



BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE: Why a Political Sensibility Is Important to Successful Military Command

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Table of Contents

1. “Correcting the Fantasy of War Without Politics” by Jason Dempsey
2. “The Three Dichotomies of *Command*” by Raphael S. Cohen
3. “What Is the Very Model of a (Post) Modern Major General?” by Susan Bryant
4. “Calling for Military Leaders with ‘Political Sensibility’ Able to Adapt to the Enduring Nature of War” by Sonya Finley

Summary

In his book, *Command: The Politics of Military Operations from Korea to Ukraine*, Lawrence Freedman highlights why an understanding of politics is a central component of military leadership. In this roundtable review, Jason Dempsey, Raphael Cohen, Susan Bryant, and Sonya Finley consider the lessons that leaders can draw from Freedman's book and the importance of a political sensibility that allows commanders to navigate complex military and political environments.

1. Correcting the Fantasy of War Without Politics

Jason Dempsey

The political landscape within which wars take place is the focus of Lawrence Freedman's book, *Command: The Politics of Military Operations from Korea to Ukraine*. Published in 2023, Freedman wrote *Command* during the COVID-19 pandemic, making it something of a bonus, as the author had previously claimed to enter retirement after writing extensively on war over the course of a long and illustrious career.

In *Command*, Freedman places politics at the center of warfare, with an understanding of politics being a central component of military leadership. In the introduction, he asserts that, "a political sensibility is an essential part of a professional competence, enabling officers to understand the contexts in which they operate."¹ With this in mind, he begins with an overview of the Korean War and the famous clash between President Harry Truman and Gen. Douglas MacArthur. From there, he leads a magisterial tour of armed conflicts from the 1950s to the present. Freedman does not offer an explicit theory of warfare but provides a series of rich narratives detailing the international and domestic political struggles that define such conflicts. The wars he covers span the globe, making the book a rich source of case studies for future leaders.

The first reviewer in this roundtable, Raphael Cohen, notes Freedman's lack of explicit theory and lays out three tensions, or dichotomies, that readers can use as a framework for understanding some of the timeless challenges of command. These tensions are

¹ Lawrence Freedman, *Command: The Politics of Military Operations from Korea to Ukraine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 8.

present across all of the conflicts Freedman describes. Two of these tensions — delegation versus control and obedience versus initiative — relate to how command is exercised. Sometimes control from the top is paramount, such as when autocrats keep a tight leash on subordinates in an effort to prevent a military coup. At other times, technology enables tighter and more centralized control, such as when strategic leaders use technology to oversee and monitor tactical operations from thousands of miles away. The tension between obedience and initiative plays out in similar ways, with subordinates in more open political systems often able to make their own decisions about objectives and how to pursue them.

The primary tension Cohen identifies, and the thrust of *Command*, is the tension between politicians and generals. This tension is present in all political systems, as even in autocracies and dictatorships generals have to be able to read the domestic political environment if they want to survive, both in their jobs and, at times, literally. Within a democratic system, the interactions may be less personally fraught but are often more complex due to the greater number of actors with a say in shaping how the nation goes to war.

Keeping War Separate from Politics: America’s Failure in Afghanistan

The other two reviewers on this panel, Susan Bryant and Sonya Finley, examine Freedman’s work squarely within the context of American civil-military relations. Bryant takes a deep dive into two books that Freedman mentions, both of which are central to understanding the identity and outlook of many of the American military leaders featured in *Command*.

Book Review Roundtable: Why a Political Sensibility Is Important to Successful Military Command

<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-why-a-political-sensibility-is-important-to-successful-military-command/>

Once an Eagle, by Anton Myrer, is a work of fiction that chronicles the parallel careers of two military officers as they navigate the wars of the 20th century. Within the military, particularly in the 1990s when the book showed up on professional reading lists and was often used for officer professional development training, the two main characters became cultural reference points for two types of military officer — one good, one bad. The good officer rose from the enlisted ranks and was honest, led from the front, cared deeply for those in his command, and was uninterested in self-promotion. The bad officer entered service as a lieutenant, was focused on courting superior officers, sought out prominent staff jobs, and was a savvy self-promoter. The scope and nuance of the book was often lost in the resulting shorthand references to it that conflated self-promotion with being a “political” officer.

These literary stereotypes dovetailed neatly with an embrace, or at least cursory understanding, of the academic work of Samuel Huntington, who, in *The Soldier and the State*, presented a model for civil-military relations that asserted a clear demarcation between military duties and politics. The result was a generation of officers who not only saw engagement with politics as outside of their scope of duties but also as something to be disdained. To be a good officer was to focus on tactics and mastering the physical mechanics of war, leaving the politics to someone else.

Regardless of whether these texts were a cause or a symptom of military leaders who wanted nothing to do with politics, they capture the essence of an institution almost entirely fixated on tactics, to the detriment of understanding how good tactics may be a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for victory in war. In the case of Afghanistan, the American military doubled down on the mistakes of Vietnam, believing that creating a military in its own image was the key to victory. This focus on building a mini-me military

Book Review Roundtable: Why a Political Sensibility Is Important to Successful Military Command

<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-why-a-political-sensibility-is-important-to-successful-military-command/>

in Afghanistan elided fundamental political questions such as whether the host government could ever sustain such a military, whether the American support and direction of the Afghan military might make it seem like an arm of an occupying force, and whether the means of funding such a military might actually contribute to the corruption and perceived illegitimacy of the host government.

Unfortunately, there were no other actors who could imbue such salient political considerations into military planning. As Freedman notes, “military leaders could underplay the political and strategic factors” that might prevent the military campaign from achieving success, as there were no diplomatic or political actors representing U.S. interests in Afghanistan who had the resources or command to counter or modify military planning.

Some of this was due to presidents wanting to avoid being seen as meddling in military affairs, which was a lesson President George W. Bush drew from the war in Vietnam, but was even more a reflection of the change in public confidence in the military from the Vietnam era.² Whereas the American military was not viewed with much respect during that period, confidence in the military grew tremendously with the advent of the all-volunteer force and its demonstrated tactical and operational competence during the First Gulf War. This confidence in the military largely held throughout the post-9/11 era, even as confidence in nearly all other government institutions dropped dramatically. This gave the military broad freedom to maneuver without fear of intensive scrutiny — and the luxury of ignoring the domestic politics of both Afghanistan *and* the United States. Despite four presidents in a row expressing unease or even outright opposition to a long-

² Lawrence Freedman, *Command*, 404.

term commitment to a country like Afghanistan, military leaders were able to pursue a plan that required, in their own words, at least a generational commitment to have a chance of success.

Even when President Joe Biden finally called for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, the military was able to avoid any meaningful accountability for the ensuing disaster. Political leaders and other agencies such as the State Department have come under justifiable criticism for mistakes they made in preparing for the withdrawal and supporting Afghan allies during the evacuation. Yet, it was the American military that stood up an Afghan force that was simultaneously so divorced from the politicians it ostensibly served and so dependent upon high-tech weapons systems that had been provided and maintained by the United States that it predictably collapsed like a house of cards upon the withdrawal of direct American military support.

To date, no politician has seen fit to directly confront the military's approach to the Afghan war, nor does there seem to be any such effort at accountability on the horizon. Indeed, the end of Freedman's book focuses on a general lack of accountability across American military efforts in recent years. The absence of accountability for military decisions was demonstrated most succinctly in the aftermath of a U.S. drone strike in Kabul that the chairman of the Joint Chiefs declared to be a "righteous strike." And that would have been the perception of the public if not for independent reporters who revealed that the Americans had killed three innocent adults and seven children. The military, then obliged to conduct its own postmortem, declared that, while the strike had

Book Review Roundtable: Why a Political Sensibility Is Important to Successful Military Command

<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-why-a-political-sensibility-is-important-to-successful-military-command/>

not indeed been “righteous,” it was also “not the result of negligence, not the result of misconduct, not the result of poor leadership.”³

This was not, unfortunately, an isolated incident but part of a broader trend that has come with U.S. reliance on airstrikes and remote targeting, paired with a lack of any significant scrutiny of military operations by political leaders. As extensive investigations from the *New York Times* revealed, civilian casualty counts were often much higher than U.S. forces estimated, and few efforts were even made to assess the aftermath of these strikes. As Freedman notes, “reports of (civilian) casualties were dismissed, or the death toll undercounted, so that no lessons were learned. Perhaps that was not surprising when units were allowed to assess their own performance.”⁴ The situation described by Freedman is one where the tension between politicians and generals is almost entirely absent, leaving the military to focus on tactical inputs with little concern for how they may influence political outcomes.

