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FROM ACCOUNTABILITY TO PUNISHMENT

Michael Junge

Why does the Navy fire so many commanding officers? Is it, as one Naval War College professor often asserts in lectures, a feature in the system?¹ Is there a problem in the command selection process? Are people just flawed individuals? All the above? Or something else? After a decade of research that examined almost two thousand individual cases and incidents and hundreds of investigations, the answer is clear: the Navy fires commanders who fall short of the Navy's standards. These officers are held to a high standard and are accountable for their actions. *Removal* is now nearly synonymous with *accountable*.

Supporting an argument from largely self-evident cases makes for preconclusive reading. Yet what is *falling short*? Why does falling short mean removal from command? These embedded questions—as well as how standards are defined, the temporal nature of standards, what happens after removal, and an assessment of the modern removal process and rate compared with historical removals—are the central issues of this article. After a very long look at history and analysis of the language in dozens of official Navy investigations, an answer to each question reveals itself to us. What does the answer to “Why does the Navy remove commanding officers?” mean for today's commanders?

Historically, removal from command followed from a violation directly tied to command itself and was described through a term of art—*crimes of command*—the most obvious examples of which are collisions, allisions, and groundings. *Collisions* occur when two moving objects strike each other. For example, if, while driving home, you strike another moving car on the highway, that is a collision. *Allisions* occur when a moving object strikes a nonmoving object. If, on that same drive home, instead of striking a moving car you strike a telephone pole, guard-rail, or tree, that is an allision. *Groundings* occur when a ship's bottom strikes the

seafloor. Some groundings are intentional and may not inherently constitute a crime of command; the same is true of some collisions and allisions. Sorting out the intent is part of the accountability process for these incidents. Major fires, weapons accidents, and aviation accidents can fit within the broad definition of a crime of command as well.

Why are the examples given above considered crimes of command, whereas poor leadership, infidelity, misappropriation of funds, and drunkenness are not? If a ship collides, allides, or grounds, the commanding officer is responsible for what happened; that responsibility is inherent in command. The commanding officer has the power and obligation to train the crew to avoid collisions, alli-

[F]lashed events—arrest, grounding, collision, death of a sailor—are more likely to result in . . . removing a commander than mediocre performance, an unpublicized affair, or funds mismanagement. However, if those things make it into the press, then removal from command is far more likely.

sions, and groundings; to stow and secure flammable materials and weapons properly; and to adhere to established standards. When he or she becomes aware of violations of rules or regulations, the commanding officer also has the obligation and power to act.

Whether the commander was involved directly in an incident is irrelevant; the nature of command is inherent in the movements of the ship.

In contrast, infidelity, embezzlement, and drunkenness are individual actions. A commander who cheats on a spouse is not involving the command. A commander who uses a government aircraft for personal transportation is acting for personal benefit. A drunken commander is just drunk. Likewise, the actions of individual sailors do not reflect on or impact the command, necessarily. Each of these actions is improper, regardless of whether the individual is in command. But if a ship collides, those directly involved in operating the ship and the commanding officer are responsible for what happened; they alone are accountable for their actions.

History shows that three current trends differ from past patterns. First, today's commanding officers are more likely to be removed for personal failings (moral indiscretions, financial mishandlings) or for accidents (fire, grounding, collision) that once barely made the news. Second, they are removed via an administrative investigation that is far from that outlined in Navy regulations and procedures. Finally, this culture of removal arises because of an improper conflation of the concepts of accountability, responsibility, and culpability. As the Navy reenters an era of great-power competition, it is past the time that we should evaluate our culture of command and relearn precise language before we jettison superb commanding officers for ahistorical reasons.

IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM

In 2004 and 2010, the Naval Inspector General (IG) sought to answer these same questions: Why are we removing so many commanders, and for what reasons? Two naval officers, Captain Mark Light and Captain Jason Vogt, published papers addressing the subject.² Neither the papers nor the IG reports provided specific answers to any of the questions, and in fact they asserted that even with a hundred removals there were insufficient data to draw any trends or overall linkage.

