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COMMAND AND DECISION

A lecture delivered
at the Naval War College
1 May 1962

by

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The subject I have been asked to talk on is *Command and Decision.*

I am sure the subject needs no introduction to this audience, but I would like to say that what follows are my own opinions based on my research and reflections and are not necessarily those of the management.

I have sought to narrow this broad subject by selecting the sector of Wartime Planning and Conduct of Military Operations as distinct from what I choose to call the Administrative Sector and the Sector of Peacetime Planning for War.

No doubt these three sectors have some general principles in common, but they offer very different environments and situations, so that command and decision in one sector may be a very different matter than it is in the others.

For example, in the Administrative Sector I would put those aspects of command and decision which relate to the routine administration and to the creation, training, and support of combat forces. This sector is heavily populated with civilians and technicians, but you will find the Bureau Chiefs and the Type Commanders sitting in here, glaring at the Comptrollers.

In the Sector of Peacetime Planning for War you will find capabilities planning and contingency planning on the national and international level. The atmosphere here is seldom clear because of national peacetime attitudes and purposes which are divergent or conflicting, and because of differing estimates of the situation. Comfortable assumptions abound and realities are often ignored in the interests of political harmony. Time here is very cheap, so that errors become retrievable. Above all, in this sector, there are apt to be many voices, much gratuitous advice, and frequently a diffusion of responsibility for decision.

But how different is this third sector, where we find the Wartime Planning and Conduct of Military Operations! This is the sector of proof testing. In this sector realities become stark and assumptions can be lethal. Time is anything but cheap. The babble of voices one hears in the other sectors gives way to measured, weighty expressions of view. There is little gratuitous advice. Above all, in the theaters of operations, responsibility of decision and command becomes fixed—and always upon one man.

It is those aspects of command and decision which you find in this third sector that I will discuss today.

At the outset, let me draw one other distinction which I consider important and which will help to focus the subject even more.

Too frequently we credit a commander with decision-making when actually what he has done is simply to use his equipment as it was intended to be used. For example, the decision to attack the enemy requires a different order of judgment than the subsequent decision to shoot it out at mean battle range. The former is made by a military commander in the large sense of the word; the latter by a mere military

technician. I propose to discuss command and decision as it pertains to the military commander; that is, to the course of an entire war rather than of one campaign, or to the outcome of a campaign rather than of a single battle.

As a point of departure I listed for myself military commanders whose experiences held for me important lessons in this regard. I then set myself to express each of these lessons as an attribute or ability which the commander should possess. In all cases these proved to be qualities of judgment or character. Technical knowledge scarcely showed itself. I then assembled these expressions into a composite description of the attributes of a commander which are pertinent to this lecture. Here is my list.

First, the ability to discern the true strategic objective which should be pursued, and to reject plausible but false objectives which might be closer at hand and for which the forces available seem more suitably adapted.

Second, the wit to discern all essential parts of the strategic problem, to adhere to the accomplishment of these parts in proper order, and to refrain from dissipating strength in nonessential operations.

Third, in the conduct of operations with large forces, the ability to overcome a natural trend towards complexity of organization and of tactical plan, and towards a multiplicity of objectives which the nature of the forces in hand might seem to warrant.

Fourth, when pressed for tactical decisions, in the face of imminent action, the ability to keep in view the larger strategic situation and the objectives of the next superior commander.

Fifth, the ability to recognize a changed situation and to exercise the mental flexibility and moral courage to depart from doctrine, to improvise, and to modify plans even to the point of abandonment, and to resist the conditioned reflex.

Sixth, a continuous awareness of the fact that although military operations are the dominant instrument of national policy in war, these operations must be pursued with due regard for contemporary and future political objectives.

Seventh, the ability to render and maintain the distinction between the interests and scope of authority of the commander in the principal theater of operations and those of the Head of State at the seat of government.

