Unity of Command
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It’s good to be king. Life is much simpler when you’re in charge of everyone, and so is military theory. One of the vaunted principles of war is Unity of Command—a tenet that counsels us “for every objective seek unity of command and unity of effort.” There is much tradition behind this idea—and a lot of myth, too. It is a principle that helps to cultivate the heroic “cult of the commander” in the American military: the idea that when all is as it should be, war boils down to the noble commander making key and timely decisions and leading his adoring men to victory. The reality, unfortunately, is worlds apart from this model.

As with most of the principles of war, Unity of Command draws its strength from Napoleon. Bonaparte was a true anomaly in history. At the height of his career, he was both head of state and commander-in-chief of his armies. He was also an exceptionally gifted individual, uniquely suited to command his wars of conquest. In the years after his final defeat at Waterloo, western military thinkers viewed Napoleon as the ultimate example of martial greatness, and they tried to codify his success in their doctrines and dogmas—including the principles of war. They observed that the Emperor of France could command his armies to great effect in the early 19th century…and concluded that one of the keys to success was unifying all authority under one man.

It works if you’re the emperor. But don’t try taking this dogma into a real fight today, because it is a formula that ignores reality and can even be harmful. The problem with the principle of unity of command is that, like most of the principles, it is prescriptive (rather than descriptive) and unbalanced (rather than dialectic). It assumes that the formulation of a strict hierarchy is both normal and preferred in war. What you find in real war instead is a spectrum of interrelationships that stretches from hierarchy on the one end to anarchy on the
other. The modern commander must function all along that spectrum and develop a concept of operation that works throughout it.

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The commander of US Central Command, for example, has to operate in the context of both hierarchy and anarchy. He has under his command some elements with whom he has a legal, hierarchical chain of command: US Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines. He also has coalition troops, over whom he has considerably less command authority. He has to work on a daily basis with American ambassadors and representatives from other agencies of the government, whom he in no way commands but may have influence with. Then there are the myriad foreign journalists, neutral government officials, and private volunteer organizations with whom he has to work—some of whom may actually be opponents of the United States. What is conspicuously absent in this mixture is unity of command or even unity of effort. Instead, we have a commanding general who must be imaginative, innovative, and flexible enough to work with both hierarchy and anarchy. Like a master chess player, he must even integrate the efforts of those who are working against him. The art of command thus involves building cooperation with those far outside the actual chain of command.

Even at the lower levels of war fighting, the modern officer finds he has varying degrees of command authority over the people he has to work with. An Army captain has platoon and squad leaders who report to him alone, but he might also have an attached artillery or engineer officer, over whom he has “operational control” but not total command. (They answer to other officers in their chain of command.) He might have a translator or liaisons from local militia or police. He might have members of the news media embedded with his command. These people are vital parts to his plan and his success on the
battlefield, but he does not actually command them. The captain may even find himself having to negotiate with a village elder over whom he has absolutely no authority. Hopefully, this captain can transcend the simplistic formula of “unity of command” and use his diplomatic skills to bring about mission accomplishment.

A realistic appreciation of the limits of command authority underlies some of history’s greatest successes. Dwight Eisenhower came face to face with anarchic relationships every day of his command of Allied forces in World War II. He had to negotiate with generals and field marshals who were nominally his subordinates and who often were at cross-purposes with each other. He had to work with American and British government officials, and there were few occasions in which he could rely only on respect for his command authority. A lesser man might have thrown up his hands and grumbled about the need for unity of command. Instead, Eisenhower became a master architect—building success out of frequently uncooperative bricks that scarcely fit together. He had no unity of command, little unity of effort, and a miasma of competing agendas, hypersensitive egos, and hopeless bureaucracies. Waist-deep in this chaotic mixture, he led the way to victory.

As with the other principles of war, there is some logic and common sense in unity of command: it can be a useful expedient. When putting together a military plan of action, a senior commander can organize some of his forces and place them under a single task force commander to facilitate efficient operations. But elevating this proven technique to an immutable principle of hierarchies is simply wrong, because the real art of command will always have to deal with anarchy as well. As on the battlefield, so also in military theory: balance is the key.