Partisanship Enters the Chat

The ability of the military to avoid critical scrutiny from political leaders has begun to falter in recent years, though not on issues related to the execution of foreign policy. After a tumultuous term that began with former President Donald Trump declaring that the military was loyal to him personally, and with several recently retired officers eager to serve in his administration, his relationship with most of his original military appointees and uniformed leaders had soured by the end of his term. This provided an opening for

³ Lawrence Freedman, *Command*, 479.

⁴ Lawrence Freedman, *Command*, 486.

overt criticism of military leaders from pundits and politicians that had previously been generally supportive of the military.

The former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Mark Milley, was the primary lightning rod for such criticism after he apologized for being with then-President Trump during a photo opportunity that took place in Lafayette Square at the height of protests in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd. In subsequent speeches, Milley reiterated the military's loyalty to the constitution as a reason to push back against illegal orders or efforts to pull the military into partisan politics. While this sounds straightforward given the circumstances that led him to speak out, such declarations by military leaders are not always a good thing. They are often precursors to justifying coups when military leaders decide that politicians are not appropriately serving the country.

How and where to draw the line on such questions and to translate the simple-sounding proposition of "loyalty to the constitution" to the intricacies of operating in a fluid and often-messy democratic system is no small task — and one that requires robust discussion within the military. And while current tensions between politicians and generals in the United States are primarily centered on issues of recruiting and training as they relate to the ethnic, racial, and gender diversity of the force, political attention beyond these areas is likely to increase as the stakes of international conflict also rise. In the years ahead, we should expect more pointed debates around the military's ability to meet the potential threats of a bellicose Russia and ascendant China.

The last reviewer on this panel places the need for increased political sensibility among military leaders within the context of these challenges. Finley notes that education on the officer's role in the political system is sadly lacking in professional military education. Her

Book Review Roundtable: Why a Political Sensibility Is Important to Successful Military Command

<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-why-a-political-sensibility-is-important-to-successful-military-command/>

suggestions for addressing this shortfall center on practical recommendations within the military's internal education system, including wargaming exercises that move beyond tactics, more robust education on the theories and practice of civil-military relations, and more integration of military leaders with civilian policymakers in senior-level education programs.

Concluding Thoughts

A starting point for American military officers begins with moving beyond a simplistic understanding of politics as something to be avoided or looked down upon. There is no small irony, and a great deal of immaturity, that comes with officers looking with disdain at the very system they have sworn an oath to defend.⁵ Professional military education should therefore work to decouple the term from its pejorative use to describe someone who is self-promoting, as well as to educate officers on the differences between politics and partisanship.

Officers must actively avoid partisanship, but the means of doing so requires a robust understanding of how political systems work. Without such knowledge, even the most conscientious military leader opens him or herself to being an unwitting pawn in partisan struggles. And while the study of domestic politics may seem tangential to the business of waging war overseas, understanding these dynamics in the American system not only

⁵ Jason Dempsey, "John Kelly lent his military credibility to Trump. It's too late now to stay neutral." *The Washington Post*, December 8, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/09/08/john-kelly-trump-military/>.

helps senior officers protect the autonomy and professional nature of the military, but makes them more attuned to how political struggles play out in other countries.

As Finley notes in her review, “Warfighting cannot be divorced from the social, geoeconomic, and political realities animating war’s broader contexts.” A more robust understanding, and respect, of the political dynamics of Afghanistan would have gone a long way to avoiding the disaster that marked the U.S. withdrawal from that country. Current and future military leaders would do well to use Freedman’s *Command* to recenter politics in our understanding of warfare, and to learn that political sensibility is not something to be avoided, but an essential element of professional military competence.

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2. The Three Dichotomies of *Command*

Raphael S. Cohen

Lawrence Freedman’s *Command* is a sweeping look at the politics of military operations since the end of World War II. Freedman’s work is not limited to a central cast of characters, types of conflict, or even a central set of countries, but rather focuses on the challenges of command at large: across time, regime type, and strategic context. Perhaps due to its broad scope, the book lacks a single thesis besides the general observation that command is by nature political, but instead takes more of a kaleidoscopic look at command — exploring how the nature of command varies depending on the circumstances. If, however, there is a unifying theme of the book, it is an exploration of three central dichotomies: politicians versus the generals, delegation versus control, and obedience versus initiative. Together, these three dichotomies define the politics of command over the last three-quarters of a century and will likely continue to do so for many more years to come.

Politicians versus Generals

The central dichotomy of *Command* is the classic divide between military leaders and their political masters. In an extension of Carl von Clausewitz’s famous dictum that war is extension of politics by other means, Freedman notes, “The unavoidable political nature of operational decisions has provided this book’s core theme.”⁶ Unsurprisingly, large

⁶ Lawrence Freedman, *Command: The Politics of Military Operations from Korea to Ukraine* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022), 513.

Book Review Roundtable: Why a Political Sensibility Is Important to Successful Military Command

<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-why-a-political-sensibility-is-important-to-successful-military-command/>

swaths of *Command* are dedicated to the tension between heads of state and their senior military leaders.

Freedman argues that this civil-military tension is both inevitable and increasing. In the past, officers clung to the Huntingtonian conception that the political and military worlds could, at some level, exist independently from one another. He remarks, “As Eisenhower knew, commanders judged to be ‘political’ are often compared unfavourably with those [whose] focus is entirely on preparing for and engaging in combat.”⁷ According to Freedman, while officers at least in many Western militaries still often cling to this perception today, the operational and political dynamics of modern warfare are driving the political and military worlds closer together.⁸

Operationally, irregular warfare requires that officers understand local political dynamics. As Freedman remarks, “a political sensibility is an essential part of professional competence, enabling officers to understand the contexts in which they operate, and how the way they act affects these contexts.”⁹ Indeed, one could argue that American generals’ ultimate success or failure was determined as much by their political sensibilities as it was by their grasp of military art. For example, Gen. David Petraeus’ success during the 2007 surge of forces in Iraq was due in large part to his ability to leverage Iraqi political dynamics — specifically the Anbar Awakening movement against al-Qaeda — while maintaining enough congressional support to achieve results.¹⁰ By contrast, despite being

⁷ Lawrence Freedman, *Command*, 7.

⁸ Lawrence Freedman, *Command*, 7.

⁹ Lawrence Freedman, *Command*, 8.

¹⁰ See Thomas E. Ricks, *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006-2008* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2009).

Book Review Roundtable: Why a Political Sensibility Is Important to Successful Military Command

<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-why-a-political-sensibility-is-important-to-successful-military-command/>

a gifted operator and tactician, Gen. Stanley McChrystal's ultimate downfall was his lack of political sensibility during the Afghanistan surge.¹¹ In irregular warfare, politics matter, and generals must also be politicians.

Freedman, however, also notes that the political landscape has changed. Particularly as more countries have abandoned the draft, fewer politicians have served. At its peak in the early 1970s, roughly three-quarters of the members of the U.S. Congress had prior military experience. By contrast, today, that percentage hovers in the high teens.¹² That trend, in turn, impacts the civil-military balance. As Freedman notes, "As presidents became less military, the military has become more political."¹³ Perhaps the most visible example of this phenomenon is the number of generals serving as secretary of defense or national security advisor, which historically have been civilian roles.¹⁴ For senior American flag officers, navigating Washington has become an essential part of the job, but the breakdown in clear delineations exacerbates civil-military tension.

¹¹ See Michael Hastings, "The Runaway General: The Profile That Brought Down McChrystal," *Rolling Stone*, June 22, 2010, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/the-runaway-general-the-profile-that-brought-down-mcchrystal-192609/>.