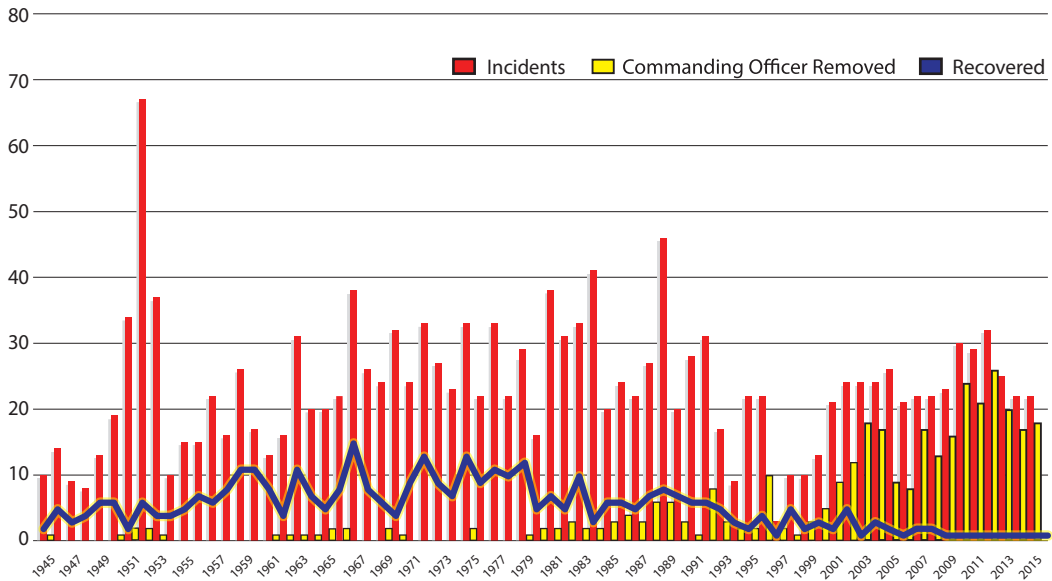
Both the reports and the papers, however, called attention to the fact that removals hovered around 1 percent of commanders, and that this 1 percent was historically normal.³ If 1 percent was normal or acceptable, and the reasons for removal were accepted and normal when the Navy removed twenty-six officers in 2003, from a service with 376,000 sailors and 297 ships, then how many commanders were removed in 1983, when the Navy had 533 ships and 779,000 sailors? Or in 1963, when there were 857 ships and almost a million sailors? From mere napkin math, the answers should be two times and three times as many removals, respectively. But where were the sensational headlines then?

I ultimately identified over 1,500 incidents, including crimes of command and personal failures, in the seventy years between 1945 and 2015. Unlike the IG reports and the papers by Light and Vogt, the incidents in my study displayed a clear trend, a clear change, and evidence that what the Navy does today is not what it did in the past. In the decades after World War II, removals occurred, but they were uncommon. Officers who committed missteps in command routinely were retained in command, often forgiven, and allowed to continue with their careers. If their career paths allowed time for rehabilitation or if their prior performance outweighed the misstep, they were promoted and remained in the service. While custom and tradition implied that commanders would lose command for collisions or groundings, the reality at that time was far different.

To evaluate the impact of these incidents, my study identified the incident commanding officer and determined whether the commander was removed overtly from command, suspiciously departed with a reduced-length tour, was relieved by an officer who held command for a few days or weeks, or was relieved by someone identified as acting or interim commander. Once the individual names were located and combined with evidence—or an educated guess—on each removal, I consulted Navy promotion records. Was the officer removed, and then failed to promote? Did the officer retain command, but fail to promote? Or, as happened in a number of cases, did the officer—whether removed or not—still promote after committing a crime of command?

Graph 1 illustrates trends where, of the 1,500 cases examined, over 330 commanders were removed overtly from command, and a majority of those

GRAPH 1
ANNUAL INCIDENTS, REMOVALS, AND RECOVERIES BETWEEN 1945 AND 2015



removals—305—happened between 1986 and 2015. Another significant difference lies in the number of officers forgiven or allowed rehabilitation. Between 1985 and 2015, only sixty-five officers experienced some sort of misstep but were promoted afterward, while between 1945 and 1985, over 250 officers recovered—or about a quarter of the thousand incidents.

RESULTS? ANSWERS? OR MORE QUESTIONS?

So, why are commanding officers removed from command? In general, news and Navy reports tell us that commanders are removed because of some mixture of alcohol, indiscretion, financial misdeeds, sexual relationships, and other inappropriate relationships between senior leaders and junior sailors. Some analysts have linked increased removals directly to the presence of women in the Navy.⁴ In almost all cases, the official Navy response includes some manner of a “loss of confidence in ability to command” and a reference to the “absolute accountability of command.”

Graphing the incidents, removals, and recoveries over seventy years (as seen in graph 1) reveals the following trends.

1. The Navy is safer today than before—explosions and major fires are rare.
2. Collisions are a constant issue.
3. Groundings are less likely.
4. Individual personal behavior is held to a different standard than in previous decades.

5. Fewer officers recover from missteps.
6. The changes are most apparent before and after the early 1980s, specifically before 1983 and after 1986.

