



COMMANDER'S MESSAGE

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LtCol Dianna F DiToro
USMCR

Military planning neophytes learn in mission-type orders or in mission command that the “in order to” lays central to the commander’s intent and holds the key to mission success. The essential mission-type order and planning process remains unchanged despite the increased complexity of the modern battlefield. Commanders can no longer assume that audiences know what their force(s) mean by their actions or inactions. The commander has no choice in providing messaging through their actions and inactions; but they do have a choice to provide messaging in a deliberate and purposeful way. To achieve this, this paper recommends that a commander provide his or her initial commander’s message as an input to the mission analysis phase simultaneously with issuing the commander’s intent.

Fire the demarche!

When the author first started her tour at US Space Command (SPACECOM) in August of 2020, the command was maturing at a rapid pace its first year. Serving as the first SPACECOM Joint Integrated Space Team (JIST) director embedded at US Africa Command (AFRICOM), the author represented an entire combatant command and received initial guidance directly from the SPACECOM combatant commander, General James Dickinson. He gave three key pieces of guidance: “Be a leader. Over-communicate. Go see Chris Wendland.” At the time, Colonel Christopher Wendland was the Joint Fires Element (JFE) chief.

Contact was made with COL Wendland while he was coordinating inputs for a demarche to be released in response to adversary aggression in space. This example of information and messaging coordinated by the JFE Chief left an impression. In a retrospective conversation, COL Wendland, now retired, relayed additional details: “I was running an OPT [operational planning team] that included State [Department of State] and several of our allies to release a coordinated demarche from all of the partnering nations denouncing the reckless behavior in space. It was a difficult process to get our messaging and timing into alignment and it had not been done before. We were developing the process as we went along.” He acted and coordinated informational effects with the eye for integration and massing of effects one expects from an expert in fires.

The process they developed yielded a demarche issued by the US State Department, followed quickly by demarches of identical sentiment from five partner nations. This whole of government approach in coordination with allies produced a powerfully reinforced message, “we [much more powerful than “I”] denounce your irresponsible testing in space as reckless behavior that endangers the global population.” This serves as an example of messaging providing information fires. This demarche also showcases the criticality of aligning with other US government (USG) entities as well as allies. The commander’s message issued by GEN Dickinson, “Never a day without space,” laid the foundation.

Another example from recent history is the phrase that then Major General James N. Mattis, USMC invoked during Operation Iraqi Freedom II in the initial Fallujah counter-insurgency operation, “No better friend; no worse enemy.” The author received his guidance personally while serving as the air support liaison team officer for Regimental Combat Team-7 aboard Al Asad Air Base, Iraq. This message supported the mission of clearing the city of the entrenched insurgency. This stands as a clear example of two different aspects of the commander’s guidance; his mission and his message. While this message was not crafted as a “fire,” per se, it certainly bolstered and added to his commander’s intent of ridding the city of Fallujah of the hostile insurgents concentrated there. This message brilliantly communicates a specific narrative to both internal and external audiences in an unusually concise manner. Mattis boasts an almost mythical figure and yet this paper offers that the principles of mission command and existing Joint doctrine provide the tools necessary for other commanders to craft similar messages.

Mission Command

Mission command provides a commander-centric approach to planning and mission accomplishment and lays the foundation for a commander-centric message. In his White Paper on Mission Command, General Martin Dempsey explains to the force, “In mission command, the commander must blend the art of command and the science of control, as he, supported by the staff, integrates all joint warfighting functions.” The Chairman reminds the reader that the centrality of the commander is supported by a staff and that he/she must integrate their inputs.

Despite a long history as an element of national power, information as a joint function showed up relatively late in doctrine. In July 2017, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff issued a change to Joint Publication (JP) 1, Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States and added information to the list of warfighting functions,

The information function encompasses the management and application of information and its deliberate integration with other joint functions to influence relevant-actor perceptions, behavior, action or inaction, and support human and automated decision making. The information function helps commanders and staffs understand and leverage the pervasive nature of information, its military uses, and its application during all military operations. This function provides [joint force commanders] the ability to integrate the generation and preservation of friendly information while leveraging the inherent informational aspects of all military activities to achieve the commander's objectives and attain the end state.