¹² Drew Desilver, "New Congress Will Have a Few More Veterans, But Their Share Of Lawmakers is Still Near a Record Low," *Pew Research Center*, December 7, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/12/07/new-congress-will-have-a-few-more-veterans-but-their-share-of-lawmakers-is-still-near-a-record-low/>.

¹³ Lawrence Freedman, *Command*, 510.

¹⁴ Raphael S. Cohen, "Looking Beyond The Generals In The Room: The Real Cause Of America's Civil-Military Malaise," *War on the Rocks*, March 29, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/03/looking-beyond-the-generals-in-the-room-the-real-cause-of-americas-civil-military-malaise/>.

Despite this friction, Freedman argues that the alternative — combining civilian and military control into one — is far worse. For example, regarding Pakistani dictator Gen. Agha Mohammed Yahya Khan, Freedman writes that “in practice, few leaders can stay on top of both the political and military decision-making processes, and certainly Yahya was not one of them.”¹⁵ As messy as civil-military relations might be, fusing the two worlds to be overseen by one person is often far worse.

One of Freedman’s major contributions here is to remind us that neither militaries nor politicians are monolithic. Some of the most intense fights occur within entities — between civilian policymakers debating amongst themselves, or military leaders jockeying for power among the ranks. As Freedman notes, “the problem [is often] not so much civil-military interaction as with that between headquarters and the field commanders.”¹⁶ This latter point is all the more important because a lot of the current debates about civil-military relations center less on generals versus the politicians, but instead on generals caught in between competing political factions. Perhaps the best example here is Gen. Mark Milley’s tenure as the chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Democrats decried Milley’s infamous walk across Lafayette Park with then-President Donald Trump during the height of the Black Lives Matter protests.¹⁷ Later, Republicans cried foul when Milley reached out to de-escalate tensions with China in the waning days of the Trump administration.¹⁸ Both

¹⁵ Lawrence Freedman, *Command*, 171.

¹⁶ Lawrence Freedman, *Command*, 104.

¹⁷ Robert Burns, “Military Chief: Wrong to Walk with Trump Past Park Protest,” *Associated Press*, June 11, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-donald-trump-ap-top-news-politics-dc-wire-965136eb02efd639182a4ad15e06ea55>.

¹⁸ Andrew Desiderio, “Milley: Beijing’s Fears of U.S. Attack Prompted Call to Chinese General,” *Politico*, September 28, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/09/28/milley-china-congress-hearing-514488>.

incidents were civil-military crises, but in both cases Milley was, arguably, doing the bidding of at least a subset of his “political masters.”

In *Command*, Freedman never addresses the issue of how commanders should navigate an increasingly polarized political climate, but these events underscore yet another reason why modern generals must also be politicians apart from the operational and political dynamics he mentioned. Multi-player sets of civil-military relations — filled with politicians with diametrically opposing views — are by definition more challenging than the classic military versus civilian dynamic. And such sets require that generals be more politically aware, becoming politicians of a fashion themselves.

Delegation versus Control

The second defining dichotomy in *Command* is the tension between the competing demands to delegate more to subordinates, on one hand, and the need for commanders retain more control, on the other. As Freedman recounts, commanders have always been torn between these two competing needs, but this tension has, of late, become more acute.

According to Freedman, a host of practical reasons push commanders to delegate. Subordinates often are closer to where the action is and, therefore, may “have a better grasp of the situation.”¹⁹ As such, they are better placed to make decisions, and certainly better placed than a senior commander sitting many miles behind the front. In other cases, commanders delegate out of necessity, either because networks are not robust

¹⁹ Lawrence Freedman, *Command*, 498.

enough, or because of other obstacles — like language barriers in multinational coalitions — that prevent continuous communications between the leaders and the led.²⁰ Above all, commanders delegate to conserve one of their most precious resources: their time. As Freedman remarks, “delegation should provide the senior commander more time to worry about the bigger picture.”²¹

This need for delegation often comes into direct opposition with another operational necessity: control. As Freedman says at the beginning of his book, “Military organizations need strong chains of command because they are about disciplined and purposive violence.”²² If commanders cannot control how their subordinates apply violence, then militaries can devolve into mayhem, and wars no longer serve their strategic aims. While the need for control has long been a part of warfare, Freedman argues that nuclear weapons and the prospect of a local irregular war sparking a third world war have only heightened commanders’ need to manage the risks of unintended escalation.²³

Militaries have wrestled with how to balance these two competing imperatives. The U.S. Army has pushed the concept of mission command, or “the exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander’s intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of unified land operations.”²⁴ In practice, the concept revolves around commanders trusting

²⁰ Lawrence Freedman, *Command*, 498.

²¹ Lawrence Freedman, *Command*, 498.

²² Lawrence Freedman, *Command*, 1-2.

²³ Lawrence Freedman, *Command*, 10, 491.

²⁴ James D. Sharpe Jr. and Thomas E. Creviston, “Understanding Mission Command,” *U.S. Army*, April 30, 2015, https://www.army.mil/article/106872/understanding_mission_command.

subordinates to employ their own initiative within certain bounds and against a defined objective. In theory, at least, mission command should allow commanders to have it both ways — gaining the benefit of delegation while still retaining the need to control violence.

Historically though, the balance between delegation versus control can be better thought of as a pendulum that has swung back and forth over the years, depending on the strategic context. During the Global War on Terror, the pendulum swung firmly back in favor of control. While militaries certainly paid lip-service to the concept of the “strategic corporal” — and there were examples of relatively junior soldiers doing things that had an outsized strategic effect, usually for the worse (see the Abu Ghraib atrocities as a case in point) — by and large, commanders maintained a relatively high degree of control over their subordinates in combat.²⁵

There are at least two reasons for this trend. First, technology has favored control. With a plethora of overhead unmanned aerial systems and robust communication networks, commanders — at the strategic level — could observe and communicate with those at the tactical level. The iconic image of President Barack Obama and his senior national security team all huddled in the situation room watching the raid that killed al-Qaeda head Osama Bin Laden epitomizes this overarching trend.²⁶ This photo — where the most senior of all commanders, the president, is watching a handful commandos conduct a raid

²⁵ Charles C. Krulak, “The Strategic Corporal: Lessons of the Three Block War,” *Leatherneck*, January 1999, 14-16, <https://www.mca-marines.org/wp-content/uploads/1999-Jan-The-strategic-corporal-Leadership-in-the-three-block-war.pdf>.

²⁶ Suzanne McGee, “The Bin Laden Raid: Inside the Situation Room Photo,” *History*, August 30, 2023, <https://www.history.com/news/bin-laden-raid-situation-room-photo>.

a half a world away in real time — documents just how far pendulum of command has swung in favor of control.

Second, and simultaneously, the operational logic of war has allowed for this degree of control. After all, there are only so many commando raids on any given night, so senior leaders can afford to spend the time. Moreover, there have been few operational drawbacks to such an approach. More control has meant slower and more deliberate use of force. Given the strategic assumption behind both the Iraq and Afghanistan wars that force — particularly haphazardly applied — only generated more insurgents in the long run, this may not be a downside.²⁷ Unsurprisingly then, as Freedman notes, upper headquarters staff has grown astronomically to handle this new need for control.²⁸

The better question, though, is to what extent this shift to control is sustainable going forward and if there are reasons to believe that the pendulum will swing back in the other direction. First, the ubiquity of jamming during the war in Ukraine demonstrates that, in future wars, commanders may not necessarily count on an unimpeded, secure communications line with their subordinates, so they will need to delegate more out of necessity.²⁹ Moreover, the war in Ukraine also shows that the scale of conflict — both in terms of geographic expanse and the number of soldiers and platforms involved — can be immense, so commanders could not supervise every tactical action even if they wanted to. Even in future great-power wars, though, commanders will want to exercise some form of control, if only to avoid the potential for nuclear escalation. Nonetheless, it suggests

²⁷ Lawrence Freedman, *Command*, 464-465.

²⁸ Lawrence Freedman, *Command*, 496.

²⁹ See Paul Mozur and Adam Satariano, “Russia Is Increasingly Blocking Ukraine’s Starlink Service,” *New York Times*, May 24, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/24/technology/ukraine-russia-starlink.html>.

that commanders may strike a different balance on the control versus delegation continuum than they have for the past several decades.