The first finding evident in this data set is that in the modern Navy, a commander is most likely to be removed for personal misconduct or when the crime of command includes one or all of the following elements: death, press coverage, or significant damage to the Navy, whether materially or to its reputation.

An immediate superior in command (ISIC) may remove a commander for one or more of four reasons: misconduct, substandard performance involving gross negligence, substandard performance over an extended period, or a loss of confidence. Each of these is largely subjective and unlikely to be questioned.⁵ Whether an ISIC thinks actions constitute misconduct is more important than the actions themselves, and in all cases each ISIC has another ISIC above him or her, so a commander is subject to the opinions of the captain and each flag officer in the chain of command. This is one reason that flashy events—arrest, grounding, collision, death of a sailor—are more likely to result in conversations about removing a commander than mediocre performance, an unpublicized affair, or funds mismanagement. However, if those things make it into the press, then removal from command is far more likely.

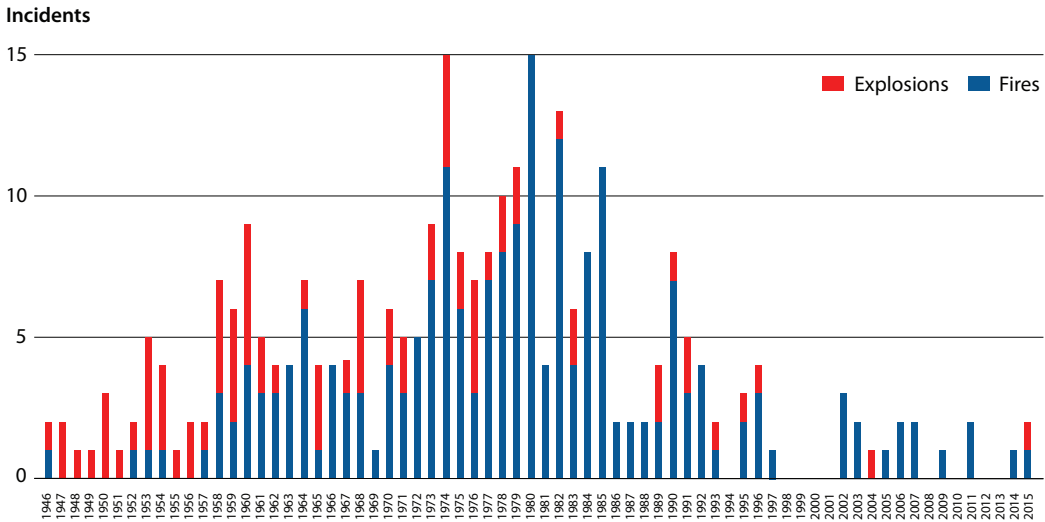
There are no crimes of command that guarantee removal, and there is no comprehensive list of reasons for removal. Reportedly, some officers are removed from command to send a message. Perhaps some are removed because mixed performance resulted in a strained relationship with the ISIC, and when a significant enough event presented itself the ISIC removed a perceived underperforming commander. In the consideration of the specific reason relating to removal, each case should, and must, be treated separately. However, this does not preclude recognizing some trends that may allow the Navy to identify future issues and reduce command removal rates.

Since 1945, the Navy also has done the following:

1. Reduced the number of senior officers at sea and aboard ships
2. Relied on less-formal fact-finding bodies
3. Conflated operational and personal missteps
4. Focused on rules and consequences rather than intent and capability

To some degree, it is obvious that the Navy is safer today and groundings are less likely. We no longer have 1,200-pounds-per-square-inch steam ships, we have fewer sailors, we use safer munitions, and we have global positioning systems to aid in navigation. Mortality rates for today's sailor are four times less than they were in 1980, and active-duty sailor mortality rates are sixteen times

