A Supreme Commander
for the War on Terror

By KEVIN D. STRINGER

Left to right:
Soldiers patrolling Bayji, Iraq
Secretary Rumsfeld addressing Veterans of Foreign Wars
Chairman Pace briefing press upon return from Middle East

U.S. Army (Joshua R. Ford)

U.S. Air Force (D. Myles Cullen)

U.S. Air Force (D. Myles Cullen)

Before September 11, 2001, U.S. defense was centered on fighting regionally focused conventional wars against state opponents such as Iraq and North Korea. After September 11, the defense reality changed to unconventional conflicts on a global scale against primarily nonstate actors. Beginning in late 2005, the term *Long War* began to appear in security documents such as the National Security Council's *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq* and in statements by the Secretary of Defense and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Robert Cassidy argues that this protracted struggle is more correctly viewed as a global insurgency and counterinsurgency.[1]

Placing the war against al Qaeda and its allied organizations in the context of a global insurgency has vital implications for doctrine, training, interagency coordination, military culture change, and, particularly, command structures and arrangements. While the functions of command are eternal, the nature of command must evolve in scale and scope, given developments in technology and warfare.[2]

If the United States is truly involved in a war on terror, the Armed Forces must apply doctrinal principles of war that are applicable to any conflict. Chief among these for the Long War is unity of command. Current command arrangements are imprecise or cobbled together and do not fully address the situation at hand. This global "theater" requires a supreme military commander to provide the necessary leadership and coherence for diverse geographic and functional commands. Lack of unity of command leads to inefficiencies, opportunity costs, and a less than holistic approach to a global counterinsurgency.

The correct command structure for a war of large dimensions is crucial. Unfortunately, determining a specific command structure is too often driven by political or Service considerations. History abounds with command arrangements powered by these factors and shows the costs of such an approach.

This article considers the current U.S. military command structure for the war on terror, the nature of the enemy, and the institutional and cultural issues the United States faces to achieve unity of effort and command. It then draws on three historical examples that differ in scale and scope to show the pitfalls associated with commands structured for political reasons. In the end, none of the examples created unity. The article concludes with a vision for how a supreme command for the war on terror can be structured to provide unity of command for the military component of national power.

Current Command Structure

In terms of structure, the war on terror presents the national security establishment with its greatest organizational challenge since 1947. The existing approach is best described as general strategic direction and compartmented execution.[3] National military strategy is the responsibility of the Joint Staff (Strategy, Plans, and Policy Directorate). The United States has nine unified commands fighting the war on terror; five are regional commands

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with responsibilities for specific geographic areas of operation, and four are functional. Responsibility for the campaign plan is vested in U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). The Secretary of Defense expanded the command's role in 2003 to include leading the Department of Defense (DOD) planning effort and commanding specifically designated operations.[4] Theater strategy is the responsibility of the geographic combatant commanders.[5] USSOCOM, therefore, theoretically provides the lead for operations in this counterinsurgency.

More specifically, USSOCOM has been designated as the supported command to plan, synchronize, and, when directed, execute strategy and operations. The command has stood up the Center for Special Operations to fulfill its planning responsibilities,[6] meaning the commander must lead a global, collaborative planning process, leveraging other combatant command capabilities and expertise, which results in decentralized execution by both USSOCOM and other combatant commands against terrorist networks.[7] This structure is less than optimal because it is a collaborative rather than a true command arrangement.

Command problems first appear in planning, with both the National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC) and USSOCOM charged with national and global strategic planning and operations. The NCTC may be tasked with national strategic and operational planning, but it has limited authority and capability. It is an Intelligence Community organization entrusted with integrated strategic and operational planning for diplomacy, information influence, covert action, and military operations. Responsibility for integrated national planning is thus divorced not only from execution but also from detailed operational planning.

A similar problem besets USSOCOM. The command has been mandated with developing detailed global military plans, but it is isolated from non-DOD planners (for example, the Joint Staff represents DOD on the NCTC). USSOCOM's global planning authority is also circumscribed within DOD by the power wielded by the geographic combatant commanders.[8] Each geographic commander runs his own fiefdom despite USSOCOM being the supported command. Thus, integrated strategy execution remains largely personality dependent.[9] This compact contrasts greatly with a simple and ideal

Family members of victims mark fifth anniversary of attack on Pentagon

DOD (Helene C. Stikkel)

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command structure resembling a chain. The top link is the military commander, who directs all the forces involved in an operation. Joint and combined operations place additional demands and complexity on exercising effective command. The minimum level of effectiveness is to ensure unity of command among national armed forces.[10]

The current structure presents challenges to unity of command and raises three questions:

■ Who exercises global military unity of command for the war on terror?
■ Who connects the holistic needs and actions within this counterinsurgency effort that links nations as diverse as Mali and Nauru, which both confront the terrorist threat in different guises?
■ If the military finds itself in a true war, who acts as supreme military commander?