I have chosen to discuss these attributes for several reasons. One is because fundamentals are too often overlooked. Command and decision is most frequently treated as a complex problem in management—or as a communication and information processing problem—or as an exercise in following tested staff procedures. In other words, it is treated as a system involving scores or hundreds of men, but ultimately, in war, all comes to depend on certain fundamental qualities residing in the mind and character of the commander alone.

Another reason is because these are attributes which, when lacking, have produced the irretrievable failures. When we consider the magnitude of the consequences, I think they assume transcendent importance.

Third, and finally, I have chosen them because the opportunity to exercise them is granted only to a very few men at great moments of history. We do not see them being exercised as a daily routine. Therefore, if we are to acquire these attributes, we must

address ourselves specifically to the task of examining them.

In this connection I should like to ask you to reflect that when command and decision is treated as a system, all sorts of *experts* who will never be required to exercise it, seem anxious to address themselves to the subject. But when command and decision is examined as a question of the character and judgment of the commander, the military man finds himself almost alone in the inquiry.

I think perhaps this is because the subject can never be mastered. Probably at best it can only be appreciated, in the sense that the questions involved are understood, if not answered, and then only by those who have spent a lifetime in it as professional officers and who have developed a habit of inquiry and reflection that is almost second nature. I feel sure you will agree that the courses here at the Naval War College are intended to equip us to search for answers rather than with the answers themselves.

Gentlemen, there is no point in dwelling on the *other* attributes which each of you could supply to my list. What we have here is sufficient food for thought for the present. Let us go back to the beginning of my list and examine these attributes one at a time.

A commander, I said, must have the ability to discern the true strategic objective and to reject plausible but false objectives which might be closer at hand and for which the forces available seem suitably adapted. He must then have the wit to discern all essential parts of his strategic problem, to accomplish these parts in proper order, and to refrain from dissipating strength in nonessential operations. The first is an ability to select a goal. The second to chart and hold a correct course. All subsequent decisions by subordinate commanders are dependent upon the existence of these two capacities at the

highest levels. Like many difficult tasks which can be described in a few words, these two fundamental undertakings have been far easier said than done.

Since I feel that history is an eloquent instructor in these matters, I should like to offer here two brief case histories for your consideration. The first is that of General von Falkenhayen. He was a great soldier, a great German, and a great failure. The lesson he teaches is a negative one. It concerns the true strategic objective.

At the outbreak of the First World War, General von Falkenhayen held the post of Minister of War of the German Government. In September 1914, when Germany's offensive in France came to frustration and failure on the Marne and von Moltke presented his resignation to the Kaiser with the simple statement, "Your Majesty, we have lost the war," General von Falkenhayen was appointed in his place as Chief of the General Staff. He held this post for nearly two years, during which he had responsibility for the over-all direction of the Armed Forces of Germany.

During 1915 von Falkenhayen correctly estimated that relatively few troops could hold the trench lines in the west and that large forces could be deployed eastward against the weakest opponent, Russia. This was done and 1915 records several great events: in the West, appalling futile sacrifices of British and French troops at Champagne, Artois, Ypres and Loos; in the East, the Balkans secure, Roumania with its vital oil and corn virtually enveloped, and Russia literally nearly disarmed, falling back on her only remaining assets: space, great manpower, and the munitions factories of England and the United States.

But by the opening of 1916, a new force was being felt in Germany: the inexorable squeeze of British sea power. It became clear to the leaders of Germany

that within her presently held frontiers, there did not exist the resources for a prolonged war of attrition. Ultimately the assets of the British empire and of the world beyond the blockade would prevail against Germany and her weak allies.

A breakthrough in the West and a defeat of the blockade were both considered unattainable. What was to be done? It was indeed a time for clear thinking about the true strategic objective.