JP 1 defines information as a joint function and tool to effect human behavior. In September of 2017, Secretary of Defense, James Mattis added,

Information is such a powerful tool that it is recognized as an instrument of national power: the elevation of Information as a joint function impacts all operations. It signals a fundamental appreciation for the military role of information at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels within today's complex operating environment.

Mattis points out that information, as a tool, always existed but that the joint force's acknowledgement and "elevation" of its importance places it squarely as foundational to the study, planning and execution of military operations. The creation of its own collection of doctrine and guidance signals the operationalization of its preeminence. The volume of subsequent doctrinal editions other written works explain operations in the information environment, their planning, virtues, risks and best practices. One of the key instruments mentioned in these documents is the narrative.

Message to Narrative

The narrative tells a story. For millennia, humans learned chiefly through stories as without them, "language is just a sequence of sounds ." In military operations these stories, or narratives, "express ideologies, policies, and strategies and are used to gain or deny popular support...An effective narrative and induced long-term effects on an audience's beliefs, attitudes and behavior." According to RAND, a command narrative "creates a framework that anchors all of the command's activities-everything from

messaging to exercises.” Such a narrative must align with what the commander wants to communicate to his/her internal and external audiences.

The Joint Publication 3-04, Information in Joint Operations, places an emphasis on narratives and describes the benefits and methods for narrative development by the staff. The publication dedicates an entire appendix to narrative development and this appendix addresses narrative development as a planner responsibility. “If planners fail to provide a narrative that provides an observer with context for sense-making, observers will use their own narratives to explain the military events around them, which may or may not advance the commander’s overall intent .” Foregoing purposeful messaging for military events invites uncontrolled assumptions and a loss of informational focus.

The above statement has several inferences: that the narrative is separate from commander’s intent, that the narrative is additive to and supports the commander’s intent, and that the creation of the narrative rests with the specialized information operations planners. In these inferences exists a disconnect. Planners are charged with creating a full operational narrative with only half of the input necessary from the commander. The commander should supply the task and purpose of the mission and the message they want their audiences to accept about the military actions and inactions taking place. Armed with that message, information operations staff and planners then further develop the command narrative.

If we re-examine the OIF II example from MajGen Mattis, we understand that the message from the commander sets the foundation for planners to create an overall narrative. This message, while originally crafted for one mission, performed other functions: it captured the essence of what Mattis expected his Marines would display in their actions and inactions; it expressed how the commander desired external actors to perceive American forces; and it provided guidance to the force throughout the entire campaign. RAND concurs and wrote, “command narrative is broader than the commander’s intent for a single operation .”

If the narrative transcends the commander's intent it should be commander-informed at its initiation. Placement of a commander's message as a product of mission analysis should also improve the speed and relevance of the overall command narrative "because it is hard to counter an accepted and engaging narrative, it is important to get the command's version of events out first" and often . In order to not relinquish influence to adversaries, it is important to the commander provide his or her guidance in the form of a commander's message in the initial stages of planning rather than after staff planners extrapolated a narrative solely from the commander's intent.

Commander's message as commander-centric

At the risk of overloading the commander with tasks and outputs; the risk in NOT producing a message or narrative is greater than the risk incurred by the time taken to produce one. Reaching this conclusion was informed by experiences and statements like, "Modern C2 systems transport and deliver information in quantities that can easily overwhelm the commander. Technology cannot replace the human ability to create and make intuitive judgement." If the commander is at risk for overload, so too are his or her troops. Clear and focused guidance allows for "intuitive judgement" to take place. Integrating the concept of a commander's message into the joint planning process and into the psyche of the collective joint force will take time and effort. Exercises and rehearsal could and should improve the sophistication of commanders with the consistent practice of the weaponization of information. Academia, industry, information operations professionals and military training and education create numerous resources and opportunities for the study and practice in crafting a commander's message; it will, however take bold, joint leadership to champion such an initiative. We also need to understand the risks when messaging is not purposefully structured but misinterpretation and a loss of control over the narrative remain difficult to quantify.

Placing the commander's message co-equal in importance and timing in the planning process follows the commander-centric principle of mission command and improves the likelihood and quality of the joint force intentionally integrating information as a joint function. Research, doctrine, guidance and professional staff all already exist to support this addition. We identify and draw from historical examples

to help inspire and inform commanders on the art and science of creating a message and military training and education can support this growth area. Information has become too important in the “Information Age” and the risk of not acknowledging this with focused consideration ignores the realities of the operational environment.

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