Obedience vs. Initiative

Finally, while *Command* is, understandably, mostly about what makes for successful commanders, it also deals — at least indirectly — with the inverse question: what it means to be a good subordinate. This arguably receives a lot less attention. After all, there are many more books on leadership than followership, in both the civilian and military arenas. Still, the underlying dilemma — when to obey versus employ individual initiative — is no less profound.

On the one hand, armies of unthinking automatons rarely do well in war. Throughout *Command*, Freedman describes the dangers of militaries that blindly insist on obedience to the chain of command. He notes how Saddam Hussein’s top-down approach to the Iraqi army led to “wholly dysfunctional military organization,” where junior officers were “fearful of taking any action without specific authorization from a higher command or at least a political officer” and “every issue, however minor, was passed back up.”³⁰ He notes how the Russian military — during its operations in Chechnya and later in Ukraine — has suffered from similar faults.³¹

And while these may be extreme examples, even democracies have had to wrestle with the obedience versus initiative conundrum. Up until 1966, the French Army’s code was,

³⁰ Lawrence Freedman, *Command*, 257, 279.

³¹ Lawrence Freedman, *Command*, 399.

“Orders are executed literally without hesitation or grumbling. Protest by the subordinate is not allowed except when he has obeyed.”³² Afterwards, it was changed to read, “A subordinate faced with an order he believes illegal has the duty to protest it.”³³ And there are plenty of examples where subordinates were expected to and did follow their commanders into the breach, regardless of the wisdom or the consequences.

At the same time, while we may lionize the subordinate who disregards orders in the name of doing what he perceives is “right,” Freedman’s book is filled with accounts of subordinates who exercise personal initiative with terrible consequences. There is the infamous case, during the Korean War, when Gen. Douglas MacArthur disobeyed orders and pushed forward to the Yalu River, ultimately sparking Chinese intervention and his own dismissal.³⁴ Freedman also recounts the exploits of Israeli general, defense minister and ultimately Prime Minister Ariel Sharon — the “very model of insubordination” — who routinely vexed his military and civilian superiors by disregarding orders across multiple wars. Sometimes, as in the case of his crossing the Suez Canal during the 1973 war, or later with Israel’s operation in southern Lebanon in 1982, Sharon’s disobedience had disastrous results.³⁵

Whether history judges subordinates who do not obey as mavericks, or simply as reckless, often hinges on whether or not their bet paid off. While there may be times when it is more or less appropriate for subordinates to exercise initiative, Freedman argues that, from the subordinate’s standpoint, the choice is always a gamble, because

³² Lawrence Freedman, *Command*, 72.

³³ Lawrence Freedman, *Command*, 72.

³⁴ Lawrence Freedman, *Command*, 18-27.

³⁵ Lawrence Freedman, *Command*, 109-141.

Book Review Roundtable: Why a Political Sensibility Is Important to Successful Military Command

<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-why-a-political-sensibility-is-important-to-successful-military-command/>

fundamentally they are operating on only partial information. Writing on the 1982 Falklands War, Freedman remarks how “the campaign highlights how much the perspectives of individual commanders are limited, not only by their experience and background but also by their most pressing concerns at any moment in the campaign.”³⁶ And so, the Falklands campaign looked quite different from London than it did from the front. And while the Falklands may be an extreme example, given the distances involved, the same is likely true for all wars, to varying degrees.

Ultimately, despite the problems inherent within allowing room for initiative, Freedman still believes this is a risk worth taking. As he writes in the conclusion:

The advantage of democratic systems lie not in their ability to avoid bad decisions, either by governments or commanders. Many poor decisions have been recounted here. The advantage lies in their ability to recognize these mistakes, learn, and adapt. Closed systems, in which subordinates dare not ask awkward questions, and in which independent initiatives risk punishment, will suffer operationally.³⁷

Ultimately, the only thing worse than initiative gone awry is not having any room for subordinate initiative at all.

Future of Command: A Series of Timeless Debates

Freedman concludes *Command* with a brief exploration of the future of command in light of new technologies in warfare (most notably the advent of artificial intelligence) and

³⁶ Lawrence Freedman, *Command*, 245.

³⁷ Lawrence Freedman, *Command*, 514-515.

changes in geopolitical circumstances (including the rise of China). *A priori*, it is not clear how any of these changes will impact the three dynamics discussed previously, and Freedman does not offer any definitive answers. For example, artificial intelligence, on the one hand, could allow commanders to have better battlefield awareness and thereby exercise more control over the outcomes. Conversely, artificial intelligence could speed up the pace of warfare and force future commanders to delegate more to machines. Similarly, potential conflict with China could either force commanders to exercise more control (to avoid potential nuclear escalation) or more delegation (given that any war would likely occur over a vast geographical area).

One thing that can be concluded about the future of command, however, is that the three central dichotomies that Freedman highlights in his book — generals versus politicians, delegation versus control, and obedience versus initiative — will continue to define the politics of command, just as they have for the past 75 years. This is one of the central contributions of Freeman’s work: that while command may look different across regimes, locations, and strategic contexts, many of the debates about how to exercise command remain timeless.

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3. What Is the Very Model of a (Post) Modern Major General?³⁸

Susan Bryant

Upon announcing retired Marine Corps Gen. James Mattis as his pick for secretary of defense, President Donald Trump remarked, “He is the closest thing we have to General George Patton.”³⁹ This statement, intended as high praise, reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of both the duties and temperament of an American defense secretary. Nonetheless, it also reflects the American public’s enduring cultural preference for the heroic qualities of generalship: boldness and extreme risk tolerance, curiously coupled with a degree of disdain for the civilians they have taken an oath to obey and serve.⁴⁰

Americans tend to see their commanders as heroic figures, in the mold of John Wayne, physically courageous, rough men of action, rather than in the persona of George Marshall or Colin Powell, diplomatic, detail-oriented, and politically savvy. Lawrence Freedman explores this idiosyncratic American preference for certain personality types in its generals and the consequences for military operations in *Command: The Politics of Military Operations from Korea to Ukraine*, concluding that these qualities are less than ideal in the current domestic and geopolitical environments. In the book’s final chapter,

³⁸ William Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, “I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major General,” *The Pirates of Penzance*, 1879.

³⁹ Michael Gordon and Eric Schmitt, “James Mattis, Outspoken Retired Marine, is Trump’s Choice as Defense Secretary,” *The New York Times*, December 1, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/01/us/politics/james-mattis-secretary-of-defense-trump.html>.

⁴⁰ Jeannie L. Johnson, “Fit for Future Conflict? American Strategic Culture in an Era of Great Power Competition,” *Journal of Advanced Military Studies*, 11, no. 1 (2020): 189, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/796241/pdf>.

Freedman concludes that the rapid rate of technological change has made the extraordinary responsibilities of command more complex and technical with the introduction of disruptive technologies in the space and cyber realm, such as generative AI and the potential for quantum computing. When coupled with the current landscape of near-peer geopolitical competition, the chance for catastrophic miscalculation by a military commander has radically increased, making it even more essential that those chosen to command are equal to the task, displaying political savvy, intellectual depth, and the ability to function well as a member of a team. Freedman observes that, at the outset of World War II, Army Chief of Staff George Marshall chose Dwight Eisenhower to command American Forces in Europe for his “astuteness” and “ability to get along with others” rather than for his courage or heroic qualities.⁴¹ This selection criteria has withstood the test of time and remains equally valid today.

When asked to review *Command*, I expected a thoroughly researched, detail-rich, and engaging volume. And that was what I found. Thinking back to my experience reading Freedman’s *Strategy*, which runs to 768 pages, I also expected it to exceed the average length of an academic tome.⁴² At 624 pages, *Command* is not a work that can be read in a single afternoon. Nonetheless, it is well worth the time for anyone looking to better understand the complicated interplay of politics and military operations in contemporary geopolitics, regardless of political system type. And there is some humor to be found in the noted enduring French cultural preference for generals to be regarded as “attractive” by women.⁴³

⁴¹ Lawrence Freedman, *Command: The Politics of Military Operations from Korea to Ukraine*, (Oxford University Press: 2022), 5.

