

Book Review

Command: The Politics of Military Operations from Korea to Ukraine

Lawrence Freedman

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In a strategic context, the notion of command is almost as elusive as the ideas of strategy and strategic. Consider, for example, the phraseology associated with the command of terrain, the air, and the sea. Obviously, command is often associated with and tied to the idea of strategy. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines “strategy”, amongst others, as ‘the science and art of military command exercised to meet the enemy in combat under advantageous conditions’.⁵⁶³ In writing about the dimensions of strategy, Colin S Gray notes that “command” refers to the quality of military and political leadership in planning and conduct to use or threaten the employment of organised force for political purposes.⁵⁶⁴ This is precisely the theoretical focus of Freedman’s book *Command: The Politics of Military Operations from Korea to Ukraine*.

Very few command arrangements, Freedman notes, are friction-free.⁵⁶⁵ And the quality of command, at all levels, is often a key variable in the creation of strategic effect. At both strategic and operational level, commanders are challenged by the pervasive influence of geography, the reality of friction, and an intelligent adversary, and are subject to the severe discipline of time.⁵⁶⁶ Although much has been written about command throughout history, the problem is that modern strategic studies ‘in its fascination with technology, its newly fashionable attraction to the face of battle at the sharpest end of war, and with its focus on broad social forces, often forgets the commanders behind the mask of command’.⁵⁶⁷ It is these commanders, Freedman notes, who have to give the orders, and who have to lead those who are receiving the orders, and manage the allies who are often suspicious of ‘being asked to take unreasonable risks’.⁵⁶⁸

Writing the book in the period of the ‘enforced solitude of the Covid pandemic’,⁵⁶⁹ Freedman aims at exploring the dichotomy between political and military leadership, and between the political and operational spheres in war in the historical period since the end of the Second World War.⁵⁷⁰ In the demarcation of the discussion, Freedman notes that the political purposes of government should infuse all operational decisions, while the problems and opportunities of the military operational domain should inform the development of national strategy. Civilian office-bearers do not necessarily have the required competencies for the implementation of defence policy. The military is skilled in the conduct of operations and the management of their logistical, intelligence, equipment, and tactical challenges. Politicians, however, have a critical role questioning ‘the smooth

functioning of the command system, the causes of any reverses, the likelihood of casualties and the prospects for success'.⁵⁷¹ Above all, Freedman notes, politicians are accountable to the public for any wrongdoing and anything going wrong.

Freedman argues that the functioning of command as an interplay between the political and military domains is not restricted to times of conflict, violence, and war. In peacetime, the interface between the military and political spheres is critical in the long-term planning of defence, budgetary allocations, personnel management, and procurement of technology. The real test for the political and military overlap of command, Freedman rightly argues, however, is to be found during times of war: where and when military decisions at the campaign or so-called "operational level of war" are supposed to be free from political interference. But military decisions, Freedman argues, are never free from political interference where politicians do their job to interrogate the logic of strategy and the effectiveness of tactics. And, as Eliot Cohen points out in his book *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime*, in times of war, political office-bearers should exercise active civilian control of the military domain.⁵⁷² Freedman's book is of specific interest in this regard, showing how political office-bearers sometimes actively engage with the military – and sometimes not at all.

The historical focus of the book is on the period after the Second World War with case studies that are selected to reflect the 'diversity of contemporary conflict'.⁵⁷³ The case studies are rich in their diversity, complexity, depth, and time frames. In the reading of the various case studies, the reader is not left with only an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the complexities of high command, but also with a respect for Freedman's comprehensive historical depth and contextualised discussion of the various case studies. Obviously, the case studies are skewed towards war involving the major powers – the United States, Russia, France, and Britain. In a strange way, though, the particularly interesting case studies are those that do not involve the major powers, namely those considering Israel, Pakistan, Iraq, and the Congo. The reader will also find the two case studies involving Putin's Russia of great interest, i.e. the Russian invasions of Chechnya and Ukraine. In combination, the reader develops an understanding of the Russian strategic culture and the way of war under the Putin regime. As a whole, though, the case studies succeed in providing the reader with a nuanced understanding of the complexities of high command and the dialectic of the political and military domains in the conduct of war.