The Enemy

Al Qaeda and its affiliates comprise a novel and evolving form of networked insurgents who operate globally, harnessing the advantages of globalization and the information age. They employ terrorism as a tactic, subsuming terror within their overarching aim of undermining the Western-dominated system of states.[11] As the *2006 Quadrennial Defense Review Report* states:

The United States is . . . engaged in what will be a long war. Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, our nation has fought a global war against violent extremists who use terrorism as their weapon of choice, and who seek to destroy our free way of life. Our enemies seek weapons of mass destruction and, if they are successful, will likely attempt to use them in their conflict with free people everywhere. Currently, the struggle is centered in Iraq and Afghanistan, but we will need to be prepared and arranged to successfully defend our Nation and its interests around the globe for years to come.[12]

This new reality challenges any nation-state, hampered by sovereignty and national borders, to confront a threat that uses the benefits of globalization to transform world politics and economies to its own ends. Using networks that link to other criminals or legitimate business interests, terrorists connect London, New York, Amman, and other frontline locations with obscure venues such as Niue, Nauru, and Togo. They can further distort the economies of industries and countries with illicit trade in weapons, drugs, people, and other traffic to finance their jihad against the West.[13]

This rise of global nonstate terrorist networks is a defining characteristic of the last decade. The enemies are not traditional conventional military forces, but rather distributed multinational and multiethnic networks of terrorists. These networks seek to break the will of nations that have joined the fight alongside the United States by attacking their populations. Terrorist networks use intimidation, propaganda, and indiscriminate violence in an attempt to subjugate the Muslim world under a radical theocratic tyranny. These networks also aim to exhaust the will of those in the Muslim world who oppose them. Terrorist networks seek increasingly deadlier means, including nuclear and biological weapons, to commit mass murder.[14] The organizational

challenge is that while terrorists operate in ever-changing international networks, the counterinsurgent organization remains in a national and stovepiped structure with vertical hierarchies for the diplomatic, informational, and economic instruments of national power.

Furthermore, al Qaeda and its associated movements operate in over 80 countries. They have conducted attacks around the world, killing ordinary people of all faiths and ethnicities. They exploit poorly governed areas, taking sanctuary where states lack the capacity or will to police themselves.[15]

This Long War against terrorist networks thus extends far beyond Iraq and Afghanistan and is characterized by irregular warfare: operations in which the enemy is not a regular military of a nation-state.[16] To succeed, the United States must organize its command structures to provide unity of direction and oversight across this global battlefield.

Unity of Command and Effort

Two principles of conflict that currently vex the national security establishment are unity of command and unity of effort. More than 5 years after the terrorist attacks of September 11, significant organizational deficiencies remain within departments and agencies and across the national security establishment in both planning and execution.[17]

The lack of unity of effort between government departments is the principal impediment to operational-level interagency integration. Simply put, no one is in overall control.[18] General Peter Pace, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, noted that the overarching problem with interagency integration is found at the operational level.[19] Unity of effort may be hard to achieve among the multitude of agencies involved in the war on terror, but at least unity of command for the military component of the Long War is a step in the right direction.

For the military, unity of command is a principle of war: "For every objective, ensure unity of effort under one responsible commander." It is particularly pertinent for the war on terror. As David Galula writes, "Clearly, more than any other kind of warfare, counterinsurgency must respect the principle of a single direction. A single boss must direct the operations from the beginning to the end."[20]

The U.S. experience in the Cold War still profoundly influences the way DOD is organized and executes its mission. But the Cold War was a struggle between nation-states, requiring state-based responses to most political problems and kinetic responses to most military problems. DOD was optimized for conventional, large-scale warfighting against the regular, uniformed forces of hostile states. Today, warfare is increasingly characterized by intrastate violence rather than conflict between states. Many adversaries are informal networks of nonstate actors that are less vulnerable to Cold War approaches.[21] This evolved threat profile and global battlefield require a unity of command that is truly worldwide.