GRAPH 2
ANNUAL FIRES AND EXPLOSIONS BETWEEN 1945 AND 2015

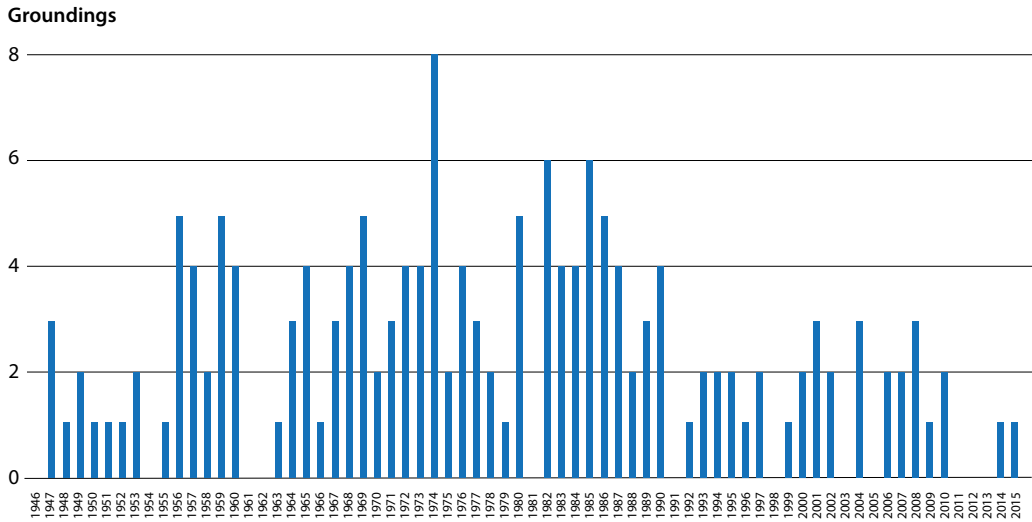


less than the population at large. Graph 2 shows the decline in major fires and explosions, especially since the late 1980s. This century has seen seventeen major fires afloat, while there were fifteen in 1980 alone. Fifteen fires per year remained a rough rolling three-year average into the late 1980s, compared with an average of less than one a year since the turn of the century. The result of a safer Navy is that each active-duty death is more noticeable.

Navigation today is far more precise—often more precise even than is useful to a ship's crew. While groundings are rare (see graph 3), collisions remain reduced but somewhat constant (see graph 4). The frequency of collisions relates more to ships entering and leaving port, operating in congested waters, and conducting underway replenishment operations than it does to changes in technology. The fact that the Navy is operationally safer supports the decreased removal rate for clear crimes of command, but does not explain why fewer officers recover after incidents or why personal standards are different now from what they once were. The underlying rules and traditions governing command have not changed—only the standard for removal has.

Through the 1970s, and even into the 1980s, flagships were where the flag officer lived and worked. Fleet commanders, and even Chiefs of Naval Operations, embarked in ships for extended periods—and not only aircraft carriers. Today, most sea commands are led by commanders who may never see their captain ISIC, much less the flag officer in command of the strike group or fleet. This separation among commanders, combined with the more-varied commissioning sources in modern accessions, leads to commanders who no longer have personal relationships with most of their subordinate commanders. This removes

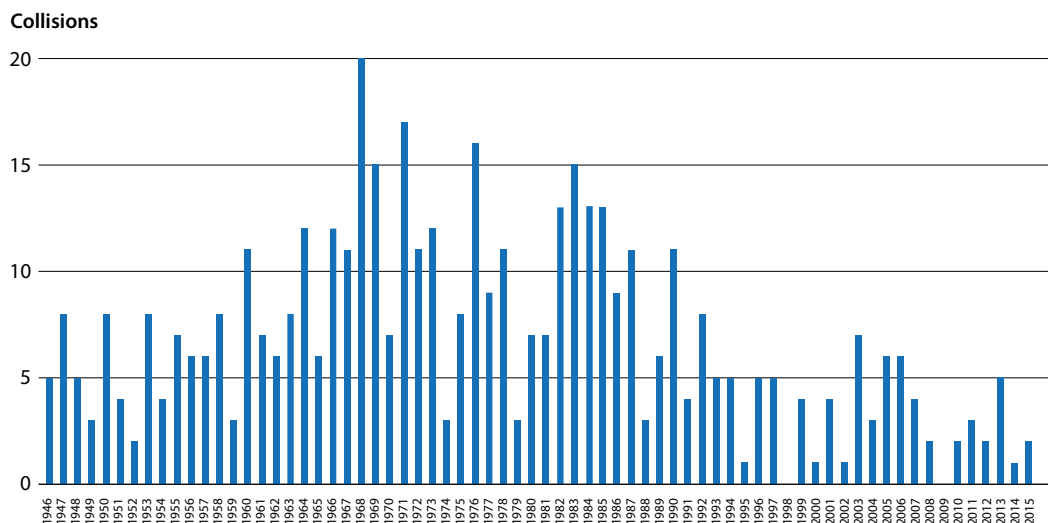
**GRAPH 3
ANNUAL GROUNDINGS BETWEEN 1945 AND 2015**



the possibility of applying a knowing “benefit of the doubt”—the sort that likely kept Admiral William F. “Bull” Halsey in command even after he endured two disastrous typhoons and committed operational missteps at the Battle of Leyte Gulf. This personal-professional relationship among commanders was one of the reasons for more frequent rehabilitation in the decades after World War II.