Perhaps Freedman should have been more deliberate in differentiating between the case studies of the Cold War and those from after the Cold War. For the major powers – and as the author rightly acknowledges – at the time of the Cold War, war was shaped by the need to avoid a third world war and the difficulties of fighting irregular wars.⁵⁷⁴ Freedman fails to highlight the fact that armed conflicts during the Cold War – and important from a command perspective – were mostly fought against easily recognisable foes. Freedman, though, is right in pointing out that post-Cold War conflict is increasingly shaped by new technologies that expanded the range of military options that are available.⁵⁷⁵ Wars also increasingly unfold in a post-heroic way and as so-called "hybrid" or "grey-zone" wars.⁵⁷⁶ Yet, the post-heroic wars following the Cold War tend to be much more indecisive, ending by way of international arbitration, peacekeeping, and withdrawal. This led someone like

Edward N Luttwak to argue in favour of ‘giving war a chance’.⁵⁷⁷ These realities have important consequences for command, especially since the current post-heroic wars are fought with small professional armed forces that place a high premium on force protection.

Of particular importance in the discussion of the different case studies is the unfolding of command in the military domain as both a political and bureaucratic process. There are commanders who are judged by their peers to be political in nature and that are often ‘compared unfavourably with those that focus ... entirely on preparing for and engaging in combat’.⁵⁷⁸ From a bureaucratic perspective, commanders are often judged by their involvement in bureaucratic practices aimed at reputational management of manipulation of situations that suit their self-interests, who ensure they are noticed by their superiors, who take credit for the bravery of others, or who are looking out for their unit to make sure that it gets its chance of glory. Command also unfolds in the world of high and low politics. As high politics, command unfolds in the world of international relations and ‘of security threats and border disputes, of ideological competition and alliance formation, of the United Nations and pressures for ceasefires’.⁵⁷⁹ Command is however also shaped by the world of low politics and ‘bureaucratic frictions, professional rivalries, personality clashes, and competition for scarce resources – of different organizational cultures and operational concepts’.⁵⁸⁰ The world of low politics further includes the interplay between corporate armies and field armies, and between those officers in high command in the national capital and those in the field tasked with implementing the policies.⁵⁸¹

Although this book should be read in its entirety by those in high command – both political and military – the last chapter of the book is compulsory reading for every student of war, professional and otherwise. The chapter, titled ‘Past, Present, and Future of Command’, addresses some of the most critical issues facing contemporary armed forces, albeit from a command perspective. This includes the changing character of command, the role of decentralised decision-making, the critical importance of intelligence and artificial intelligence, and issues of political control that may arise during armed control at all levels. In the end, command comprises a formal authoritative process of orders, a chain of command, and formal relationships. However, and as Freedman amply demonstrates, command is above all about informal networks that ensure that systems that rely on mutual trust work effectively. Perhaps the most important lesson of the book is the value of understanding the difference between loyalty and honesty when in command, and not to confuse loyalty with honesty and vice versa.

Abel Esterhuyse 
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ENDNOTES

- ⁵⁶³ Merriam-Webster, 'Strategy'. <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/strategy>> [Accessed on 26 November 2021].
- ⁵⁶⁴ CS Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 17, 39.
- ⁵⁶⁵ L Freedman, *Command: The Politics of Military Operations from Korea to Ukraine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 12.
- ⁵⁶⁶ Gray, *Modern Strategy*, 38.
- ⁵⁶⁷ Gray, *Modern Strategy*, 40.
- ⁵⁶⁸ Freedman, *Command*, 13
- ⁵⁶⁹ Freedman, *Command*, xvii.
- ⁵⁷⁰ Freedman, *Command*, 12.
- ⁵⁷¹ Freedman, *Command*, 9.
- ⁵⁷² E Cohen, 'Supreme Command in the 21st Century', *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Summer 2022, 51. <<https://ndupress.ndu.edu/portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-31.pdf>> [Accessed on 24 Oct 2023].
- ⁵⁷³ Freedman, *Command*, 12.
- ⁵⁷⁴ Freedman, *Command*, 10.
- ⁵⁷⁵ Freedman, *Command*, 11
- ⁵⁷⁶ Freedman, *Command*.
- ⁵⁷⁷ E Luttwak, 'Give War a Chance', *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 1999. <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1999-07-01/give-war-chance>> [Accessed on 24 Oct 2023].
- ⁵⁷⁸ Freedman, *Command*, 7.
- ⁵⁷⁹ Freedman, *Command*, 8.
- ⁵⁸⁰ Freedman, *Command*.
- ⁵⁸¹ Freedman, *Command*, 9.