Unless additional resources could be obtained, to permit Germany to endure the blockade, defeat was inevitable. This was, or should have been the paramount consideration. Where could these resources be obtained? The answer was that they were available in Roumania, and beyond Roumania, in the virtually undefended areas of the Ukraine. But General von Falkenhayen had other ideas. He admitted that the effect of the blockade was to render Germany incapable of sustaining a long war. But he dismissed the idea of military conquest for resources in the East because he considered communications in that area were inadequate. He reasoned that if Germany could not defeat the blockade at sea, she might be able to defeat it by inducing England to give up the war. His method of achieving this was to break England's best sword, France, by making France bleed. He selected Verdun as an objective which he correctly assumed the French Army would not yield, and which was exposed to a concentration of German artillery fire. He viewed Verdun as an anvil on which the sword of France could be broken with little cost in blood to Germany.

All of you know the story of Verdun. Hundreds of thousands of French and German casualties resulted. The psychological effect in both France and Britain was the opposite of that which the General expected. Instead of using her limited strength to gain new strength, Germany expended it futilely. Her position at the end of this campaign was worse than when it began.

I would state the essence of von Falkenhayen's lesson in these words: "The end in view or the broad objective was expected to be achieved as a by-product of the action taken, that is, as the result of assumed secondary effects, rather than as a direct result of that action."

Winston Churchill put it this way:

> One-half the effort, one-quarter the sacrifice, lavished vainly in the attack on Verdun would have overcome the difficulty of the defective communications in the "rich lands of the Ukraine."
>
> The school of formula had vanquished the school of fact, the professional bent of mind had overridden the practical; submission to theory had replaced the quest for reality. Attack the strongest at his strongest point, not the weakest at his weakest point, was once again proclaimed the guiding maxim of German military policy.
>
> From the moment when he received the news of the total evacuation of the Gallipoli Peninsula, the opportunity of General von Falkenhayen . . . was to pronounce the word *Roumania*. He pronounced instead the word *Verdun*.

As you know, the consequences to Germany were fatal. After Verdun Germany was forced to gamble on the one weapon which could force England out of the war, but which was almost certain to bring America in: unrestricted submarine warfare.

General von Falkenhayen has contributed a valuable illustration of the relationship between the discernment of the true strategic objective and the outcome of the war. To illustrate the companion ability—

that is, the wit to discern all essential parts of the strategic problem, to adhere to the accomplishment of these parts in proper order, and to refrain from dissipating strength in nonessential operations— let me refer briefly to the experiences of a corporate body, the Anglo-American Combined Chiefs of Staff, in World War II.

When these men first met as a body at the Arcadia Conference early in 1942, they quickly reached agreement on their correct strategic objective. This was the defeat of Germany first. Although Japan had overrun huge areas in the Pacific and in Southeast Asia and probably would expand her conquest even further before she was checked, she did not have the capability of converting the resources which she was conquering into military capacity for many years. Germany, on the other hand, having overrun a highly industrialized part of the world, if not quickly defeated had the prospect of converting Europe into a military fortress which would resist any assault. The Combined Chiefs of Staff therefore agreed on the principle of Germany first.

But coming to agreement on the essential parts of the plan was thereafter no easy matter. When General Marshall declared his belief that the quickest way to end the war was to invade France in 1942 or 1943, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Sir Alan Brooke replied, "Yes, but not the way we want to end it." In Brooke's mind there were three other essential parts of the strategic plan.

First, continued delivery of supplies to the Red Army. If the Red Army collapsed the bulk of German ground forces would be redeployed to Western Europe.

Second, the containment of German reserves available for counteraction against an allied landing in Western Europe. Some method must be found to force Germany to commit part of these reserves at a place

where they would not have ready access to Germany's superb east-west communications system.

Third was the fact that the deployment of any British or American armies and the delivery of supplies to Russia was dependent upon shipping. It was estimated that opening the Mediterranean and eliminating the long route around the Cape would immediately release one million tons of shipping for other purposes.

While the members of the Combined Chiefs of Staff had disagreement on many points, it was the unanswerable mathematics of shipping that brought them into agreement on the necessity to open the Mediterranean prior to the invasion of Europe. To accomplish this, the American Chiefs agreed to the invasion of Sicily and to a campaign in Southern Italy limited to denying to the Germans those areas they needed to mount dive bomber attacks on Mediterranean convoys.