Another reason for the modern difference lies in how the Navy investigates incidents. Incidents that occurred through the mid-1970s were investigated by boards and courts of inquiry. Three or more officers sat together and interviewed

**GRAPH 4
ANNUAL COLLISIONS BETWEEN 1945 AND 2015**



witnesses and interested parties before issuing their findings and opinions. Everyone went on the record. Some of these courts were contentious; many, if not most, were routine. Even complicated cases such as the 1952 collision between USS *Wasp* (CV 18) and USS *Hobson* (DMS 26) took little over a month from incident to report completion. The internationally sensitive 1969 collision between USS *Frank E. Evans* (DD 754) and HMAS *Melbourne* (R21) took a little

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over five weeks, with interviews and testimony taking three weeks and involving seventy-nine witnesses. The only modern court of inquiry was of USS *Greenville* (SSN 772) regarding its 9 February 2001 collision with

Japanese fishing vessel *Ehime Maru*. The court was appointed eight days after the collision but did not convene until 5 March 2001. After twelve days of testimony, the court closed on 20 March but did not issue its report until 13 April, sixty-three days after the collision. The Navy has not held a court or board of inquiry for a major incident since, in no small part because the participants believed that courts of inquiry, while appropriate to their case, required significant investments of resources and time. In other words, they were hard, and there were easier and more-efficient ways to accomplish the same result.⁶

The veracity of this claim is subject to challenge. USS *Fitzgerald* collided on 17 June 2017, and the command triad was removed two months later. USS *John S. McCain* collided on 21 August 2017, and the commanding officer and executive officer were removed on 10 October of the same year. A narrative report was released to the press on 1 November, but the actual reports remain withheld and the courts-martial for officers in the *Fitzgerald* incident finally were canceled without trial in April 2018.

Other modern cases took similar amounts of time. The investigation into the October 2000 attack on USS *Cole* (DDG 67) was completed forty-eight days after the investigation. The investigation into the 1987 attack on USS *Stark* (FFG 31) took twenty-six days. The investigation into the 2005 collision between USS *Winston S. Churchill* (DDG 81) and USS *McFaul* (DDG 74) took twenty-five days. The investigation into the 2013 helicopter mishap aboard USS *William P. Lawrence* (DDG 110) took sixty-one days. The biggest differences between these investigations and the courts of inquiry are not time and resources but Navy regulations and the rights of the commanders involved.

The older courts of inquiry and the individual officer investigations that have dominated the last four decades are governed by the same instruction: *The Manual*

of the Judge Advocate General (*JAGMAN*). This document delineates the requirements for preliminary inquiries, command or administrative investigations, and courts and boards of inquiry. Command investigations, per the *JAGMAN*, are for ship groundings, shipboard flooding, fires, or collision and aviation mishaps, provided they are not identified as major incidents. The *JAGMAN* defines *major incidents* as follows:

An extraordinary incident occurring during the course of official duties resulting in multiple deaths, substantial property loss, or substantial harm to the environment, where the circumstances suggest a significant departure from the expected level of professionalism, leadership, judgment, communication, state of material readiness, or other relevant standard. Substantial property loss or other harm is that which greatly exceeds what is normally encountered in the course of day-to-day operations. These cases are often accompanied by national public and press interest and significant congressional attention. They may also have the potential of undermining public confidence in the Naval service. That the case is a major incident may be apparent when it is first reported or as additional facts become known.⁷

This definition has not changed since 1990 and is consistent with prewar definitions as found in the 1937 edition of *Courts and Boards*. Why, then, would the Navy use the single-officer investigation over the mandated court of inquiry? Courts of inquiry provide for greater legal representation of the commanders and other interested parties and the information presented becomes part of an open record. In fact, most courts of inquiry were open to spectators and reporters. By contrast, today's investigations are completed, acted on—and subsequently not disseminated to the fleet. They become available only to judge advocates on large staffs or via the Freedom of Information Act process, which in itself reduces the amount of released information, if any is released at all. In many cases, the individuals removed from command are not provided copies of the applicable investigation, even when they ask for one.

Because commanders are now judged via an administrative process during which they enjoy fewer rights than they would in a judicial process, removal for personal misconduct is lumped in with operational incidents. Much of the reasoning for this process lies in the Navy's own regulations, wherein any removal is treated the same, whether an officer requests relief for some reason or is removed by the ISIC for a significant event or personal misconduct. The result is that a commanding officer who sexually harasses subordinates, a commander whose ship runs aground and is lost to the Navy, and an officer who has a minor collision are all treated the same way by the Navy.

