

1972

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Recommended Citation

Burke, Arleigh A. (1972) "The Art of Command," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 25 : No. 6 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol25/iss6/3>

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THE ART OF COMMAND

The last few years have seen a great many changes in the values and attitudes of American society, and these changes have necessarily had an impact on the military. Every organization, however, be it military or civilian, must live by certain fundamentals known for centuries if it is to enjoy success. While developments in our society as a whole must remain a concern for every individual, the specific duty of the military man is to ensure that the organizational principles of discipline, authority, responsibility, loyalty, and a willingness to perform be upheld.

A lecture delivered

by

Admiral Arleigh A. Burke, U.S. Navy (Ret.)

Last spring I had the privilege of spending some time in Australia, Indonesia, and the Solomons. Although the object of that trip was to inspect copper and nickel mines and survey prospects for future mines, I did find time to revisit the old battlefields of Guadalcanal, Bougainville, and the other islands. Flying over calm tropical seas, one paused to reflect over the desperate struggles fought there and where the losers, both American and Japanese, still lie in the wreckage of their ships on the ocean floor.

Many changes have occurred in the area. There are huge mines, numerous roads and hotels, and the people who live there now know very little about the war fought 30 years ago. They have forgotten how close the outcome of

those battles was, and they never think of what might have happened had we not won decisively.

Two months later, in July, I went to Korea with the other two survivors of the first meeting of the Military Armistice Committee in Kaesong for the 20th anniversary of that first meeting. General Paik, Korean Army, General Craigie of our own fine Air Force, and I traveled through Korea from Pusan to Panmunjom. New roads, big hotels, and all sorts of factories now dot the entire countryside. As we revisited Panmunjom, where the conference tents have long since been replaced with permanent buildings, we naturally talked of those first days so long ago. We were briefed by the present occupants of our old jobs. After 20 long futile years of

negotiations, there is no peace. Even today the Republic of Korea lives with the prospect of another attack, another invasion, whenever the North Koreans think the time is ripe. Korea was a war we did not win.

Those two trips to old battle scenes are why I am here today. Although I gave up making speeches a year ago, I still feel that the subject of the Art of Command needs to be more fully discussed. Some fundamental points must be reemphasized.

There have been tremendous physical changes in the world in the last 30 years, but there have been even greater changes in the social structure, in the attitudes of our people. This change in attitudes is going to have a much greater impact on the future of our country than all the advances we have made in the physical sciences.

Undeniably, the military as a part of the greater national society necessarily reflects the values and the attitudes of the whole. The great social forces at work in our society today are creating new problems with which the military must contend. Nevertheless, there are some fundamentals of command that remain true, and it is time that the military took a good solid look at them again—as well as the consequences if these fundamentals are ignored.

There are many factors that influence the outcome of a campaign or a battle, but none of the factors is more important than the exercise of proper command. Every man in the military services spends his whole time in the service seeking to improve his role in the command system, both by being ready to carry out in an effective manner all orders he may receive and by being capable and willing to give orders to his unit to further the operation his outfit is undertaking.

Important to the exercise of proper command are the systems used. The services continue to try to improve their systems even though sometimes the

changes introduced do not work as well as the system did before the changes were made. The organization of the services is based on the necessity for a clear-cut, effective command system—and by this I do not mean a management system.

As important as the organization and command system is to the success of a unit, however, it is not nearly as important as the attitude of the people in the system. In every organization, from a church to a combat unit, the attitude of the members of the organization will be the determining factor in the success of the organization. A "gung-ho" outfit will be effective when a better equipped, sluggish, or contentious outfit will fail. The exercise of proper command is just as essential for noncommissioned and petty officers as it is for general and flag officers. As a matter of fact, it is more important for the lower echelons, for no matter how good the high command is, the organization cannot succeed unless the lower echelons have the loyalty, willingness, and skill to carry out their orders in the proper fashion.

All people in a military organization must understand the necessity of command and discipline if that organization is to be successful. Seamen and soldiers, more than any other group, must understand this. When there is no command, no discipline, there is no military organization. There is no place in a military organization for disobedience, and if disobedience is permitted for whatever reason, the organization rapidly deteriorates to an uncontrollable mob. Unfortunately we have heard of such cases in our own services over the last few years. If this pattern continues, the ultimate result is predictable.

Command responsibility is not possible without command authority. A corporal must have the authority to exercise his command responsibilities or he cannot direct his squad or his unit. The chevron he wears is a mark of his

authority as it is a mark of his responsibility. If he has been given the authority and cannot, or will not, exercise his responsibilities, then he must be removed and another man trained to carry out his duties.

Of course, senior commanders, including fleet and area commanders, need authority too if they are to perform successfully. If the local commander on the spot must refer most of his problems with recommended solutions back to Washington for decision, either decisions will be delayed to the point where a once right solution will no longer be timely, and therefore wrong, or the recommended decision is modified enough so that it is no longer a solution. Occasionally, problems referred back to Washington for solution do result in timely and correct decisions, but the odds are against it. From what I have heard, in the last few years, senior commanders have had too little authority to make decisions, and quite naturally their operations have suffered.

This is not to say that local commanders should be free of all restrictions on their authority. Some restrictions must be retained, but they should be formulated as more general policy guidelines within which the local commander must operate. If he does not, he should be replaced. If, instead of living by this old fashioned idea of requiring performance of a commander some higher authority issues orders that should be given by a subordinate, a lot of very undesirable things are apt to occur. First, the initiative of the subordinate commander is sapped. It is obvious his seniors do not have confidence in his judgment or his ability. Second, his command realizes he is no longer boss, and his image in their eyes suffers. Finally, senior commanders usually do not have time to follow through on the execution of orders carried out far away, and that always yields poor results. In short, the proper

orders are frequently not given, and the orders that are given are not well executed.