From this point on, the Combined Chiefs of Staff meetings were a struggle to find a plan and to adhere to it, to put their resources behind the essential operations and to reject many others, all of which were put forward with most compelling logic. An invasion of Norway to secure the Murmansk route was proposed. Once ashore in Italy, Churchill saw in the Balkans what he called "gleaming subsidiary opportunities." An invasion of Rhodes to bring Turkey into the war to open the Dardanelles almost secured agreement. To relieve the hard-pressed Chinese there were demands for an offensive in Burma, and for amphibious operations in Southeast Asia.

Throughout all these discussions ran American suspicion of a British policy that they considered peripheral, and British suspicion of an American policy which they considered impetuous and premature.

General Brooke was foremost in striving to keep in the forefront of the arguments the basic parts of the strategic problem; shipping, the build-up of forces for cross-channel invasion which had a safe margin of superiority, and the containment of a part of German reserves south of the Alps. In the end a plan was adopted which generally accorded with his recommendations. Diversions which might have fatally affected the essential parts of the plan were avoided.

These experiences are particularly instructive for us because when we consider our multilateral security arrangements we can be certain that command and decision in the future will be subjected to the claims of many competing proposals. Unless a sound military plan can be formulated and adhered to, the potential strength of an alliance system may be frustrated in indecision or frittered away pursuing subsidiary opportunities.

There is an interesting point of comparison in the example of von Falkenhayen and the example of the Combined Chiefs of Staff. That is the difference between a supreme single, military authority, and a supreme corporate authority. Of course, you will recognize a difference in speed of decision. One mind is easier to make up than two.

What about correctness of decision? Are four or six minds necessarily better than one?

In a vertical organization argument or dissent can be dangerous to the individual who provokes them. Consequently these are rarely used effectively because they cannot be used freely. In a committee organization argument and dissent are used freely, sometimes simply to keep the issue on the table. If the committee possesses sufficient wit and endurance a solution will emerge on the basis of being the least arguable. Is this a tribute to the committee system or to the members? Is it a tribute at all? Some would

suggest that credit for results belongs more to the system than to the men in it. They regard the system as being a safety device against gross blunders, and as a place where judgment is manufactured.

In my opinion a corporate body such as the Combined Chiefs of Staff is probably no stronger than its weakest member. And if you will consider the effect on a committee of a persuasive man with a towering reputation *who is in error*, I think you will agree that the committee system heightens rather than alleviates the necessity for excellence in each of its members. As long as we use it for the check and balance it provides, and to give representation to partners of equal standing, or to supply special individual abilities, our committees probably will serve us well. But when we come to rely on the committee to provide wit and judgment which are not present in its members, I think we can expect to be disappointed.

In drawing on these experiences of von Falkenhayen and of the Combined Chiefs of Staff at the highest level of command to illustrate the importance of the ability to select a correct strategic objective and to adhere to the essential parts of a plan, I do not mean to imply that these elements do not enter into the problem of command and decision at lower levels. Indeed, they enter at *all* levels. But at lower levels these considerations become less acute. Strategy, as it were, is apt to be less baffling than grand strategy. Objectives are often set by higher authority. Most important, as we leave the level of grand strategy and come to the theater or tactical commander, we find fewer voices being heard; command and decision become vested in one commander, whereas upstairs it may have resided in a sort of committee.

But subordinate commanders are not without special problems requiring special capacities. You know the saying that "Battle is the payoff." And you

know who gets paid off when there is failure. It generally is not the committee upstairs.

The next several aspects of command and decision which I will discuss are more applicable to the operational commander, either at his headquarters in the rear area or at the scene of action. These are aspects which I believe to be more or less timeless. That is, they are invulnerable to elimination by technology. They reside in the minds of men. They cannot be built into machines. The first of these has to do with the way in which military resources are used or, if you will, misused.

You might say military resources and money have often affected those who possessed them in much the same way, especially when these resources appeared to be in abundance. Some men, when they receive an appreciable sum of money, immediately get big ideas. So it is also with the military commander and his resources, and with his undertakings. The next on my list of abilities deals with this problem.

