

On command

Anthony King

PAIS, Warwick University, Coventry, England

Command: The politics of military operations from Korea to Ukraine,
by Lawrence Freedman, London, Allen Lane, 2022

Something Rotten, by Jim Storr, Havant, Howgate, 2022

ABSTRACT

The question of military command has always been of central concern to scholars, policymakers and military professionals. Indeed, in the last twenty years, many commentators have expressed deep concern about the failure of western command in Iraq and Afghanistan. In their recent books, Lawrence Freedman and Jim Storr contribute to these debates. This article assesses their analysis of command.

KEYWORDS Civil-military relations; leadership; operations; orders; headquarters

Command has always been central to military operations. In the last two decades, the question of command has been at the forefront of public debates. Utter failure in Afghanistan, enduring crises in Iraq, indecision over Syria, and the collapse of Libya all point to profound flaws in western command. Scholars, commentators, and military professionals themselves have recurrently expressed deep dismay about the failures of command during the Global War on Terror. A huge literature has developed on the topic, dominated by titles like *Why we lost*, *How the west lost its way*, *Unwinnable*, *Fiasco*, *Losing Small Wars*, 'Losing their way', *Blunder*, *Illusions of Victory*, etc.¹ The general sentiment is clear. Command is vital in the prosecution of war, but the west have consistently failed to command successfully in the last two decades. The incompetence of Russian commanders in Ukraine – and the unexpected skill

CONTACT Anthony King ✉ a.king.9@warwick.ac.uk 📍 PAIS, Warwick University, Coventry CV4 7AL, England

¹Dan Bolger, *Why We Lost: A General's Inside Account of Iraq and Afghanistan* (New York: First Mariner Books 2015); Tim Bird and Alex Marshall, *Afghanistan: How the West Lost its Way* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2011); Theo Farrell, *Unwinnable* (London: Vintage 2018); Thomas Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Adventure in Iraq* (London: Penguin 2006); Frank Ledwidge, *Losing Small Wars: British Military Failure in Iraq and Afghanistan* (Yale: Yale University Press 2011); *The Economist* 'Losing their Way' 31 January 2009, <http://www.economist.com/node/13022177>; Patrick Porter *Blunder: Britain's War in Iraq* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2018); Carter Malkasian, *Illusions of Victory: The Anbar Awakening and the Rise of the Islamic State* (Oxford University Press 2017).

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

of their Ukrainian opponents – has only underscored the significance of command to the conduct of military operations today.

Lawrence Freedman's new book *Command: the politics of military operations from Korea to Ukraine* and Jim Storr's *Something Rotten: Land Command in the 21st Century* are timely contributions, therefore. They might be read as the latest contributions to this literature addressing themes which have attracted the attention of so many other scholars. Both books are attempts to diagnose command pathologies and identify successful command practices. In theory, they form a natural pair. Indeed, Freedman cites Storr approvingly in his final chapter in support of his own diagnosis.

Yet, in fact, it is difficult to review these works together. As would be expected from such an eminent academic, Lawrence Freedman's book is a detailed, erudite, thoughtful and wide-ranging scholarly work. The prose is lucid and measured; the arguments and analysis perceptive throughout. The evidence is precise, transparent and clearly presented. It is a serious contribution.

By contrast, despite some pertinent points about process and prolix orders, Jim Storr's work is very different. For instance, there are major evidential concerns. In order to generate the material on which his argument is based, Storr 'conferred with 21 serving and retired officers' from lieutenant colonel to general, from five different countries.² All are completely anonymous. He is right to protect their identities, but since Storr declines to provide any information of his informants' rank, experience, roles, or nationality, the status of much of their evidence is dubious. It would be useful to know which officer made what statement. It is impossible to judge whether they are representative. Elsewhere, his argument is based on uncorroborated personal experience, recorded in 'notes' which Storr took 'as far back as the 1980s'.³ The fact that Storr's work seems to be substantially energised by a compulsion to refute my work on command in ad hominem attacks does not help to appraise its merits. As a result, *Something Rotten* reads as a polemic: strangely angry, even bitter. Nevertheless, notwithstanding radical differences between the two books in tone, methods, purposes, and my own personal sentiments to them, it might be possible to find some common theme within them and to identify how they contribute to the current debates about command.

At the beginning of his book, Freedman defines command as the authority to give orders. Command comes from the Latin word 'mandare' from which 'mandate' derives; from the start, the word was 'synonymous with an order'.⁴

²Jim Storr, *Something Rotten* (Havant: Howgate 2022), xi.

