contract. It is important to state a formal disclaimer: UK MOD review of this work has been undertaken for security purposes only and should not be construed as endorsement.

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During the course of this project, I moved from Exeter University to Warwick University to take up the post of Chair in War Studies. I spent nineteen very happy years at Exeter and I made some very good friends at that institution. In terms of this project, I am particularly grateful to Hannah Pike, Rosamund Davies, Claire Packman and Paul Woolnough in supporting my application to the ESRC; I remain guilty about leaving for Warwick, having won the award. My move to Warwick coincided with a period of study leave for this grant and, although I have been in the privileged position of being employed by Warwick but not actually starting to teach for the university, I have found my new department to be extremely collegial; it has been a privilege to get to know some impressive new colleagues. I am extremely grateful to the support of Nick Vaughan Williams, Jackie Smith, Jade Perkins, Jill Pavey and Gary Fisher. Indeed, I could not have put on the conference ‘Command in the 21st Century’ in September 2017 without the assistance of Jackie Smith, Jade Perkins and Jill Pavey.

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