In the conduct of operations with large forces, the ability to overcome a natural trend towards complexity of organization and of tactical plan and towards a multiplicity of objectives which the nature of the forces in hand might seem to warrant; in other words, adherence to the principles of simplicity and of the objective, regardless of any apparent abundancy of resources.

I think that the Battle of Midway provides a vivid illustration of the importance of this attribute. As you remember, Admiral Yamamoto commanded a naval striking force which constituted abundant resources compared to available U.S. Forces. Yet he suffered the defeat that doomed Japan. After Japan's amazingly victorious winter from December 1941 until May of 1942, her high command was faced with the problem of where should her powerful naval forces

next be used. Yamamoto secured agreement on Pacific operations to complete the work of Pearl Harbor because actions in the Solomons and in the Coral Sea had convinced him that Japan must destroy the remaining American carrier strength before undertaking other tasks. His basic plan was to attack an American position which Admiral Nimitz would be forced to defend. He selected Midway. His choice was excellent. Admiral Nimitz assembled his last three carriers to defend it.

But Admiral Yamamoto had allowed other objectives to enter his plan to make claims on his resources. By the time of first contact on 3 June his forces were scattered in no fewer than ten groups over the Central and North Pacific. Two of his carriers, which might have provided the margin of victory, and a sizable surface force, had been sent to attack Dutch Harbor and to seize Attu and Adak. His forces in the Midway area were organized and disposed for their separate tasks and were unable to provide mutual support. Writing about this battle Admiral Nimitz expressed the view that:

> Even with the most complete warning, it is inconceivable that the three United States carriers could by any combination of luck and skill have defeated and turned back the 8 carriers, 11 battleships, and immense number of supporting vessels which the Japanese committed to this action *had the Japanese fleet been concentrated.*

In the conduct of operations with large forces, Admiral Yamamoto had failed to overcome the natural trend towards complexity of organization and tactical plan and towards a multiplicity of objectives. In short, he spent his sizable assets on too many things.

If there is not a saying that the best campaigns are fought by hungry commanders, there probably ought to be. Slender resources counteract the trend towards

complexity. They force adherence to the principles of simplicity and concentration. If Admiral Yamamoto had not believed himself capable of undertaking so much, he might have been more successful. But slender resources pose problems of another sort, which brings me to my next point:

> When pressed for tactical decisions, in the face of imminent action, the ability to keep in view the larger strategic situation and the objectives of the next superior commander.

Generally speaking, one of the most difficult decisions a commander can face is the decision to avoid action, or to disengage while the outcome remains unclear. The human impulse, I suspect, of all commanders is to grapple and slug it out. This may be particularly true after a long series of setbacks, and when the anxiety of the next superior for a victory has become unmistakably clear. There may be a great inward temptation and a great outward pressing to turn the tide. Because this usually occurs in a generally adverse situation, the impulses of the commander to grapple and win could be extremely dangerous. It is under these conditions more than any other, that he must be able to keep in mind the over-all strategic situation and the objectives of his next superior in command.

Admiral Spruance, who opposed Admiral Yamamoto at Midway, found himself in a situation where, if he had not kept in mind the over-all strategic situation, he might have made certain tactical decisions which could have lost the battle in spite of Admiral Yamamoto's errors.

Admiral Nimitz made certain that Admiral Spruance was in no doubt on this point before Midway by sending him this message:

> You will be governed by the principle of calculated risk, which you shall interpret to mean the avoidance of exposure of your force to attack by superior enemy forces without good prospect of inflicting, as a result of such exposure, greater damage on the enemy.

I suggest that a careful examination of the Allied side of the Second World War will reveal two situations when the decision of a commander at the scene of action could have profoundly affected the outcome of the war. One was the decision of Admiral Spruance at Midway to retire rather than follow up. Had he risked further exposure of his force he might have lost the entire Pacific.