³Storr, *Something Rotten*, xi.

⁴Lawrence Freedman, *Command: the politics of military operations from Korea to Ukraine* (London: Allen Lane 2022), 1.

He accepts that command is not simple though, and that it must necessarily be more than 'handing out orders'.⁵ It involves leadership and *coup d'oeil*. Freedman's definition is a military one; it refers specifically to generals and their legal authority to command. However, reflecting his long-standing interest in strategy, the concern of the book is not military command itself; he is not so interested in military operations and their orchestration in themselves. He concentrates on the politics of military command (as the subtitle signifies). Specifically, Freedman is interested in analysing the relationship between political leaders, as Commanders-in-Chief, and their senior military commanders. That civil-military fulcrum is the book's central question. His concerns are primarily strategic, though he does explore how politico-military relations at the strategic level influence operational decisions: 'The unavoidable political nature of operational decisions has provided this book's core theme'.⁶

Freedman attempts to identify how and when this relationship between political leaders and military commanders works, and when it collapses. To this end, he documents fifteen case studies from the Korean War in 1950 to the current Russo-Ukrainian War, though some studies include more than one episode. He looks at famous cases: MacArthur in Korea, the French in Indo-China and Algeria, Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Yom Kippur War, the Falklands, Saddam Hussain, but also lesser discussed events, such as the surrender of East Pakistan, as well as recent episodes in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Ukraine. In each example, the discussions are lucid and vivid, dissecting the complex dynamics of the predicaments which political and military commanders faced. The book resembles Eliot Cohen's *Supreme Command* in topic and methodology.⁷ The book also has echoes to John Keegan's work, *The Mask of Command*, which discusses a series of ideal typical commanders: the heroic, the anti-heroic, the false heroic. Freedman does not define his cases so formally.⁸ Yet, Freedman's chapters might be read in the same way as a typology of civil-military relations – the good, the bad, and the ugly – in the last seventy years.

Conceptually and empirically, it is an ambitious, rich and wide-ranging work. Of course, the very breadth of the volume also generates a challenge for Freedman. With so many cases, and so much material drawn from radically divergent situations, it is not always easy to hold together the central motif of the work: the relationship between political leaders and military commanders and its effect on operational decisions. Centrifugalism may threaten at a couple of points.

Yet, the richness of the case studies is worth the risk of diffuseness. Freedman periodically signposts his key theme – political-military relations –

⁵Freedman, *Command*, 2.

⁶Freedman, *Command*, 506.

⁷Eliot Cohen, *Supreme Command* (London: Simon Schuster 2002).

⁸John Keegan, *The Mask of Command* (London: Pimlico 1999).

to ensure that readers can see a pattern even in all the kaleidoscopic diversity. In the concluding chapter, Freedman draws his analysis together to define strategic command at the political-military interface. He notes an enduring conundrum; political and military commanders operate under different pressures. Consequently, their relations are almost inevitably fraught. Yet, the reconciliation of those tensions is crucial to the exercise of command. Although the conundrum is eternal, it can be mitigated through two of measures.

Firstly, Freedman rejects simplistic Huntingtonianism. Commanders cannot simply be told what to do by their political masters and get on with it. Objective Control is a myth. In practice, the military simply cannot be separated from political powers: 'The simple division of labour between the civilian policy maker and military political-executor did not work in practice'.⁹ Indeed, 'the consequences of institutional separation breaking down tends to be bad government and an incompetent military'.¹⁰ Dictators have often assumed the role of political and military leadership to obviate precisely that problem. Freedman repeatedly demonstrates that this arrangement which theoretically promises so much, is, in reality, deeply flawed. Any executive efficiencies are vitiated by solipsism, sycophancy and recklessness.¹¹ Saddam Hussein was an egregious example.

For all its obvious faults, Freedman, therefore, prefers, a democratic, professional system;

The advantages of democratic systems lie not in their ability to avoid bad decision, either by the government or commanders. Many poor decisions have been recounted here. The advantages lie in their ability to recognise their mistakes, learn, and adapt.

Freedman concludes: 'If there is a lesson from this book, it is not that civilians and military must stick to their own spheres of influence, and not interfere in the other's, but that they must engage constantly with each other'.¹² Operational objectives must be linked to political goals through constant dialogue between civilian and military commanders at the strategic level.

For Freedman, Dwight Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe during the Second World War, represented an ideal. Eisenhower had little combat experience and could never be described as a great captain; he made 'his name by being astute rather than heroic'.¹³ In a circus of monstrous narcissists, he was somehow able to encourage cooperation: 'He was highly professional in his grasp of how military power should be

⁹Freedman, *Command*, 512–3.