⁴² Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

⁴³ Freedman, *Command*, 40.

The closest analog to *Command* is Eliot Cohen's *Supreme Command*, a classic for teaching civil-military relations at the university level.⁴⁴ While *Supreme Command* considers four cases in which the chosen commanders can all be classified as political-military geniuses — U.S. President Abraham Lincoln, French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion — who successfully governed wartime democracies, Freedman casts his net more widely. *Command* analyzes 11 cases — some successful, some decidedly less so.

In each, the commander was not necessarily the political leader of a democratic state who has the best interests of the citizens at heart or who is accountable to anyone but himself. This leads to broader conclusions than are found in *Supreme Command*. Freedman includes chapters on the command styles of such nefarious figures as Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. As a result, the lessons that can be drawn from *Command* are more diverse than those found in *Supreme Command* and usefully include some of the shortcomings, such as “coup-proofing,” that are baked into authoritarian governance models. These are good reminders for military officers — including me — who have chafed at the slowness, inefficiency, and even self-contradictory nature of decision-making in democratic societies.

Nonetheless, like Cohen's book, *Command* is ultimately a work about civil-military relations. For contemporary American strategists, politicians, and commanders, Freedman's most significant contribution lies in his exacting exploration of the bewildering intersections of strategic, political, and military cultures, their effects on civil-

⁴⁴ Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (Free Press, 2012).

Book Review Roundtable: Why a Political Sensibility Is Important to Successful Military Command

<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-why-a-political-sensibility-is-important-to-successful-military-command/>

military relations, the preferred way of war, and wars' outcomes. Therefore, the book is a must-read for anyone working at the seams of these uniquely complex spheres.

Command and American Culture

Freedman begins his study by noting the unique qualities of military command, pointing out that, unlike other forms of authority, commands are “authoritative orders, to be obeyed without question.”⁴⁵ He further notes that successful command in combat requires “people of special character,”⁴⁶ for whom courage, physical, and intellectual ability are required in nearly equal measure. Despite these enduring requirements for military command, a particular state’s conception of what constitutes an exceptional commander must be filtered through both its strategic and military cultures, producing commanders whose character reflects the cultural norms and preferences of the states they serve.

Both American strategic and military cultures encompass degrees of dissonance regarding the desired qualities of senior military commanders — on the one hand, requiring them to be obedient guardians of democracy, while on the other, preferring them to embody the persona of an iconoclastic maverick who reflects the spirit of American cowboy culture.⁴⁷ This dissonance, which infuses and complicates American civil-military relations, is a recurring theme in Freedman’s U.S.-focused case studies. He considers the relationship

⁴⁵ Freedman, *Command*, 1.

⁴⁶ Freedman, *Command*, 2.

⁴⁷ Edward C. Stewart and Milton J. Bennet, *American Cultural Patterns: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Nicholas Brealey, 2005), 45.

Book Review Roundtable: Why a Political Sensibility Is Important to Successful Military Command

<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-why-a-political-sensibility-is-important-to-successful-military-command/>

between the character and successes — and failures — of Douglas MacArthur, Eisenhower, Wesley Clark, and Tommy Franks, analyzing how their temperaments, actions, and interactions with their peers shaped the outcomes of the conflicts they oversaw.

In the words of Colin Gray, all political and military activity is encultured, meaning there is no aspect of decision-making or strategic formulation free of cultural context or influence.⁴⁸ This statement requires further explanation. In 2006, Thomas Mahnken observed, “One of the central challenges facing the scholar of any state’s strategic culture lies in determining which institutions serve as the keeper and transmitter of strategic culture. Is it the state? The military as a whole? Or some subset of the military?”⁴⁹ He proposed that strategic culture is best understood as three distinct yet interrelated levels. They are:

[T]hose of the nation, the military, and the military service. At the national level, strategic culture reflects a society’s values regarding the use of force. At the military level, strategic culture (or a nation’s “way of war”) is an expression of how the nation’s military wants to fight wars. ... Finally, strategic culture at the service level represents the organizational culture of the particular service—those values, missions, and technologies that the institution holds dear.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Colin Gray, “Strategic Culture as Context: The First Generation of Theory Strikes Back,” *Review of International Studies*, 25, no.1 (January 1999): 56, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20097575>.

⁴⁹ Thomas G. Mahnken, “United States Strategic Culture,” prepared for the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, 2006, 4, <https://irp.fas.org/agency/dod/dtra/us.pdf>.

⁵⁰ Mahnken, “Strategic Culture,” 5.

Thus, although Carl von Clausewitz correctly observed, “War is a continuation of politics by other means,”⁵¹ members of both the American public and military would prefer that the two spheres remain separate.⁵² Although likely unaware of the theory’s existence, many Americans prefer Samuel Huntington’s objective control model of civil-military relations, in which the military is given autonomy in exchange for professionalization. In this construct, the military is free to make “military” decisions apart from political considerations.⁵³

Although the decision to use force is a fundamentally political one, the preference for this model persists on both sides of the civil-military relationship. This may be why the U.S. military has managed to maintain the trust and confidence of the American people, even as other institutions — from the church to Congress to the Supreme Court — have seen plummeting ratings over the last few decades.⁵⁴ The title of a recent *New York Times* article sums up the prevailing American sentiment pithily: “How do Americans Feel about Politics? Disgust isn’t a Strong Enough Word.”⁵⁵ However, Americans have greater trust in

⁵¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Peter Paret and Michael Howard (Princeton University Press, 1984), 280.

⁵² Risa Brooks, “Paradoxes of Professionalism: Rethinking Civil-Military Relations in the United States,” *International Security*, 44, no. 4 (Spring 2020): 8-10.

⁵³ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Belknap Press, 1959).

⁵⁴ Jeffrey M. Jones, “Confidence in U.S. Institutions Down; Average at New Low,” Gallup, July 5, 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/394283/confidence-institutions-down-average-new-low.aspx>.

⁵⁵ Jack Healey *et al.*, “How Do Americans Feel about Politics? Disgust isn’t A Strong Enough Word” *The New York Times*, October 6, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/06/us/kevin-mccarthy-congress-matt-gaetz-speaker-biden-trump-voters.html>.

the military. For example, in 2022, a Gallup poll found that 64 percent of Americans expressed a significant amount of confidence in the military, well above the presidency at 23 percent and Congress at 7 percent.⁵⁶ Despite the current American disdain for all things political and the enduring preference for “apolitical” military officers, the major general — modern, post-modern, or otherwise — is an inescapably political figure, a fact that the average American seems not to recognize.

While reading *Command*, I was surprised by Freedman’s repeated use of two fictional characters from Anton Myrer’s *Once an Eagle* as shorthand for the debate over the preferred qualities of American military leaders.⁵⁷ The book tells the story of two U.S. Army officers, Sam Damon, the hero who embodies the persona of the apolitical “soldier’s soldier,” and Montgomery Massengale, the villain, an ambitious, political, and self-serving West Point graduate. More than an engaging story, *Once an Eagle* is a touchstone for several generations of Army officers who strove to emulate Damon and knew that being compared to Massengale was a severe insult.⁵⁸ A one-time fixture on the chief of staff of the Army’s reading list, *Once an Eagle* has recently fallen out of favor, although it remains widely admired by generations of Army officers.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Jones, “Confidence.”

⁵⁷ Anton Myrer, *Once an Eagle* (Harper Collins, 2013).

⁵⁸ The introduction to the current edition is written by former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. (ret.) John Vessey, who discusses the profound impact the book had upon him personally, along with generations of military officers.