A second example was General Neil Ritchie, commanding the British Eighth Army in Egypt. In late June 1942, the Eighth Army was almost all that General Auchinleck had to defend his Middle East theater against Rommel. After a long series of reverses, culminating in the capitulation of Tobruk, General Ritchie went to ground, as it were. He took up a hopeless position on the Egyptian frontier, and gave Auchinleck to understand that his army would win there or die trying. It was a gallant posture, but it showed a complete lack of appreciation of the problem of the theater commander, which was to keep the army alive, however battered, and to trade space for time, until new forces and new weapons arrived.

Fortunately on the eve of Rommel's attack General Auchinleck arrived on the scene, relieved General Ritchie of his command and devoted all of his energy to extricating his army. Three days later Rommel had won his most astonishing victory. But the Eighth Army was still alive and on its way back to the lines at El Alamein. Had General Ritchie remained in command, the Eighth Army would probably have been destroyed and the Middle East lost.

One might say that the ability to keep in mind the general situation amid the noise, confusion, distress, and weariness at the scene of action is simply an ability to watch what is developing behind you as well as in front of you. If commanders have sometimes been remiss in this respect as was General Ritchie, they have been able to plead that the situation in front of them claimed all of their attention and energy. I am referring here to the battle, when a demand is made for those qualities in a commander which we have come to think of as generalship. (Oddly enough I have not been able to locate a naval equivalent of this term.)

When command and decision are placed in the crucible of battle, two things immediately happen. First, time becomes very dear. Temporizing is no longer tolerable. Second, command becomes extremely personal and lonely. The time for consultation has passed.

If the exercise of command and decision in battle were limited to the execution of a prepared plan, I suppose victory or defeat would be attributable more to the staffs which prepared them than to the commander who approved them for execution. But the phase we know as the Supervision of the Planned Action is always there. It is this phase which demands those attributes on my list which I would like to discuss next:

> The ability to recognize a changed situation and to exercise the mental flexibility and moral courage to depart from doctrine, to improvise and to modify plans even to the point of abandonment, and to resist the conditioned reflex.

Winston Churchill said all of this, rather sarcastically, when he stated:

> However absorbed a commander may be in the elaboration of his own thoughts, it is sometimes necessary to take the enemy into consideration.

You will notice that I have emphasized the ability to deal with change—that is, to recognize it, to respond to it, or to initiate it. If you will reflect a moment on the nature of a military organization, wherein discipline, obedience to orders, and observance of established common doctrine are necessary elements, you will see that if the organization is to have the capacity for dealing with change, these attributes *must* exist in the mind and character of the commander. A command which is dominated by a rigid, unresponsive or unseeing head, will reflect these same qualities in its operations, however many brilliant innovators it contains.

We hear frequent usage these days of the word *flexibility* in connection with military matters. I suggest that the term is used almost exclusively in describing a weapons system, or a service capability. Its application to mental properties is comparatively rare. Let me ask you what good is flexibility in hardware if it does not also exist in the mind of the commander? The essence of my point is that a commander must have the ability to act in a new way on new information. Machines display conditioned reflexes. Much more is required of men.

I cannot help thinking that this attribute is distinguished from the others because it springs from that special place in the mind wherein reside intuition, perception, insight, and invention. When these qualities are present in abundance, and when they are complemented by vigor and decisiveness, we have genius. When they are absent, we have a blunderer.

As you know, history has recorded the actions of both geniuses and blunderers. But the handbook of

blundering is considerably more thoroughly documented than the other. In order to help fix in your minds these thoughts on the ability of a commander to deal with change, let me give you the famous case of General Niville.

All of you have heard of Marshal Joffre and Marshal Petain. General Niville briefly enjoyed a position at the summit of French Army affairs in 1917 between those two famous figures. When Marshal Joffre had shown himself unable to cope successfully with the stalemate on the Western Front, thereby provoking a crisis in the French Cabinet, the new Premier cast about for a general who could succeed where Joffre had failed. In General Niville he thought he had such a man, because General Niville had demonstrated an ability on a small scale to innovate and to depart from doctrine and he had won a small victory.