This treatment is inconsistent with historical practice. John Barry, recognized as the "father of the Navy," ran USS *Raleigh* aground and abandoned it to the British in 1778. William Bainbridge grounded and lost USS *Philadelphia* in 1803

and then was imprisoned in Tripoli for nineteen months. Ensign Chester Nimitz ran his first command, USS *Decatur*, aground. Today all of these officers have ships named for them and are revered as heroes of the Navy. And these officers are not anomalies, but rather well known. Between 1945 and 2015, over three hundred officers recovered from some form of crime of command or personal misstep and were promoted or continued on to other commands. In this century, across over two hundred crimes of command, only twelve officers recovered, with none of those in this decade.

These examples illustrate what was then, and what is now. Other major questions are how and why. How did the Navy change from a service that allowed recovery after an incident to one that never forgives? Where did the idea of a zero-defect culture originate? Why does the Navy remove commanders and discard them regardless of their prior or potential future contributions? Neither Barry, Bainbridge, nor Nimitz—nor even Halsey, Raborn, Mullen, or Natter—would survive in today’s Navy. How and why are we here? The answer comes down to a single individual who, oddly, held command for roughly six months but was a flag officer for almost three decades: Hyman G. Rickover.

WORDS MATTER

For some the groan is audible: “Rickover!?!” Admiral Rickover is both lauded and blamed for every facet of the modern Navy. Every success and every failure might, in some way, link back to him. At the beginning of this research, Rickover’s legacy had no place. Nuclear weapons and nuclear power, yes, but Rickover? No. In hindsight, this was an exceptionally naive view. Any study of command must at least acknowledge someone who had such a significant impact on the Navy. But that is hindsight. It was not until I was reading through the investigations and cases that Rickover’s influence started to show through. There are any number of stories or tales that can link Rickover to command and removal from command, but no instance more directly links to how we got here, and why we got here, than Rickover’s statements on responsibility.

In 1961, Rickover testified before Congress as follows:

Responsibility is a unique concept: it can only reside and inhere in a single individual. You may share it with others, but your portion is not diminished. You may delegate it, but it is still with you. You may disclaim it, but you cannot divest yourself of it. Even if you do not recognize it or admit its presence, you cannot escape it. If responsibility is rightfully yours, no evasion, or ignorance, or passing the blame can shift the burden to someone else. Unless you can point your finger at the man who is responsible when something goes wrong, then you have never had anyone really responsible.⁸

Certainly, many readers recognize this statement, or something similar to it. It appeared in one form or another in a few of the investigations after the mid-1980s

and has been quoted often since. It is *similar to* what lies at the core of the next issue. What Rickover left behind is not what he said, but how others internalized and repeated it.

In 2014, Admiral Dave Oliver, USN (Ret.), wrote in a book about Rickover: “Do you agree with Rickover’s concept of accountability? He phrased it thusly: ‘You may share it with others, but your portion is not diminished. You may delegate it, but it is still with you. . . . If responsibility is rightfully yours, no evasion, or ignorance or passing the blame can shift the burden to someone else.’”⁹

An astute reader will have seen the difference already. Rickover said *responsibility*; Oliver wrote *accountability*. While the modern Navy uses the words interchangeably, they are two different words and two different concepts, and they are misused all too often. These two words also frequently supplant another word: *culpability*. The simple fact is that we no longer differentiate among *accountable*, *responsible*, and *culpable*.

Accountability is the condition of someone who is accountable. Being accountable, or to give account, entails the need to explain one’s actions or to provide a balancing of sums. *Responsibility* is different, even when used synonymously. Responsibility is the condition of being responsible—that of an obligation or power to act or respond. Responsibility carries an additional subtext of claim, credit, blame, and sometimes trust. *Culpability* is the state of being culpable; it often is defined as being responsible for a fault or deserving blame. This definition is different from the other two: culpability is associated solely with blame. Culpability looks back after an action, as does accountability when one gives account for an action. Responsibility is the only word with both a forward-looking (power to act) and a backward-looking component (the power to respond). While these three terms commonly are used together or in place of each other, their conflation illustrates one of the issues the Navy faces today: imprecision in language means not only that we are uncertain about what these words mean today, but we misunderstand them when they are used in historical context.

The Navy also does not seem to differentiate between *mistake* and *sin* or *guilt* and *shame*. We all too often think of these different concepts as identical. A mistake is not a sin: a mistake is unknowingly doing something wrong, while a sin is knowingly doing something wrong. If you know the rule and choose to violate it, that is sin. If you should have known the rule and chose not to learn it and violated it, that is also sin. If you did not know the rule, you did not know about the rule, no one drew your attention to the rule, or you were accustomed to some other standard, that is a mistake.