⁵⁹ *Once an Eagle* appeared on Chief of Staff of the Army Raymond T. Odierno’s reading list as recently as 2015, https://history.army.mil/html/books/105/105-1-1/CMH_Pub_105-5-1_2014.pdf. However, it did not appear on Gen. Mark Milley’s list. The book’s hero, Sam Damon, engaged in a long-term extra-marital affair, a punishable offense under the Uniformed Code of Military Justice, which makes it an odd choice for a

Freedman adopts this Damon-Massengale shorthand in *Command* to demonstrate American military officers' continuing disdain for all things political despite the fact that a senior commander's function is inescapably political. He also notes that, at times, Army officers use the specific "Damon-Massengale" typology to classify each other. For example, Freedman recounts an incident during Operation Allied Force, when then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Hugh Shelton, who would denigrate the character of other officers by calling them "Massengales,"⁶⁰ believed that the NATO Commander, Clark, was behaving too overtly politically and in a self-serving manner. Freedman recounts how Clark's subordinates often referred to him as a "perfumed prince" and describes an occasion when he was explicitly called out as a "Massengale, not a Damon."⁶¹ Freedman then returned briefly to the case study of MacArthur's relief during the Korean War, in which he described MacArthur as the model from which Massengale was created.⁶² Like all typecasting, the absence of nuance is evident. Nonetheless, the fact this "Damon- Massengale" sorting persists among U.S. Army officers demonstrates the continuing misunderstanding and disdain for the political aspects of command.⁶³

"must-read" book. The fact that it was a one-time staple on the chief of staff of the Army's reading lists speaks to the enduring cultural resonance of the leadership traits found within the novel.

⁶⁰ Freedman, *Command*, 339.

⁶¹ Freedman, *Command*, 339.

⁶² Freedman, *Command*, 338.

⁶³ As recently as 2022, I observed an Army general explaining the differences between Massengale and Damon and stating to an incoming cohort of Army strategists that they never want to be a "political, self-serving Massengale."

Book Review Roundtable: Why a Political Sensibility Is Important to Successful Military Command

<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-why-a-political-sensibility-is-important-to-successful-military-command/>

For all that *Once an Eagle* tells a compelling story of good versus bad leadership, the necessary covariation of political savvy and self-serving behavior in contemporary strategic and military culture is detrimental to America's ability to fight and win future wars. Its enduring popularity among military officers is problematic. Certain aspects of the story are inherently obvious. No one wants to be commanded by a self-serving leader who cares more about their own advancement than the welfare of their troops. That said, by conflating "political" with "self-serving," *Once an Eagle* and American military and strategic culture has done itself a profound disservice.

The pretense of Huntington's separate spheres — the political and the military — is a fantasy that persists to America's profound peril. Freedman addresses this reality and its potential consequences in *Command* through the shorthand of the Massengale/Damon dichotomy. He quotes Maj. Gen. Robert Scales, a former commandant of the Army War College, who opines that "the novel conflates two views of careerism ... the good warrior versus the bad staff officer."⁶⁴ Scales further observes the strategic problem these cultural preferences engender: "We need more officers with Courtney's [Massengale's] skills as strategists, officers with the ability to think in time, who are able to express themselves with elegance ... and ... navigate through the swamp of political-military policymaking."⁶⁵ In concurrence with this assessment, Freedman demonstrates the consequences of this preference in a chapter about the U.S. invasion of Iraq that "Franks was a Damon rather than a Courtney Massengale, though in this case, the lack of a political sensibility was a major handicap."⁶⁶ As long as the adjective "political" remains an insult in American

⁶⁴ Freedman, *Command*, 360.

⁶⁵ Freedman, *Command*, 360.

⁶⁶ Freedman, *Command*, 408.

military culture and senior leaders avoid honing their political instincts, their ability to provide comprehensive military advice to their civilian superiors will be compromised.

Looking Ahead: What Is the Very Model of a (Post) Modern Major General?

In the book's final pages, Freedman considers the future of command predominantly through the lens of technological change. He concludes, "Decision-making authority has had to be more widely distributed to empowered subordinates, forming executive teams, closely united around a common understanding of the mission..."⁶⁷ This is due to the increased complexity of military campaigns in the current era.⁶⁸ Freedman forecasts that this trend will likely increase as technology continues to improve. He briefly delves into the critical question of the impacts of generative AI on command, noting the possibility that "non-human logic" may be transformative.⁶⁹ Like the rest of us struggling to understand the potential impacts of AI, he leaves the detailed "how" an open question.

Regardless of the answer, the inherently political nature of command will not change with technology. Thus, the Damon-Massengale dichotomy should be destroyed within American political and military culture, and political savvy should accompany physical and moral courage on the long list of attributes necessary for the [Post] Modern Major General.

⁶⁷ Freedman, *Command*, 494.

⁶⁸ Freedman, *Command*, 509.

⁶⁹ Freedman, *Command*, 505.

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Book Review Roundtable: Why a Political Sensibility Is Important to Successful Military Command

<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-why-a-political-sensibility-is-important-to-successful-military-command/>

4. Calling for Military Leaders with “Political Sensibility” Able to Adapt to the Enduring Nature of War

Sonya Finley

Lawrence Freedman’s latest book, *Command: The Politics of Military Operations from Korea to Ukraine*, offers timely, and even provocative, insights into the complexity of fundamental competencies required of military leaders to successfully serve their countries in wartime. A primary message he conveys is that “political sensibility is an essential part of a professional competence, enabling officers to understand the contexts in which they operate, and how the way they act affects those contexts.”⁷⁰ Highlighting the political nature of operational decisions and activities,⁷¹ Freedman’s tight analytical narratives illustrate the increasing contextual complexity in which military officers operate, notably the fluidity of what is considered the battlefield and the increasing number of factors influencing and being affected by military operations.

Herein emerges a provocative argument regarding military professionalism at the heart of Freedman’s work: Is there a need to reconceptualize the implicit boundaries of military professionalism driven by its warfighting purpose as prescribed by the 20th-century sociologist Samuel Huntington?⁷² With 21st-century technological advances dramatically

⁷⁰ Lawrence Freedman, *Command: The Politics of Military Operations from Korea to Ukraine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 8.

⁷¹ Freedman, *Command*, 513.

⁷² Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1957). See Gen. Gary Brito, “Professionalism Is the Foundation of the Army and We Will Strengthen It,” *War on the Rocks*, March 18, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/03/professionalism-is-the-foundation->

affecting the implications of time and space for military activities and their effects, Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 2019 to 2023, issued a call for the joint force to adapt, innovate, and develop “resilient leaders who can successfully conduct operations with little guidance.”⁷³ In the modern era, success (however defined) may hinge on military leaders developing a military genius that blends warfighting expertise with political sensibility — a phrase that may likely prompt reflexive aversion by some.

Potential Contributions to Professional Military Education

While Freedman’s work explores a host of issues raised by the interplay between political and operational considerations, this overarching question and many of the other questions posed within his 15 chapters may prove useful for senior-level professional military educators. With China as a pacing challenge and multiple acute regional threats, the Joint Chiefs of Staff are calling for “a new trajectory for our professional military education (PME)” motivated by a “driving mindset ... that we are preparing for war.”⁷⁴ To

[of-the-army-and-we-will-strengthen-it/?utm_campaign=dfn-ebb&utm_medium=email&utm_source=sailthru&STOverlay=2002c2d9-c344-4bbb-8610-e5794efcfa7d.](#)

⁷³ Mark Milley, “Strategic Inflection Point: The Most Historically Significant and Fundamental Change in the Character of War Is Happening Now—While the Future Is Clouded in Mist and Uncertainty,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 110 (3rd Quarter, July 2023): 8.

⁷⁴ Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Developing Today’s Joint Officers for Tomorrow’s Ways of War: The Joint Chiefs of Staff Vision and Guidance for Professional Military Education & Talent Management,” May 1, 2020, 2, 6, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/education/jcs_pme_tm_vision.pdf?ver=2020-05-15-102429-817. For specific guidance, see U.S. Department of Defense, Combined Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction 1800.01F, “Officer Professional Military Education Policy,” May 15, 2020, A-4, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/education/cjcsi_1800_01f.pdf?ver=2020-05-15-102430-580 and

Book Review Roundtable: Why a Political Sensibility Is Important to Successful Military Command
<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-why-a-political-sensibility-is-important-to-successful-military-command/>

advance this mindset, the Joint Chiefs of Staff have refined the ultimate focus of professional military education to developing leaders who are “able to discern the military dimensions of a situation” and “recommend viable military options.”⁷⁵ Professional military educators will make choices about how to scope boundaries of military dimensions and options as we reassess and refine curricula and pedagogical approaches. Will we begin to delimit our primary foci to operational battlespaces defined by interacting military doctrines, processes, and technologies? Will we take note of Freedman’s insights regarding the layered contexts in which military operations are situated, adapting previous approaches in which students learn how to think about and act within complex, multi-dimensional environments? Historian Hew Strahan has argued that effective commanders are those who infuse historical, anthropological, and political dynamics of war within their assessments.⁷⁶ With a renewed focus on honing warfighting abilities and capabilities, the time may be right for senior military leaders to deliberate about why political sensibility is an essential part of professional competence for those responsible for understanding war, strategy, and warfighting. Importantly, senior leaders must reflect on what political sensibility entails (and does not) and how to develop this attribute and skill. While Freedman’s argument is not novel,⁷⁷ it is timely with its array of military command vignettes providing fodder for such discussions.

https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/education/jf2030/enclosure_a_dod_inst_outcomes.pdf?ver=2018-12-04-120200-097.