Niville's innovation was simple and direct. He argued that prolonged artillery bombardment destroyed the element of surprise. He had simply dispensed with the prolonged bombardment in favor of a short bombardment of great intensity followed by an immediate and sudden *leveè en masse* from his own trenches.

Upon being given command of all the French forces, General Niville set to work to extend his innovation to a great assault by an entire army. He selected as his point of attack a German-held salient which fitted itself to the theory of his plan. But the preparation of an army for attack proved to be quite a different thing than the preparation of a division. Whereas the preparation of the division assault had required a matter of a few days, the preparation of the army required months. All was undertaken in the face of an alert opponent, from whom nothing was hidden.

As General Niville's preparations progressed, the German command proceeded to alter the situation

entirely. They simply withdrew from the salient. In places the lines moved back as much as ten miles. They heavily reinforced the whole area. Whereas Niville had contemplated the sudden overwhelming of a front held by eight or nine divisions in close proximity to his own lines, he found himself confronted by forty divisions which were several miles distant. A great concentration of German artillery was brought to bear on the now vacated sector. In short, such changes were made that the situation which General Niville faced ceased to resemble the one on which all his plans were predicated.

No arguments could deter him, no minister in Paris dared to interfere for fear of showing lack of confidence in the new man whom they had elevated to the top command. Yet even when German documents were captured indicating that the Germans in their turn had captured the details of the plan in every particular, General Niville remained immovable. Finally the attack occurred. The French Army gained no more than three kilometers. In three days it had lost 187,000 men. Thereafter, for the only time in the whole war, widespread mutinies occurred in the French lines, ultimately involving 65 divisions. The government fell. Niville was dismissed. Petain assumed command, and addressed himself to the task of restoring the fiber of the army. When asked to conduct offensive operations to relieve the British on his left later that same year, Petain shook his head and said, "No, the French Army will wait for the tanks and for the Americans." Such is the story of General Niville.

Before leaving this attribute of generalship and of responsiveness to change, let me add a kind of footnote. When the grisly lessons of other men are laid bare in retrospect, the causes of error often appear so obvious and so preventable that our minds refuse to admit that these lessons have any applicability to us, beyond, perhaps, to be on guard against fools. We seem to deflect the lesson by denying that

the actions of an idiot can be instructive to men of intelligence and training such as ourselves.

Well, let me point out that most of the great blunderers, including the recent ones, had much to recommend them for the positions from which they blundered. Nearly all were professionals of long experience. Many, no doubt, were war college graduates. Nearly all had risen to the top of their professions. Therefore, it appears to me—and here is my footnote—that the beginning of wisdom for each of us is to regard ourselves simply as untested blunderers until events have either provided confirmation or justified a different conclusion.

Well, now I come to the last two attributes on my list. For these, we should shift our point of view from the scene of action to the headquarters of the Theater Commander. Let me describe a sort of tableau we might encounter if we were to visit the headquarters. Here we find two groups of men focusing their attention on the Supreme Commander. One group is comprised of his military subordinates. These men are struggling to overcome military obstacles. They deal with life and death and stark realities in the here and now. Their voices are insistent—their presence dominates the room.

The other group of men, although fascinated with the proceedings, stands somewhat aside. They are anxious to assist but loathe to interfere. One of them frequently consults the Head of State, who is far removed at the seat of government. Their special responsibilities lie in economics, industry, weapon making, transportation, propaganda, and diplomacy.

Occasionally, when there is a letup in the intensity of events, the commander confers with the nonmilitary group. They wish to think somewhat beyond the present. Where, they ask, will the campaign lead? The commander explains his military problem. He

identifies his present aims. The group comprehends. They cannot deny that today's action will bring necessary results by nightfall. But one of the group, perhaps the statesman, asks, "And tomorrow?" The commander shrugs. He pronounces the single unarguable word, *Victory*. The discussion ends.

I have intentionally sketched this picture in only two colors: black and white. Obviously its contrasts are exaggerated; obviously the colors could be reversed. But there is no doubt that the contrasts are there. In the few minutes I have left I would like to discuss these in a general way, and then fit them into the problem of command and decision. I am sure you will recognize that the contrasts I am referring to are those which exist between military objectives and political objectives.