¹⁰Freedman, *Command*, 513.

¹¹Freedman, *Command*, 513.

¹²Freedman, *Command*, 514–5.

¹³Freedman, *Command*, 5.

developed and applied, but what made the difference was that he could work with the combined chiefs of staff of the United States and United Kingdom, maintain the confidence of President Franklin Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and cope with egotistical generals'.¹⁴ The argument has close resonance with Hew Strachan's work on strategy.¹⁵ In the current era, the relationship between President Volodymyr Zelensky and General Zaluzhnyi, which Freedman discusses, would also be an ideal.

Secondly, Freedman promotes integrated operational military command. Once civil and military commanders have agreed upon strategy and are in communication with each other over operations, Freedman lays out – much more briefly – what operational military command itself looks like. For him, operational commanders must depend upon their formal authority to give orders, but they need a grasp of 'informal networks that ensure that the system works effectively'; 'respect for the chain of command, reinforced by the imperatives of military discipline, may not be enough to ensure that they are followed effectively'.¹⁶ Informal relations are crucial to ensure orders are followed, according to Freedman. Consequently, on operations, commanders need to build relations with superiors, peers and subordinates: 'Senior commanders, from commander in chief down, learn to appreciate particular individuals for their loyalty, but also their initiative and intelligence'.¹⁷ In particular, on Freedman's view, the introduction of digital communications has facilitated the rise of increased interaction across the echelons between individual commanders at each level: 'With their networked communications, junior officers could check with superiors before acting and their superiors could expect to be involved'.¹⁸ He describes a system of Mission Command; subordinate commanders do not simply do as they please in the face of uncertainty, but they are always integrated with their superiors in constant dialogue as they develop courses of actions together.

Freedman's model of command is intended to be individualist. It is centred on the commander whose authority to give orders and whose personal powers of intuition and experience are decisive. For Freedman, only empowered, authorised commanders can respond quickly enough to changing situations and to crises – and can issue orders rapidly enough to resolve them.

Something Rotten is an excoriation of western command in the past two decades. Storr claims he is criticising western land command, but in fact, overwhelmingly, his examples are from the UK. It is primarily a tract on the failure of command by the British Army in Iraq and Afghanistan and on subsequent command post exercises. Storr has a simple answer for

¹⁴Freedman, *Command*, 6.

¹⁵Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2013).

¹⁶Freedman, *Command*, 515.

¹⁷Freedman, *Command*, 515.

¹⁸Freedman, *Command*, 496.

everything that has gone wrong; the British Army has forgotten how to command. Headquarters have become cumbersome and process driven; plans and orders are far too long. Staffs are too big. Consequently, headquarters take far too much time trying to generate orders. Commanders cannot make decisions.

Since, for Storr, the growth of process and the expansion of staff is driven purely by arbitrary bureaucratic exigencies, not military need, he argues that this situation can be remedied easily. Headquarters should be radically reduced; swathes of staff officers removed, as headquarters return to their supposedly optimal size in the Second World War or the late Cold War. Plans and orders should be simplified by focusing on the next tactical action, rather than planning longer campaigns: 'if planning is short and quick, contingency planning will generally not be necessary'.¹⁹ War may be chaotic but at any one point, there are only several possible courses of action. For a good commander, it should be obvious what to do. Issues of coordination and sequencing are apparently quite straightforward. Consequently, Storr advocates a system of 'naturalistic decision making', based on experience and intuition.²⁰

The approaches of Freedman and Storr differ in many ways. Yet, Freedman and Storr converge on a broadly common position. They seek to locate command in the agency of the commander; they see individual intelligence and imagination, and informal networks as decisive. Their emphasise on the individual agency of the commander seems to arise from a common understanding of the character of war. Storr asserts that 'warfare has long been utterably complex'²¹; it is chaos. Similarly, in more measured tones, Freedman argues that chance, luck, uncertainty, and randomness are irredeemably parts of war. Since contingency dominates in war, it can be mitigated only by individual agents, who have the authority and the freedom to react and innovate at will. Freedman and Storr recommend open, flexible command systems, organised around individual commanders who are empowered to make and enact decisions swiftly and to issue orders immediately.

Because Freedman and Storr promote an individualised vision of command, my concept of 'Collective Command' is an obvious target for both of them. Both scholars imply that in my 2019 book, *Command*, I was arguing for a consensual system of command. Here, it was putatively best for commanders to defer to staffs, deputies and subordinates who had appropriated the responsibilities of command for themselves. Command has become by committee; orders negotiable.