⁷⁵ Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Developing Today’s Joint Officers,” 4. This guidance is codified in the latest “Officer Professional Military Education Policy,” A-2. Personal discussion on war college-level curriculum changes with Gen. Joseph Dunford, USMC (Ret.), 19th chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, via Teams, May 17, 2023.

⁷⁶ Hew Strahan, *The Direction of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 19.

⁷⁷ For example, see Carsten F. Roennfeldt, “Wider Officer Competence: The Importance of Politics and Practical Wisdom,” *Armed Forces & Society* 45, no. 1 (2019): 45-77, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X17737498>.

Book Review Roundtable: Why a Political Sensibility Is Important to Successful Military Command
<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-why-a-political-sensibility-is-important-to-successful-military-command/>

Carl von Clausewitz theorized that war is an interactive human endeavor constrained by three forces of reason, passion, and chance whose interplay is “like an object suspended between three magnets”⁷⁸ with “war and its forms result[ing] from ideas, emotions, and conditions prevailing at the time.”⁷⁹ This analogy of active magnetic forces animating the unique interactions within and between antagonists provides the foundational insight for why political sensibility is essential. Battlefield decisions reverberate beyond the battlefield, and vice versa. Battlefield successes can contribute to victory, but Beatrice Heuser assesses that even Clausewitz would agree that victory “has to contain a very large admixture of politics” to change the will of one’s adversary.⁸⁰ Violent military conflict may be “the final arbiter of the disputes that strategy is meant to address;”⁸¹ however, military activities occur within a larger contest of war, with its three dominant forces, that protagonists seek to win. Warfighting cannot be divorced from the social, geoeconomic, and political realities animating war’s broader contexts.⁸²

⁷⁸ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and eds. Peter Paret and Michael Howard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 89.

⁷⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, 580.

⁸⁰ Beatrice Heuser, “Clausewitz’s Ideas of Strategy and Victory,” in *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 162.

⁸¹ Hal Brands, *The New Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), 7.

⁸² Michael Howard also cautions against ignoring the interactive implications of warfighting, arguing that since the beginning of the 20th century, war has been “conducted in these four dimensions: the operational, the logistical, the social, and the technological.” Michael Howard, “The Forgotten Dimensions of Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1979): 978.

Book Review Roundtable: Why a Political Sensibility Is Important to Successful Military Command

<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-why-a-political-sensibility-is-important-to-successful-military-command/>

Freedman implicitly stresses that the politics of military operations demand senior commanders who develop and exercise *coup d'oeil*⁸³ as well as political sensibility: in other words, commanders capable of reading both the battle and how the battle fits within the war. Yet he chronicles the reluctance of many commanders to do so, informed explicitly or implicitly by an underlying belief in professional supremacy⁸⁴ — a concept opined in Huntington's normative theory of civilian-military relationships. The implicit covenant many subscribe to is that military officials will stay out of the political space and politicians should refrain from meddling in military operations given that warfighting expertise is the domain of the military profession. In a vignette set during the Vietnam War, Freedman describes the propensity for a “military habit” of keeping civilian leaders at arm's length “so their input was not required.”⁸⁵ Even President George W. Bush recalls that the Vietnam War taught him to “be cautious about second-guessing professional military judgments.”⁸⁶ Freedman describes Gen. Hugh Shelton, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 1997 to 2001, as viewing his job decades later as “limited, but traditional,” citing that “I did my best to isolate myself from the political arena and walk squarely down the middle.”⁸⁷ Quoting Gen. Stanley McChrystal, Freedman underlines that “soldiers of his generation ... had been taught to follow Samuel Huntington's advice that ‘a military commander should endeavor to operate as independently of political or even

⁸³ Clausewitz, *On War*, 102.

⁸⁴ Peter D. Feaver, “The Right to Be Right: Civil-Military Relations and the Iraq Surge Decision,” *International Security* 35, no. 4 (Spring 2011): 89.

⁸⁵ Freedman, *Command*, 181.

⁸⁶ Freedman, *Command*, 433.

⁸⁷ Freedman, *Command*, 339. Vignette contrasting Shelton with Gen. Wes Clark who served as the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe of NATO from 1997 to 2000.

Book Review Roundtable: Why a Political Sensibility Is Important to Successful Military Command

<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-why-a-political-sensibility-is-important-to-successful-military-command/>

policy pressures as possible.”⁸⁸ And yet, according to Clausewitzian logic, Huntington’s prescribed norms for civil-military interactions may actually undermine possibilities for strategic success.

Current generations of military leaders continue to affirm the efficacy of Huntington’s “normal” theory, a deeply ingrained norm reinforced in part through the continuum of professional military education. For the preponderance of one’s military career, professional military education focuses on honing the unique military skills involved in effectively exercising violence on behalf of the state at the tactical and operational levels. This is a foundation of the military profession, but it produces two unintended consequences influencing military leaders’ understanding of the implicit boundaries of military professionalism.

The first is a delinking of warfighting from war. With exercises and wargames that focus on military effectiveness divorced from the interactive effects within social, geoeconomic, and political contexts, military leaders become agnostic to reciprocal effects. A reasonable justification may be that such reciprocal effects are not within the military’s scope of responsibility; however, the Department of Defense is one of the few (if only) institutions with a continuum of required education and time dedicated to the study of war, strategy, and warfighting. Civilian officials have no educational requirements that prepare them in advance for considering such interactive forces, although security and strategic studies programs offer similar courses of study to that of senior-level professional military education. Such education does ask its military and its few civilian students to consider that “once war has broken out, two sides clash, and their policies conflict: that reciprocity

⁸⁸ Freedman, *Command*, 512.

generates its own dynamic, feeding on hatred, on chance and on the play of military probabilities. War has its own nature, and can have consequences very different from the policies that are meant to be guiding it.”⁸⁹ Nonetheless, Freedman reminds the reader that senior commanders often hold onto “the soldier’s conviction that success must mean the defeat of the enemy. Yet, while a military victory might be a precondition for meeting a campaign’s political objectives, it can never be sufficient. Soldiers have little say in what is done with their victories. That is up to the government.”⁹⁰

This leads to the unintended consequence of an aversion to the political sphere as voiced by Gen. McChrystal and others.⁹¹ Many of Freedman’s vignettes underscore the enduring tensions between commanders on the ground and those at higher levels weighing multiple concerns beyond the immediate warfight. However, quoting then-Brig. Gen. James Mattis, Freedman writes, “When you’re the service commander in a deployed force, time spent sharing your appreciation of the situation on the ground with your seniors is

⁸⁹ Strahan, *The Direction of War*, 54-55. War college student bodies include a limited number of executive branch civilians.

⁹⁰ Freedman, *Command*, 54. For a pop culture rendering of this attitude, see “The true enemy is war itself,” *Crimson Tide*, directed by Tony Scott (1995), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hur6LcyuTuU>. In the movie, Gene Hackman plays Capt. Frank Ramsey, who intellectually spars with Lt. Cdr. Ron Hunter, played by Denzel Washington. Ramsey asserts that what he learned about Clausewitz while at war college was that the “sailor most likely to win the war is the one most willing to part company with the politicians, ignore everything except the destruction of the enemy.” Denzel Washington’s character reminds him that it is more “complicated,” especially in the nuclear age with the risk of military escalation that would actually undermine leaders’ ability to achieve positive political goals.

