

By Regina Parker

The Army let me study abroad in China this year to deepen my understanding of international relations, but I have also learned quite a bit about the Army itself. Last week, for instance, I was riding a train through Tianjin when my Australian friend asked me to explain Mission Command after glancing at the article on my iPad screen titled "[Mission command is not a software!](#)" by [Thomas Ricks in Foreign Policy](#). As I flipped through [ADP 6-0](#) and [ADRP 6-0](#) on my iPad and explained the doctrine, her two questions on the subject

notably challenged my preconceptions.

### **If Mission Command opposes micromanaging, why are Army publications on Mission Command so unwieldy?**

She was right, and the irony is painful. Perhaps the worst consequence of the length and complexity of Mission Command publications is that few Soldiers read let alone absorb all of them, making it impossible for the Army to generate shared understanding of the doctrine. Moreover, the hours spent by those few Soldiers reading stacks of doctrine is a waste of manpower that most likely kills morale.

Army publications on Mission Command (actually, on most things) should be streamlined. Let's start by nixing *ADRP 6-0*, and then consolidate the six principles of Mission Command. General Dempsey in his [Mission Command White Paper](#) published in 2012 proposed that the joint force implement three principles - commander's intent, mission type orders, and decentralized execution - and the subsequent publication of ADP 6-0 unnecessarily doubled this number to six - build cohesive teams through mutual trust (1), create shared understanding (2), provide a clear commander's intent (3), exercise disciplined initiative (4), use mission orders (5), and accept prudent risk (6). While all six principles are important, it seems that four swallows six, three swallows two, and the first principle of trust underlies them all.

Keep it simple, stupid. Alexander Hamilton [argued against including the Bill of Rights](#) in the Constitution, not because he disagreed with any of the rights listed in the bill, but because he understood that adding detail restricts meaning. The effectiveness of Mao Zedong's Little Red Book demonstrated the power of brevity, so much so that private-sector companies have since followed suit and issued similar booklets to their employees; for instance, Scandinavian Airlines issued a literally red booklet called "[Let's Get in There and Fight!](#)" to its twenty thousand employees. Atul Gawande in *The Checklist Manifesto* substantiated

these anecdotes and scientifically validated the utility of simple guidelines in managing complex situations across a variety of industries.

### **Why pretend that Mission Command belongs to the Army?**

Mission Command doctrine is camouflaged in Army green acronyms and terminology. Read no further than the introduction to *ADRP 6-0*, which effectively states that only Soldiers can understand Mission Command:

*To comprehend the doctrine contained in ADRP 6-0, readers must first understand the nature of operations and the Army's operational concept described in ADP 3-0, Unified Land Operations. Readers must understand how the foundations of unified land operations contribute to unified action. In addition, they must be familiar with the fundamentals of the operations process established in ADP 5-0, The Operations Process, and the fundamentals of Army leadership.*

But as my friend pointed out, the concept of Mission Command is in fact universal, spanning not only all branches of the armed forces, but all facets of society. In business, a team of bankers share drinks after work to build trust and esprit de credit (principle 1); in politics, a senator explains her representatives' issues on the floor to allow for shared understanding in Congress (2); an Imam determines the intent of Allah through deciphering the Quran (3); a son takes the initiative to water the plants on his own (4); a football team executes the orders of their captain and coach (5); you once considered the prudence of trying that weed (6).

The Army should embrace rather than shroud the universality of Mission Command, for instance by using primarily non-military language and examples in its (newly shortened) Mission Command publication and inevitable briefings. This would serve three purposes.


First, enabling everyone to digest the doctrine would help reduce the civ-mil divide and attract more people to join the military, or as Jim Collins wrote in *Good to Great*, [get the right people on the bus](#). Second, explaining Mission Command through a broader lens would facilitate deeper understanding of the concept by a) guiding Soldiers to relate Mission Command to their experiences outside of the Army and b) distancing the theory underpinning Mission Command from a narrow set of Army-themed observable implications that stifle Soldiers' creativity in exercising the doctrine. Third, applying Mission Command to non-military situations would help Soldiers exercise the philosophy in their service out of uniform toward the betterment of society, which after all is the fundamental purpose of our government and by extension our Army.

## Conclusion

We often talk about barriers to exercising Mission Command, such as the incredible number of forms required to take a pass, the Army-wide [warnings on Pokemon Go](#), or leaders' use of [information technology](#) to [micromanage](#). But these are symptoms of a deeper problem. It took me four years and an analytical Australian to realize the inadequacy of Mission Command doctrine itself. How long will it take our Army?

*[Regina Parker](#) graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point with a double-major in Mechanical Engineering and American Politics. She is currently in China pursuing a master's degree as a [Schwarzman Scholar](#) before she enrolls at Harvard Medical School in the fall of 2017. Her views do not represent the official position of the U.S. Army.*

Share this:

- [Email](#)
- [Tweet](#)
- 

- [Print](#)
- [WhatsApp](#)