History Lessons

The U.S. Civil War, the Pacific theater in World War II, and the second Indochina War provide examples of struggles where the military adopted a unified approach either late or not at all and suffered the organizational and command inefficiencies and consequences for the duration of the conflicts.

The war on terror is a unique global campaign, and command generalizations must be extrapolated from these historical cases. Nevertheless, these models provide lessons on how to enhance military command structure.

U.S. Civil War. The American Civil War is analogous to the war on terror in that it represented a period of change for the conduct of military operations. The Army was forced to move from a pre-industrial to an industrial age conflict, with large theaters of operation, mass forces, and technological developments of rifled firearms, railroads, and steamships. Similarly, the events of September 11, the opening shot in the war on terror, signaled a shift to postmodern war, where the battlefield is global and adversaries must manage the technology of the Internet, satellite communications, and both high- and low-tech weaponry.

Until President Abraham Lincoln appointed Ulysses S. Grant to lead the overall Union war effort, his armies were riddled with diverging goals, lack of coordination, and ineptitude, and they suffered a number of defeats because of bad generals and an imprecise command structure.

Grant was not the first holder of the office of commander during the Civil War, but a chief difference was that, until his appointment, Lincoln had been authorized to assign a general-in-chief from among the

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many officers who held the rank of major general. Essentially, this position was more a "first among peers" than a true supreme commander. Illustrative was Major General Henry W. Halleck, whom Lincoln appointed as the commander in chief in 1862, with high hopes of success; but Halleck viewed his role as a military advisor and chief of staff to the President and Secretary of War. He shirked from issuing orders to his "subordinate" commanders and only suggested or recommended strategic or tactical actions.[22]

With Grant, Congress authorized the permanent rank of lieutenant general, not used since George Washington. This created a single senior officer to command the U.S. armies. Grant brought to the position of general-in-chief an attitude not shared by Halleck. He intended not to advise his subordinates but to issue orders and expect full compliance. In essence, he would exercise true command and only inform the President and the Secretary of War of his actions.[23]

After his promotion to lieutenant general in 1864, General-in-Chief Grant became commander not of one army, as he had been at Vicksburg, or even three armies, as at Chattanooga, but of all the armies of the United States. Under his charge were 19 military departments and 17 commanders, and his new job was to move all of them in concert toward one goal: the destruction of the Confederacy.[24] He sagely decided not to combine his important strategic duties with command of the Army of the Potomac, which would undoubtedly have involved him in intricate and time-consuming detail. Rather, he issued orders through his chief of staff to the commander of the Army of the Potomac, George G. Meade; the commander of the Army of the James, Benjamin F. Butler; the commander of IX Corps, Ambrose E. Burnside; and all the diverse forces operating in Virginia, Tennessee, northern Georgia, the deep South, and far West.[25]

This unity of command allowed Grant to apply pressure in all theaters of war with the purpose of grinding the Confederate army into defeat. The integration of the different theater generals under one chief provided the synergy and cohesion to defeat the Confederate military. The war on terror is structured as a cooperative arrangement between USSOCOM and the geographic

combatant commanders, all headed by general officers of equal rank and authority. There is no senior military commander like Grant unifying this arrangement.

World War II in the Pacific. The Pacific theater during World War II provides a second example of how not to structure a command for wartime by dividing it into two parts with equal leaders, and creating commands heavily influenced by one Service rather than having a balanced joint culture.

Against the dictates of military doctrine—and against all common sense—the Pacific was divided into two theaters for command. The traditional elements of careerism and doctrinal differences within the Armed Forces combined to produce a monstrosity. As Louis Morton observed, the arrangement "led to duplication of effort and keen competition for the limited supplies of ships, landing craft, and airplanes, and it placed on the Joint Chiefs the heavy burden of decision in matters that could well have been resolved by lesser officials."[26]

One reason for this division of command (beyond inter-Service rivalry) was the presence of General Douglas MacArthur. Senior to almost all other Army and Navy officers at the time, MacArthur was disliked by the Navy, who would never entrust the fleet to a land general. Therefore, in a Solomon-like decision, President Franklin Roosevelt appointed MacArthur commander of the Southwest Pacific area: Australia, the Philippines, New Guinea, Borneo, and all the Netherlands Indies, except the large island of Sumatra, while the Navy was given the remainder of the Pacific Ocean except for the coastal waters of Central and South America. This vast Navy domain was entrusted to Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, who also remained commander of the Pacific Fleet.

