



# A Response to Lawrence Freedman's "Command: Individual or Collective? A Review of Anthony King's *Command: The Twenty-First-Century General* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019)"

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It is clear from Lawrence Freedman's generous evaluation of my work that we share much in common about our understanding of command. However, his review also highlights a divide between his definition of command and my own. Freedman argues that command is constitutively defined as authority; it is the power to give orders. I, on the other hand, prioritise the decision-making function of command; for me, above all else, commanders have the authority to make decisions.

It is an apparently small difference. On my account, because commanders are recognised as decision-makers, they can issue orders to their subordinates; they decide where, how and when to deploy them. Orders are the formal manifestation of command decisions. On Freedman's account, the authority to order is primary but an order, of course, always involves a decision. The two concepts of command are plainly interrelated, then. Moreover, both of us are interested in the way in which the institution of command generates organisational cohesion.

However, his review nicely points up how the definition of a research problem can alter a research programme decisively. In definitional issues, detail really matters. Because I was interested in the process of decision-making, command was always already a collective practice, rather than an individual power, for me. It was to be located, not so much in the person of the commander, but in the relationships and interactions between commanders, their staffs, deputies and subordinates. Working from a concept of decision-making, the lifeworld of the headquarters almost automatically became the critical focus of my investigations, before individual commanders.

If I had adopted Freedman's more authoritarian definition of command, it seems likely *Command* would have minimally had a different emphasis; the project is likely to have been more commander-centric. Its focus would have been on generals, their authority, their orders—not so much the decision-making process.

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Of course, it is highly probable that the fact that I am a sociologist encouraged me to focus on decision-making, as a collective practice, rather than on more individualist authority. I may have defined command as decision-making because it already suited my own sociological interests in groups, interaction and cooperation. Indeed, I had a very strange experience as I wrote this book. The project was intended as a new departure for me, quite independent of my previous writing on the armed forces. However, as the book crystallised, its continuity with my previous work became all too evident. Indeed, *Command* followed so closely from my two previous works on the armed forces (King 2011, 2013), in theme, method and orientation, that in the end I could honestly call the three works a trilogy. *Command*, like the two previous volumes, was concerned with military professionalization in the twenty-first century; it is really about the evolution of teamwork. In this way, *Command* replicated not just my work on the armed forces but all my previous sociological work which has been interested in the historical evolution of clubs, groups, teams and organisations in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

On the basis of his alternate definition of command, Freedman raises two main questions about my thesis. The central claim of my book is that command has become a more collaborative and professionalised practice when compared with the twentieth century; 'collective command' has appeared. Freedman is sceptical about collective command and believes that commanders have always potentially distributed authority. For Freedman, less has changed than I suggest; for him, collective command is not new. He puts his finger on a very pertinent point.

Command was and is always collective. Divisional commanders in the twentieth century relied on aides, staff officers and headquarters as they do now; some divisional commanders trusted subordinates to make decisions for them. However, in order to understand my argument about collective command, it is necessary to be absolutely precise about where and how decision-making has been shared. Command consists of three elements: mission definition, mission management and leadership. Collective command does not mean a simple democratisation of decision-making in each function, still less the emergence of command by committee. It refers to a transformation in the topography of command. As I repeatedly argued throughout the book, divisional commanders have actually assumed ever greater individual responsibility for mission definition. In comparison with their twentieth century forebears, today's divisional commanders exercise far greater levels of influence, in terms of defining what their forces will actually do in a theatre. As Freedman has illustrated better than most scholars, the political and even military direction which generals have received in the recent decades has often wanting. Although nominally designated as only tactical commanders, divisional commanders have become nodal points in a politico-military complex who must collaborate with many partners and agents to develop a mission. At this level, command responsibility has actually increased. Major-Generals are more important than ever.

However, even as divisional commanders have assumed greater responsibility for mission definition, they have been compelled to share decision-making authority in managing missions. Military operations have become so complex, involving diverse forces and heterogeneous actors that their coordination has become very difficult. At the divisional level, there are simply more decisions over a great range of activities than in the past; divisions must coordinate aircraft, helicopters, drones, long-range artillery alongside political engagement, and cyber, information and psychological operations. Consequently, while divisional commanders have reserved the most important decisions for themselves, they have empowered subordinates, deputies and nominated staff officers to make day-to-day management decisions

for them. Moreover, they have not simply allowed subordinates to make decisions independently. They have actively sought to create a command team so that decisions at each level of command have been integrated into the overall mission, synchronised with all the activities of the division.