The same results occur in very small commands too. If the first class petty officer starts issuing directions that should be given by the third class, the third class petty officer loses his effectiveness and the first class is not working in his own rate but in a lower one. Such actions short circuit the chain of command—nobody knows who has the responsibility—and it is expensive as well. The Government is paying for two petty officers and utilizing only one, and in these days this amounts to squandering our most precious and expensive commodity—people.

I have also heard there is a growing tendency to bypass commands. Everybody who has taken elementary training in any organization, civilian or military, should know the evil effects of this pernicious practice. It does not take long before the whole command is demoralized for the simple old reason that responsibility and authority cannot be separated.

I have said enough about the necessity of investing the proper authority in all commands, from the lowest to the highest, if our mission is to be accomplished. Now I would like to bear down a little on the responsibilities of commanders, and again I would like to stress that these principles are as important to noncommissioned commands as they are to Fleet and Army commands.

In every organization, individuals occupying various positions have specific jobs to do. The assignment of duties may be by job description sheets, organization manuals, or by custom, but people must know who does what if the organization is to function properly. Similarly, standards must be set and quality control established for every job. There must be some yardstick of performance. The only difference between civilian organizations and military organizations is that failure in a civilian

organization may mean the ruin of a company or an industry, while failure in a military organization will too often result in the collapse of a nation, either immediately or more gradually. Many times in military operations there is only one chance to succeed or fail, and with the consequences of failure being what they are, military men had better be as certain as they can that operations undertaken are successful.

This leads to the most important responsibility of every commander—the responsibility to insure that the standards he sets for his unit are high enough to enable his unit to be successful and, as a corollary, to reward those subordinates who do extraordinarily well and to punish those who fail. For years we in the military have gone all out in rewarding people. We have emphasized rewards so much that many times people are rewarded for doing an ordinary job without distinction. On the other hand, we have neglected to punish those who fail to measure up to high standards, even when that failure is willful. Every man who has ever commanded any unit, even the most minor of small units, knows that he must demand proper performance, and if he does not get it he must take whatever action is necessary to get it. Men must either qualify for their jobs or lose them. Subordinates must perform. If they cannot, they must be trained. If they still cannot do the job, they must be fired or given a job they can perform. That part is not too difficult to accomplish. The hard part is what to do with men who can but do not do their duty. It is a commander's obligation and not just his prerogative to punish willful neglect of duty. The voice of duty is a stern voice. If punishment is not inflicted quickly and surely on transgressions, the good men in the unit suffer from the wrong attitude of poor people. Nothing lowers the effectiveness of a unit faster or further than acceptance of disobedience or deliberate poor per-

formance. *Permissiveness has no virtue in a military organization.* Requirements for performance should be reasonable, just, and fair, but an individual in the military cannot decide which requirements he will meet and which he will ignore nor determine under what conditions these requirements will be met. Reliability of performance, loyalty, and willingness to do his very best to further the mission of the unit has been the hallmark of members of good military units since the dawn of history.

As you can see, I am a traditionalist. I am convinced that the lessons of the past are proper guides for the future. I do not believe in fragging or in mob control. I am even convinced that strict discipline is a necessary ingredient in a good military unit. I can appreciate the meaning of the expression, "A good

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Adm. Arleigh A. Burke, U.S. Navy (Ret.), is a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy (Class of 1923), of the Naval Postgraduate School, and holds an M.S. in engineering from the University of Michigan. His early experience led him to command of several destroyer squadrons in World War II, the last being Destroyer Squadron 23 which participated in 22 separate engagements. Following this assignment, he reported as Chief of Staff and Aide to Commander Carrier Division 3, later designated Task Force 58. After World War II he had numerous assignments with the fleet and in Washington—including Commander Cruiser Division 5; Commander Naval Forces, Far East; Director, Strategic Plans Division, Office of the Chief of Naval Operations; and Commander Destroyer Force, U.S. Atlantic Fleet. Admiral Burke served as Chief of Naval Operations from 1955 to 1961; since his retirement he has assumed executive positions in business and with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Georgetown University.

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ship is a taut ship." I am also sure a lot of my subordinates were correct in their descriptions of me.

Nothing I have said today is new. The fundamentals of command have been known for centuries. They have been tested by many societies, many nations, many commanders in many languages. Sometimes they have been ignored, and that is as good a reason as any to study the leaders who failed in the past as well as those who succeeded.

It is also true that every organization must follow essentially the same principles if it is to achieve success. The bigger the organization, the more important those principles are. The principles apply to fraternal organizations, churches, industrial organizations, and universities. They also apply to governments, all components of government. To the degree they are not applied, confusion exists, morale and initiative of the organization suffer, standards of conduct and performance vary within the organization, and the performance of the organization deteriorates, losing the respect and admiration of those who are in the organization as well as those

outside of it.

What happens in our society as a whole is, of course, of concern to all of us, but we in the military have a very specific duty—the obligation to insure that our own organization maintains its effectiveness.

I know you expected a lecture on leadership and high command. That is not a different subject, it is just a limited one. It is wise to study the lives of great commanders. They were men of widely different characteristics, different backgrounds, with different systems, but they had some characteristics in common. They were professionals. They knew strategy and tactics, the use of weapons, the use of speed, the value of surprise. They all had initiative. They took action. They were audacious. They knew the capabilities and limitations of their commands. They had a lot of other common traits.

I have known personally quite a few of these great men in our own services and some from other nations. I have never known one who did not demand performance. I have never known one who was permissive.



The commander must try, above all, to establish personal and comradely contact with his men, but without giving away an inch of his authority.

Erwin Rommel, 1891-1944