Both MacArthur and Nimitz received orders from the heads of their respective Services, acting for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who had the final say on matters of strategy. That meant that overall direction of operations in the Pacific was in the hands of a committee, and there was no single authority below that level to make decisions for the Pacific theater.[27] Clearly, this structure had implications for strategy development, strategic and operational planning, and resource allocation. While the U.S. military did win in the Pacific, this fragmented command structure created both real and opportunity costs, which resulted in loss of personnel, materiel, and time.

The supported and supporting command arrangements for the war on terror vaguely resemble the organization in the Pacific. Rather than having a single authority for the Long War, the U.S. military works with a collaborative and committee style structure reminiscent of the Southwest Pacific and Pacific Ocean areas split. Also, the geographic combatant commands and functional commands are still very much Service-branded. Although the evolving nature of military operations requires the United States to break the tradition of linking particular Services with certain unified commands, this major step in improving command selection has not yet occurred.[28] The result is inefficiency, opportunity costs, and a less than holistic approach to addressing a global counterinsurgency.

Second Indochina War. Commenting on command and control in Vietnam, Major General George Eckhardt, USA, stated that "a prerequisite for command and control will be unity of command, to ensure . . . effectiveness of military and advisory activities."[29] Unfortunately, this requirement was not achieved in Indochina.

In 1962, the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), was formed as an operational headquarters with the staff elements needed to direct operations. Soon the Army and Air Force began to argue that MACV should be a theater unified command with land, sea, and air components. The Navy opposed such an arrangement and argued that U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM) should provide the unified command structure, with the Pacific commander controlling all forces assigned to Vietnam. The result was an incredibly complex command structure. At the top was Pacific Command, the unified command with three components: Pacific Air Forces, Pacific Fleet, and U.S. Army Pacific. MACV was a subunified command, subordinate to Pacific Command, whose commander was responsible for the U.S. war effort in Vietnam, yet USPACOM controlled most of the air campaign against the North. Furthermore, the MACV air component commander did not exercise operational control over B–52s taking part. During most of the conflict, he had no authority over Marine air units based in South Vietnam. The MACV commander had no continuing operational control over 7th Fleet units operating off the coast of North

President, Secretary of Defense, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at Pentagon briefing

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and South Vietnam, nor did he have authority over South Vietnamese forces.[30]

While General William C. Westmoreland, head of MACV from 1964 to 1968, was commonly regarded as the U.S. commander in Vietnam, his authority was severely limited. The Pacific commander and the commander, U.S. Army, Pacific, were both sandwiched between Westmoreland and the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the hierarchy. In addition, Strategic Air Command and 7th Fleet units fell outside Westmoreland's authority, while his control of the Marine forces was limited by Marine Corps headquarters in Washington. The Pacific commander and Washington, not MACV, ran the air war against North Vietnam. The command structure resembled a particularly confusing wire diagram rather than a chain.[31]

This arrangement soon proved unworkable, and some senior military leaders began to argue for a single, simplified structure. With the war spreading into Laos, new questions about command relations arose. To resolve these matters, the Army recommended that all forces in Vietnam and Thailand be placed under the commander of MACV. The Navy disagreed.[32] After 4 years of discussion, the Joint Chiefs of Staff decided not to change the command structure but simply to realign some forces. Thus, the Americans made life difficult for themselves by failing to ensure unity of command among their own forces, let alone achieving unity with their allies. This analogy serves well for the war on terror: if the military does not have a global unified command, a broader and better interagency unity of effort with similarities to combined operations among allies will be even harder to achieve.

A Supreme Commander

These historical examples point to the need for a supreme commander to provide unity of direction for the military component of the war on terror. The essence of this provocative concept must be evaluated. As in other wars, a supreme military commander would create cohesion and unity of command, vital in addressing the global counterinsurgency. This step is a partial move in improving the unity of effort so critical to the interagency process because it streamlines the command arrangements for the military component of national power. The development of a four- or even five-star commander with staff to run the war on terror would create clear relationships among the geographic combatant commanders, USSOCOM, and other commands and enable a high-level linkage of the global area of operations.