When a war is in progress the commander undertakes to win it the best way he can. The politician may or may not provide political direction to the effort, but no politician who values his office is likely to interfere with winning. However, when the war is over, other politicians may look back and say that it was won in the wrong way. Until recently, the commander has been rather invulnerable to these hindsight charges because the task given him by the politician was *Victory—victory at all costs*.

The politician, in his turn, will say that the conflict became unmanageable, that it was nearly impossible to formulate a set of political objectives short of unconditional surrender to which all of the Allied Powers would have agreed, that military operations could not wait for this to be done. And so it was a politician and not a military commander who pronounced the single word, *Victory*.

When the politician found himself bankrupt of any objective except unconditional surrender, he made a virtue out of extreme violence and barbarism in the

conduct of war. I say this because it was necessary to resort to extreme measures in order to reduce an enemy to a state of helplessness where he had to choose between unconditional surrender and annihilation. In all fairness, it must be admitted that the politician found many willing hands for the task. But as a result we find the outstanding military developments stemming from the Second World War are basically methods for producing extreme violence leading to national annihilation. Concurrently, we have seen grow up a school of military thinking which has lost sight of the purpose of strategy, which is simply to establish control, and has instead equated it with slaughter and destruction.

Considering the predicted nature of a general nuclear war in the future, many people would maintain that it is not practical to expect that there can be a relationship between military and political objectives in war, other than survival. Well, if a conflict is allowed to reach unlimited scope, I'd say they may be right. But the potential consequences of general war most certainly will exercise limitations on the conduct of all lesser conflicts. So we might be inclined to hope that in the future the commander will encounter careful political guidance and active restraint which will affect his aims as well as his means. We can hope so, but in view of our experiences we cannot *rely* on it.

Therefore, I suggest that the commander will find it necessary to relearn an old attribute. I have expressed this attribute as "a continuous awareness that although military operations are the dominant instrument of national policy in war, these operations must be pursued with due regard for present and future political objectives."

Let me add that if the politician is going to impose this requirement on the military commander, *as he properly should*, there is a corollary

requirement which the politician should observe. It can almost be expressed simply by rearranging the language I have just used:

> A continuous awareness that warfare must be conducted towards political ends that are both desirable and feasible and that military operations, once undertaken, cannot be conducted sensibly in a policy vacuum, and cannot safely be halted while political objectives are derived.

At the risk of offending some of you, let me suggest something which is implied here, and which I think history tends to support. It is that since clear political objectives are likely to be wanting, the commander would be well advised to be prepared to derive them himself.

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As I come to my conclusion I find I have one attribute left over. It was simply that a commander must have the ability to render and maintain the distinction between his own interests and scope of authority, and those of the head of state at the seat of government. What is necessary here is that a commander must have a degree of invulnerability to the workings of prestige on perspective and subordination. I am sure that all of you are sufficiently familiar with recent history so that this attribute needs no amplification. Let me simply end by saying the same thing in the words of the first military scholar, written 3,000 years ago.

> The general who advances without coveting fame and retreats without fearing disgrace, whose only thought is to protect his country and do good service for his sovereign, is the jewel of the kingdom.

BIOGRAPHIC SKETCH

Commander Richard G. Alexander, U.S. Navy

EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND: USNA, 1945
Naval War College,
Command and Staff Course,
1955.

DUTY ASSIGNMENTS:

Naval War College	Staff	1960
USS Hartley (DE-1029)	CO	1958-1960
USS Jonas Ingram (DD-938)	XO	1957-1958
BuPers	Officer Promotions Division	1955-1957
Naval War College	Student	1954-1955
USS Mitscher (DL-2)		1952-1954
USS Rooks (DD-804)		1951-1952
USS Williamsburg		1949-1951
USS O'Hare (DD-889)		1946-1948
USS Cushing (DD-797)		1944-1946