The parallel between Bernard Montgomery as General Officer Commanding 3rd Infantry Division during the Battle of France in May 1940 and James Mattis, Commander of 1st Marine Division during the Iraq Invasion in March and April 2003, is instructive here. There are certainly parallels between Montgomery and Mattis as divisional commanders; they were both powerful, charismatic generals. However, Montgomery exercised continuous directive control over his subordinates, personally monitoring their activities. Mattis certainly monopolised the most important decisions for himself and he was in close communication with his subordinates. However, he commanded his formation in such close partnership with General James Amos, the 3rd Marine Air Wing commander, that they almost shared command of a genuinely joint air-ground operation. At the same time, he actively empowered and trained his subordinates to make decisions, to ensure complete unity across the echelons. Mattis consciously saw himself as the captain of a football team: a *primus inter pares*. By contrast, Montgomery's saw himself as a conductor, tightly 'gripping' operations with subordinates firmly under his baton.

Freedman is worried that divisional command may have always had collective features, then. He also raises the question of whether the changes, which I observed at the divisional level, represent not a fundamental transformation of command itself, but only its compression. On this account, Army and Army Group commanders in the twentieth century already exercised collective command; because the span of command was so wide at their level, they had to share authority then, as divisional commanders do now. Collective command is not new; it has only descended to the divisional level. There is certainly something to this argument. There is little question that some compression has occurred and that functions have descended down the chain of command. Indeed, in an earlier and much longer draft of the book, I addressed this question extensively. For the sake of concision, I cut the discussion from the final manuscript.

The deleted argument made the following points. Although divisional commanders now have to deal with operational, theatre level questions, once the preserve of Army or Army Group commanders, it would be a mistake to assume that the transformation of command as a practice can be reduced merely to compression. Divisional commanders today are not simply doing what Army Group commanders did in the twentieth century. Montgomery is again a good example here. He began the war as a Divisional Commander but was promoted to Army Group Command in 1944; he commanded 21st Army Group from D-Day to the end of the war.

As an Army Group Commander in 1944–1945, Montgomery had to consider wider questions of Alliance and joint operations, political and civil action and the press. Nevertheless, even as an Army Group Commander, his concerns remained almost entirely military; the political questions mainly involved internal Alliance politics (which he handled badly). Moreover, he did not have to cooperate intimately with the other services. D-Day, which was Montgomery's plan, was obviously a 'combined' operation relying on maritime and air power. Yet, the Battle of Normandy and the European Campaign was not, for the most part, a genuinely joint operation, although tactical air power was periodically important. It was very noticeable that senior Allied air commanders found Montgomery impossible and did not want to work with him. As an Army Group commander, Montgomery concentrated almost entirely

on his own land forces, initially, the British Second Army and the United States First Army and, from July 1944, the British Second Army and the Canadian First Army. Montgomery was extreme but the point could be replicated. Army commanders in the twentieth century operated in a military sphere; they commanded land forces.

The argument for the compression of command is not false. However, it misses the more important point in the twenty-first century. Command has changed at every level. As force levels have declined and divisional commanders have taken control of more and more of the battlespace, they are not simply doing what Army or Corps commanders used to do. They are conducting quite different operations; in order to control an enlarged battlespace, they are commanding novel joint, multinational and inter-agency campaigns. They are now forced to engage with a much wider set of military and non-military actors and partners. Decision-making has expanded, diversified and proliferated at the divisional level. Similarly, senior commanders at Corps and Combined Joint Task Force levels—Armies and Army Groups have disappeared—are themselves facing different challenges to their predecessors and developing distinctive systems of collective command. As the challenge of command has changed at every level, so has the practice of decision-making.

*Command* was an attempt to analyse the lifeworld of military decision-making. The fact that it defined command as decision-making rather than authority has certainly framed the book in a specific way, as Freedman rightly points out. Doubtless, this has inevitably produced omissions and biases. However, his observation about the two potentially different meanings of command also highlights the historical thesis at the core of the book. In the twentieth century, it might be cogently argued that command was, as Freedman suggests, primarily defined by authority; generals issued orders. They were able to do this because operations were lineal and Newtonian, conducted by homogenous ground forces under their direct command; decisions were best made quickly and forcefully by an individual. However, in the era of complex, joint, hybrid and heterogeneous operations, generals are often unable to command in a traditional way; they can no longer simply order their subordinates into action. Yet, they must constantly make decisions. Sometimes this involves issuing direct orders, but often it also involves defining complex situations, identifying possible courses of actions and encouraging the support of superiors, peers and partners through manipulation, negotiation and influence. On the basis of Freedman's felicitous definition, it might be possible to say that twenty-first century decision-making has superseded twentieth century command.

## References

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