Likewise, guilt and shame are very different concepts. Guilt relates to actions, while shame relates to self. The guilty person feels bad that something happened, while the ashamed person feels bad about him- or herself. The guilty commander

says, “I can’t believe I *ran the ship aground*.” The ashamed commander says, “I can’t believe *I* ran the ship aground.” This extrapolates up the chain of command (and down) with ISICs who are upset that Commander Smith-Jones ran the ship aground. How the ISIC frames it—action or person—determines whether the action is one that induces guilt or shame; that is, if it is the action being criticized or the individual. Guilt is something one can repent from and atone for, but shame is not. When we internalize shame, either as an individual or as an institution, we say that someone brings shame and discredit on the Navy, and we are saying that their actions are unforgivable and irredeemable. This is something we should say only in rare cases, and never lightly.

If an officer does not know better or if an officer works within a culture that is consistent and constant for the fifteen years prior to command—and is evalu-

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ated by an officer who has not been to sea in four, seven, or ten years, or who never commanded a ship at all—then those officers are working from different frames of reference. Each officer has a differ-

ent idea of “is,” which leads to a different idea of how things “ought to be.” And it is easy to confuse what “is” with what “ought to be” when what “is” generally has worked in your favor.¹⁰ One of the challenges that leaders face is identifying what a subordinate knows, should know, and honestly does not know. Another lies in creating the system that imparts the lessons necessary for success in peace and war.

One path that helps to guide us through this model of language, rules, understanding, and what is or what ought to be is ethics. Professional military ethics came into popular understanding with Samuel P. Huntington’s seminal 1957 work *The Soldier and the State*. Huntington laid out three criteria for a profession: special expertise, responsibility toward society, and a sense of corporateness. This sense of corporateness includes a self-policing function whereby the profession examines and evaluates members against recognized standards. What the Navy has done, however, is to turn from ethics to rules. Ethics are about right or wrong, and sometimes about choosing the least wrong of two wrongs. Rules are different. Rules are about “shall” or “shall not.” Ethics cannot, and should not, be rules. Ethics imply a level of autonomy that requires decision-making, while rules do not.

Rickover’s words and legacy provide insight. In 1978, a submarine officer who was on his way to his first nuclear submarine for his department head tour after initial qualification in diesel submarines wrote that submarine officers were

“given responsibility, but not authority, [and] the natural reaction is to ask to be told exactly what to do, to request rudder orders. An officer working in a nuclear billet can become a commanding officer if he simply makes no major mistakes. Leadership is not nearly so important a criterion of success. A leader who does what he is told and ensures that he is told everything that he must do does not make mistakes.”¹¹

Look at the language: “responsibility, but not authority,” “not make mistakes.” Phrases such as these still ring true today and reflect the view of many junior, and some senior, officers. If I do not make a mistake, I can make it to command. If I take a risk, I might make a mistake. If I follow the rules, I will not be taking a risk. This is where the zero-defect culture, the accountability culture, has brought us. Do what you are told, nothing more and nothing less, and you will advance. Take no risks, make no mistakes, and you will advance. It does not matter that this is not what Rickover lived or believed, or that modern leaders do not believe this. Enough junior officers do believe it, which is what makes a culture—and culture is everything.

For those who wonder and think, “Nineteen seventy-eight—that was forty years ago; I was in grade school (or not even born),” look at how the Navy viewed ethics in a 2014 white paper written at the Naval War College: The Navy’s “pre-dominant approach to ethics is legalistic in content and often negative in tone. . . . At best, we employ a checklist of what *not* to do, and at worst, ethical development of our people is a chore or a burden that takes away from getting the job done.”¹²

This is how we moved from broad to narrow, from latitude to checklist. This is how we lost focus on the profession and instead emphasized protecting the perception and reputation of the Navy. We traded judgment for following orders.

What can we do to right the ship? First of all, we must follow Rickover’s lead. Rather than misunderstand him, we must study and learn from his example. Imagine if we put as much study into the human psyche, into leadership and ethics, as Rickover and the nuclear enterprise put into nuclear power, materials, controls, and testing. We must understand and standardize our language so that we know the difference between clear concepts such as allision and collision, and less clear ones such as accountable, responsible, and culpable. We must know where rules matter and where principles are more important. The simple fact is that the more rules that exist, the more likely sailors and officers are to violate and then ignore them. If rules are no longer applicable, change them. If the eight-decades-old guidance for courts of inquiry is no longer applicable, change it. But do not ignore it out of personal or institutional convenience.

Admiral Arleigh A. Burke had a saying that “a commander who fails to exceed his authority is not of much use to his subordinates.” This is not about commanders overstepping standards beyond their authority or taking personal liberties

with command funds and equipment. Burke was talking about commanders exceeding given authority to the betterment and benefit of subordinates: back-dating awards to advance a well-deserving petty officer who just missed the final multiple, or sending fathers home from deployment for a child's birth.