⁹¹ Risa Brooks, “Paradoxes of Professionalism: Rethinking Civil-Military Relations in the United States,” *International Security* 44, no. 4 (Spring 2020): 7-44.

like time spent on reconnaissance: it's seldom wasted.”⁹² With each war having a unique character, there is no one-size-fits-all answer for how commanders should listen, relay, and refine their understanding of the multiple contexts in which they operate. Nor is there a simple formula for how commanders should develop and exercise *coup d'oeil* informed by political sensibility. Freedman includes vignettes that illustrate when political sensibility overrides sound military decision-making. Addressing Huntington's fears of politicized militaries, Freedman asks, “Under what circumstances will — and should — senior commanders deny the legitimacy of the civil authority?”⁹³ Chapters analyzing military juntas and autocratic leaders may be useful for students to appreciate the implications of subjective control of the military, a condition that exists today in potential adversaries as well as partners. Freedman concludes that such cases — such as under Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq — represent a “loss of military professionalism resulting from too much time running the country and suppressing domestic opponents”⁹⁴ and how “military professionalism was but a minor consideration in officer recruitment and promotions.”⁹⁵

Senior-level professional military education can provide the opportunities for analysis, reflection, and deliberation regarding why and how political sensibility can be an essential part of commanders' professional competence, as well as its limitations. Each of the senior-level war colleges within U.S. professional military education has a distinctive niche that informs its approach to the study of war, strategy, and warfighting as well as its

⁹² Freedman, *Command*, 423. General James Mattis reflected on his time as commander of Marine Task Force 58 in Afghanistan and the hunt for Osama bin Laden in Tora Bora.

⁹³ Freedman, *Command*, 35.

⁹⁴ Freedman, *Command*, 243.

⁹⁵ Freedman, *Command*, 251.

Book Review Roundtable: Why a Political Sensibility Is Important to Successful Military Command

<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-why-a-political-sensibility-is-important-to-successful-military-command/>

incorporation of civil-military relationships and strategic leader communication skills that underpin political sensibility. Having analyzed war college syllabi from 2019 to 2020, Cornelia Weiss concludes that the state of civil-military relations education is “paltry and may be decreasing.”⁹⁶ With the Joint Chiefs of Staff’s emphasis on military dimensions and military options, educators must think creatively to organically incorporate ways for senior-level students to focus on warfighting while simultaneously developing and exercising political sensibility. Applied history can provide problem-solving opportunities by placing students in the position of commanders and decision-makers at the time. Through complex, multidimensional case studies that include (even center around) warfighting, students can dissect the military aspects of a situation as they critically assess broader, multilayered contexts. Longitudinal cases, such as the U.S. involvement in Iraq from 1990 through the present day, specifically enable students to examine the effects of the interplay of war’s forces over time on political leader and commander assessments, options, and decision-making. Having government civilians enrolled in professional military education programs enhances learning environments, as these students offer unique agency and department perspectives that contribute to developing broader political sensibilities.

⁹⁶ Cornelia Weiss, “The State of Civil-Military Relations Education: Falling Short?” *Hemisferio* 6 (Inter-American Defense College Publications, 2020), https://publications.iadc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/hemisferio/volume6/Civ_Mil_Weiss_22-July.pdf. She analyzed relevant military and civilian undergraduate and graduate programs in this area of study and plans to update her analysis for a longitudinal examination. I examined related syllabi from three war colleges and found that each introduces a spectrum of practitioner and academic perspectives on civil-military relations but often within stand-alone lessons within the core curricula. All war colleges offer electives and/or advanced scholars programs.

Freedman's vignettes underscore the importance of creating command and control and communication structures that enable commanders to listen and communicate with leaders responsible for political and strategic aspects of war, as well as make timely, informed, and effective tactical and operational decisions.⁹⁷ But the vignettes also encourage readers to grapple with assumptions regarding civil-military relations, specifically of appropriate interactions with those beyond the battlefield. Freedman acknowledges that "with good communications, senior political and military figures may be tempted to meddle in decisions best left to local commanders. With poor communications, the temptations were still there, but the meddling was less well informed."⁹⁸ Senior-level professional military education can seek to inculcate a willingness to listen to others as well as critical considerations of appropriate mechanisms to facilitate communications — which may be even more important in the nuclear age — that may place limits on the use of force itself.⁹⁹ With layered contexts and dynamic interactions in play, not to mention the range of interests and evolving technologies, communication skills are becoming more important than ever — a dynamic that senior professional military education must incorporate within academic programs.

⁹⁷ Freedman, *Command*, 5.

⁹⁸ Freedman, *Command*, 244. Chapter on the Falklands campaign.

⁹⁹ Freedman, *Command*, 12.

Book Review Roundtable: Why a Political Sensibility Is Important to Successful Military Command

<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-why-a-political-sensibility-is-important-to-successful-military-command/>

Wakeup Call: Adapt Now, or Lose Later¹⁰⁰

Within the U.S. system, professional military education is the backbone for honing cognitive capabilities and professional competencies throughout officers' careers. Over time, the continuum of learning emphasizes service to joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational environments, intent on developing leaders capable of analyzing national security challenges and generating options for civilian leaders.

After years of critiques, senior-level professional military education is posturing for a new trajectory of preparing for war against a peer adversary.¹⁰¹ Educators are refining content and pedagogical approaches to graduate officers capable of leading the military profession and its warfighting purpose. Freedman's primary contribution in *Command* is to remind military leaders that the political nature of war is interwoven with warfighting. And, as

¹⁰⁰ Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2022 *National Military Strategy*, 1,

https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/NMS%202022%20_%20Signed.pdf. Then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark A. Milley characterized the strategy as a wakeup call to re-focus on “campaigning now and building and sustaining warfighting advantage in tandem. Both are critical to prevail in war.”

¹⁰¹ U.S. Department of Defense, “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy,” 8,

<https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf> See James Lacey, “We’re Doing it Wrong: Returning the Study of War to the Center of Professional Military Education,” *Modern War Institute*, June, 3, 2022, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/were-doing-it-wrong-returning-the-study-of-war-to-the-center-of-professional-military-education/>. Professional military education debates extend beyond the United States. See Steve Maguire, “Professional Military Education Needs Reform. Here’s Why and What to Do,” *Wavellroom*, October, 13, 2021, <https://wavellroom.com/2021/10/13/professional-military-education-reform/>.

Book Review Roundtable: Why a Political Sensibility Is Important to Successful Military Command
<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-why-a-political-sensibility-is-important-to-successful-military-command/>

battlefield boundaries continue to blur¹⁰² and allies and partners become integral to long-term success,¹⁰³ the politics of military operations in the 21st century will become even more complex. Senior-level professional military education should not shy away from preparing future commanders for the intricacies they will face by the nature of operating within multiple contexts as they discern military dimensions of situations and develop military options. By incorporating underpinnings of and cases involving political sensibility, senior-level professional military education programs can continue to “foster critical thinking and analytical skills” as well as integrate “insights from the social and behavioral sciences.”¹⁰⁴

Future senior leaders deserve to wrestle with what it means for commanders to develop political sensibility within the norms of apolitical militaries. How wide and deep should commanders scope contexts and consider the effects of their military decisions? Which voices, outside of traditional military-centric perspectives, may be necessary to shape best military advice? The nature of war endures, yet the character of each war is unique. With a broad range of historical cases that represent the complexity of the politics of military operations, Freedman’s *Command* can be a valuable addition for senior-level

¹⁰² Risa Brooks, “Technology and Future War Will Test U.S. Civil-Military Relations,” *War on the Rocks*, November 26, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/11/technology-and-future-war-will-test-u-s-civil-military-relations/>.

¹⁰³ See The White House, “National Security Strategy,” October 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>; U.S. Department of Defense, “2022 National Defense Strategy,” October 27, 2022, 14, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/trecms/pdf/AD1183514.pdf>; and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, “2022 National Military Strategy.”

¹⁰⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, “2022 National Defense Strategy,” 20.

professional military education, spurring senior military leaders to contemplate how they may develop political sensibility as an essential part of their professional competence.

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