¹⁹Storr, *Something Rotten*, 98.

²⁰Storr, *Something Rotten*, 90, 36.

²¹Storr, *Something Rotten*, 35.

Evidently, I was not clear enough about my definition of command, for this is not what collective command means. I have to accept responsibility for encouraging a false reading of my work. However, the 'collective' system of command which I was describing in the twenty-first century, in no way undermined the powers, responsibilities and duties of the commander. Collective command was never intended to mean command by committee. On the contrary, throughout the book, I repeatedly emphasised that in the twenty-first century, as the span of command has expanded, the commander was more important than ever. In this complex politico-military system, it was essential to have one point of reference; that was the commander. Moreover, precisely because political and even military direction had often been less than clear in the twenty-first century, commanders have had a duty to define their own missions, in a way which their forebears in the twentieth century were often absolved: they were simply told what to do, as Storr himself emphasises.

In a collective command system, the commander lies at the very centre. I completely agreed with David Petraeus's description: 'Contemporary operations are commander centric, network-enabled. The network is not the centre. The commander is'.²² My concept of collective command in no way disparages, denigrates or demotes the commander – as Freedman and Storr suggest. On the contrary, I emphasised the point repeatedly. In discussing counter-insurgency I noted: 'The distribution of decision-making authority which seems have been evident in Kandahar does not imply that somehow commanders have become mere bureaucrats who make decisions by the consent of a command board ... On recent counter-insurgent operations, the military chain of command has been superseded by an operational politico-military orrery. As a result, the role of the commander in mission definition has become pronouncedly more important'.²³ Analysing 1st Marine division's role in Iraq invasion in 2003, I observed: 'James Mattis is one of the most charismatic and competent commanders of the recent era. There is no question that he dominated 1st Marine Division during the March Up. He was the reference point for this formation'.²⁴

However, precisely because the span of command has expanded so that even a tactical land action now involves air, maritime, cyber, space, informational and political dimensions, the management of operations, has become more challenging. More decisions have to be made about more things, often more quickly. Consequently, in response to this functional pressure, western militaries, with the US in the lead, have expanded their headquarters, appointed deputies, empowered staff officers and subordinates to share

²²Anthony King, *Command: The Twenty-First Century General* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2011).

²³King, *Command*, 247–8.

²⁴King, *Command*, 285.

some of the decision-making pressure with their commanders. In such an environment, successful commanders have sought to create cohesive command teams, unified around a single mission, integrated between echelons, and across formations and services. The result is a historically distinctive practice of command: no better or worse than more individualised command systems in the twentieth century; just different, with its own strengths and weaknesses – including a potential slide towards process, observed by Storr.

It would seem that Freedman and Storr have misinterpreted my concept of collective command. I blame myself. However, the result of my unclarity is that, ironically, Freedman comes much closer to my concept of collective command than he may realise. His work is a subtle dissection of the relationship between the political leader and the military commander. He categorically demonstrates that successful military operations rely on close integration between both these actors. Consequently, the orders, which military commanders eventually give actually arise out of interactions with their political masters. On Freedman's own account, an effective order is not simply, then, a manifestation of the individual authority of military commanders – although it must be impressed with their legal authority – but is, in fact, the product of a partnership between the civil and military commanders. Even though only a commander can issue an order, it is a collective decision; produced not by committee or nebulous consensus, but by intense collaboration, negotiation and discussion between two potent executives. If we compare Freedman descriptions of the sacking of MacArthur in 1951 and McChrystal in 2010, it might be possible to conclude that this politico-military partnership has deepened and thickened. Might it be possible to say it has become more collective?

Indeed, it is particularly interesting how closely Freedman's description of contemporary operational command, facilitated by digital communications, converges with my own position on divisional command. Freedman believes that operational command should be built around individual commanders integrated closely with subordinates so that they can respond quickly and coherently to the unexpected. Freedman sees these relations, facilitated by digital communications, as primarily informal – with orders acting only as a formal spine. Informal relations can be important but, on my analysis, successful divisional command depends on far more than informal, ad hoc relations between individuals; the execution of command extends well beyond orders, vital though they are. Professional command teams are forged by shared doctrine, formal rank structures, precise divisions of labour, authorised roles, routine, staff-work, intense training, systematic horizontal and vertical communication, and careful rehearsal. Nevertheless, although I believe operational command much more formal than Freedman implies, it seems we substantially share a view on command in the twenty-first century.