The Navy also must relearn institutional forgiveness. This is not recommended lightly. The perceived ability to recover from failure is more important than any commander's exhortation that we do not have a zero-defect culture. If commanders make a mistake, then they deserve a better education, they deserve a chance to show what they have learned, and they deserve to move up. However, if they sin—no matter what the results—they must be investigated and evaluated—for the decision, not the outcome. Flouting regulations cannot be absolved because everything turned out fine. Likewise, just because something turned out badly does not make the decision inherently wrong.

Studies show that forgiveness matters. Many studies, going back centuries, have showed us that people lie and people cheat.¹³ It is part of who we are; it is human nature. We also know that those who are absolved of sin, who know that repentance is accepted, or who are reminded of the group standard that eschews lying or cheating are less likely to sin, or less likely to sin again.¹⁴ Some believe that if there is no chance of repentance, then they might as well keep doing bad things. This is a culture we should avoid at all costs—but we might be headed down this road already.

Rickover knew the value of forgiveness. As a junior officer his ship went aground and his commanding officer was court-martialed. The court verdict is unknown, but this officer, Herbert Kays, was not removed from command and went on to be promoted and to command a light cruiser and a destroyer squadron before retiring. In the Navy's nuclear-propulsion program, legend depicts Rickover summarily removing commanders from command for trivial reasons; the legend is apocryphal. At least one officer *was* removed from command of a nuclear-powered submarine, *twice*—but he still was promoted to captain. Ernest Barrett commanded USS *Permit* (SSN 594) until the submarine ran into a freighter during precommissioning trials, whereupon he transferred ashore. But two years later he reentered the command course, this time for nuclear missile submarines. After taking command of USS *Ethan Allen* (SSBN 608), his boat collided with a merchant ship in January 1965, and again he was removed from command. But Barrett was promoted to captain before he retired in 1971.¹⁵

The Navy removes commanders when they do not meet the standards set for them. Despite a constant underpinning of law, regulations, and tradition, Navy custom and action have raised those standards and divorced them from historical context, such that today's commanders are held to a higher standard than those before them. What began as aspirational now has become the minimum. We

should not be surprised if someone does not meet an aspirational standard. This also means that more commanders are removed from command, and removed from the service, than in past decades. This leads to weakened command, risk-averse commanders, and a focus that places results ahead of intent. Results are important, but ill-intentioned success is more corrosive than the poor results of good and well-intentioned commanders. Differentiating the two is the Navy's challenge going forward.

Yet even with this information, some might insist that the responsibility of the commanding officer is absolute, and that when blood and treasure are lost accountability must be demanded. That argument is valid and correct; however, neither accountability nor responsibility mandates removing an officer from command. In fact, had the Navy lived by this idea of absolute removal, the following officers never would have risen to important positions in our forces:

- Captain Robert J. Kelly, USN, who commanded USS *Enterprise* (CVN 65) when it ran aground in 1983. Kelly served as Commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet from 1991 to 1994.
- Commander Mike Boorda, USN, who commanded USS *Farragut* (DDG 37) when it ran aground in 1975. Boorda was Chief of Naval Operations from 1994 to 1996.
- Captain Leon “Bud” Edney, USN, who commanded USS *Constellation* (CV 64) when it collided with a Bangladeshi merchant ship in 1980. Edney also dealt with an explosion aboard USS *Ponchatoula* (AO 148) when he commanded it in 1976. He served as Vice Chief of Naval Operations from 1988 to 1990.
- Lieutenant Michael Mullen, USN, who in 1973 allided with a buoy when he commanded USS *Noxubee* (AOG 56). Mullen was Chief of Naval Operations from 2005 to 2007 and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 2007 to 2011.
- Captain Roy L. Johnson, USN, who collided with USS *Pinnacle* (MSO 462) while in command of USS *Forrestal* (CVA 59) in 1956. He commanded U.S. Pacific Fleet from 1965 to 1967.
- Captain Joseph S. Mobley, USN, who in 1990 lost twenty-one sailors to a liberty boat accident when he commanded USS *Saratoga* (CV 60). Mobley commanded Naval Air Force, U.S. Atlantic Fleet from 1998 to 2001.
- Captain William Raborn, USN, who in 1954 lost 103 sailors when the hydraulic catapult system exploded aboard USS *Bennington* (CV 20). Raborn retired as a vice admiral after overseeing development of the Polaris missile system.

These are only a few of the more than 150 officers who commanded ships during crimes of command yet rose to flag rank before retirement. Those officers benefited from a less draconian view of accountability, and the Navy benefited from their service and experience. What have we lost in the hundreds of officers handled differently over the past three decades?

NOTES

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