The war on terror is an intelligence and special operations-intensive war. The U.S. system of high command is focused on the regional level, which is of reduced importance in both strategy and operations.[33] One command option is to augment USSOCOM and make it a five-star billet. The other is to create a supreme commander, one level higher than the combatant commanders and USSOCOM, and form a staff to execute the war. The Joint Staff and combatant commands would be the donors for this new staff.

Regardless of the option, the profile of this commander would be novel for the U.S. military tradition since he would need to come from the Special Operations community due to the nature of the conflict. Career Special Operators from all Services are the natural candidates for supreme command.

The size and scope of the battlefield have evolved throughout history. Beginning with a football-sized field where a single chieftain could control his tribe during a morning of fighting, the battlespace has expanded to encompass the globe. Yet thanks to the outputs of globalization, primarily technology, one commander could be placed in charge of the U.S. military effort in the war on terror to achieve unity of command. This principle of war enables an integrated and synergistic effort within at least the military component of national security and would lead to greater unity within the interagency process and for future combined operations in the Long War. **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] See Robert M. Cassidy, *Counterinsurgency and the Global War on Terror* (Westport, CT: Praeger International, 2006).

[2] See Martin van Creveld, *Command in War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 11–12.

[3] Michael Vickers, "Implementing GWOT Strategy: Overcoming Interagency Problems," Testimony before the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities, U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Armed Services, Washington, DC, March 15, 2006.

[4] General Bryan D. Brown, Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Armed Services Committee, Washington, DC, March 2, 2005.

[5] Vickers.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *National Military Strategic Plan for the War on Terrorism* (Washington, DC: The Joint Chiefs of Staff, February 1, 2006), 29.

[8] Vickers.

[9] Ibid.

[10] G.D. Sheffield, "Introduction: Command, Leadership, and the Anglo-American Experience," in *Leadership & Command: The Anglo-American Military Experience Since 1861*, ed. G.D. Sheffield (London: Brassey's, 2002), 1–16, specifically 8–9.

[11] See Robert M. Cassidy, "Feeding Bread to the Luddites: The Radical Fundamentalist Islamic Revolution in Guerrilla Warfare," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 16, no. 3 (December 2005), 334–359.

[12] *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR) Report (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2006).

[13] A good source for understanding these networks is Moises Naim, *Illicit: How Smugglers, Traffickers, and Copycats are Hijacking the Global Economy* (New York: Doubleday, 2005).

[14] *QDR Report*, 20.

[15] Ibid., 21.

[16] Ibid., 11.

[17] Vickers.

[18] Ross Coffey, "Revisiting CORDS: The Need for Unity of Effort to Secure Victory in Iraq," *Military Review* (March-April 2006), 24–34, specifically 24.

[19] Jim Garamone, "Agencies Must Coordinate to Win Terror War, Pace Says," available at <www.armedforces.net/Detailed/2295.html>.

[20] David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: From Theory to Practice* (St. Petersburg, FL: Hailer Publishing, 1964; repr., Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005), 87.

[21] *QDR Report*, 83.

[22] For a good overview of Henry W. Halleck's style of command during the Civil War, see John F. Marszalek, *Commander of All Lincoln's Armies: A Life of General Henry W. Halleck* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

[23] Timothy H. Donovan et al., *The American Civil War* (West Point, NY: U.S. Military Academy, 1981), 296–297.

[24] R. Steven Jones, *The Right Hand of Command: Use and Disuse of Personal Staffs in the Civil War* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2000), 192.

[25] Brian Holden Reid, "The Commander and His Chief of Staff: Ulysses S. Grant and John A. Rawlins, 1861–1864," in *Leadership and Command: The Anglo-American Military Experience Since 1861*, 17–36, specifically 28–29.

[26] Louis Morton, *U.S. Army in World War II: The War in the Pacific, Strategy and Command: The First Two Years* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1962).

[27] Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun: The American War with Japan* (New York: Free Press, 1985), 144–145.

[28] See Russell J. Handy, *Opening the Aperture: Ending Service "Branding" of U.S. Unified Commands*, unpublished paper, Air War College, Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base, AL, 2003.

[29] George S. Eckhardt, *Vietnam Studies: Command and Control, 1950–1969* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1974), 86.

[30] John J. Land, Jr., *Command and Control and Communications Structure in Southeast Asia Area* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Airpower Research Institute, 1981).

[31] Sheffield, 1–16, specifically 9.

[32] Ibid., 68–78.

[33] Vickers.

Army Special Forces on patrol in Iraq