There is one final unavoidable question. What do these books tell us about the current Russo-Ukrainian War? On 24 February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. An intense war has been raging since that time. Against all predictions, the Russian invasion has failed in its strategic aim of destroying the Zelensky government and it has struggled badly to annex eastern and southern parts of the country. The war has once again raised the question of command to the forefront. It will be fascinating to compare Russian and Ukrainian command systems when more evidence is declassified. However, some initial observations are evident. Russian generalship has failed egregiously. One of the many problems of the Russian Army seems to have been its command system. The operation has been coordinated by a steep but disaggregated command pyramid. Commanders in theatre with responsibility for only limited sectors have been under direct control of Putin. There has been little integration between echelons, and across the services and formations. The Russians have failed to conduct an integrated, joint campaign; they have fought a series of local tactical battles. Freedman's diagnosis about the failures of dictatorship seem entirely accurately. No good can come of the fusion of political and military leadership, as Putin's autocracy shows.

By contrast, the Ukrainian command system has triumphed. This was surprising given their handling of the war in the Donbas in 2014, when they were responsible for some fiascos, like the disaster at Zelonipihlya in July 2014 when they lost two brigades to a Russian rocket strike. They have learnt a lot. It has also now become public knowledge that they have been heavily dependent on the US. The US has admitted that it has given them intelligence with which they have struck Russian generals so successfully. It is possible the assistance runs deeper. The Ukrainian force seems to have developed a robust and responsive system of command, under western mentorship. At the strategic level, Freedman is surely correct that Zelensky and General Zaluzhnyi have forged a crucial relationship.

However, at the operational level, things are very interesting. In the first six months of the war, Ukrainian forces conducted a successful defence of their country. They fought from fortified urban areas, striking Russian forces in the deep. They repelled the Russians from Kyiv and slowed their advances elsewhere. They inflicted appalling losses on the Russians in this way. On 29 August 2022, they launched a counter-offensive around Kherson, before the main blow fell east of Kharkiv. In a month, they had taken back 6000 square kilometres of terrain. The counter-offensive was supported by sophisticated information operations and deep strikes on Russian command nodes, logistical hubs, and artillery batteries.

The sophistication of the counter-offensive suggests that the Ukrainian may have institutionalised a highly professional system of operational command. It seems to be directed by a Joint Task Force at the highest level, under General Zaluzhnyi, with a series of subordinate, presumably brigade and,

perhaps, divisional commands below that. In short, although, at this point, it can be only inferred, they seem to have adopted an integrated, joint system of command which has close echoes which the kind of operational command system which Freedman has described in his book – and which I analysed in mine. Commanders have communicated across – and between – the echelons closely to synchronise their actions. It may not matter so much whether we use terms like, mission command, collective command or operational command, to classify such systems. It is more important that we look carefully at how land warfare and military operations are now actually conducted in order that we can recognise how and why the practice of command might be distinctive today. Lawrence Freedman book certainly helps us to do that. In its very sermonising about how everything was so obviously better in the past, maybe Jim Storr’s work does too.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Bibliography

- Bird, Tim and Alex Marshall, *Afghanistan: How the West Lost Its Way* (New Haven: Yale UP 2011).
- Bolger, Dan, *Why We Lost: A General’s Inside Account of Iraq and Afghanistan* (New York: First Mariner Books 2015).
- Cohen, Eliot, *Supreme Command* (London: Simon Schuster 2002).
- Farrell, Theo, *Unwinnable* (London: Vintage 2018).
- Freedman, Lawrence, *Command: The Politics of Military Operations from Korea to Ukraine* (London: Allen Lane 2022).
- Keegan, John, *The Mask of Command* (London: Pimlico 1999).
- King, Anthony, *Command: The Twenty-First Century General* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2019).
- Ledwidge, Frank *Losing Small Wars: British military failure in Iraq and Afghanistan* (Yale: Yale UP 2011).
- Malkasian, Carter, *Illusions of Victory: The Anbar Awakening and the Rise of the Islamic State* (Oxford: Oxford UP 2017).
- Porter, Patrick, *Blunder: Britain’s War in Iraq* (Oxford: Oxford UP 2018).
- Ricks, Thomas, *Fiasco: The American Adventure in Iraq* (London: Penguin 2006).
- Storr, Jim, *Something Rotten* (Havant: Howgate 2022).
- Strachan, Hew, *The Direction of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2013).
- The Economist*. Losing Their Way. 31 January 2009. <http://www.economist.com/node/13022177>