

By John T. Correll

The Defense Reorganization Act of 1958 took the services out of the loop and empowered the combatant commands.



Gen. Dwight Eisenhower gives the order: "Full victory—nothing else" to paratroopers in England before they board airplanes for the invasion of Europe, June 6, 1944. World War II was the first time US forces fought in a truly integrated fashion.

Eisenhower and the Eight Warlords

For more than 150 years, the US armed forces had no need for complicated organization. The army and the Navy fought their battles separately and there was seldom any overlap. Each of them had its own chain of command. Military actions taken in conjunction with allies were rare.

This division persisted until World War II and its huge expansion in the scope and complexity of combat. Airpower took away the clean distinction between land and sea operations and introduced new factors into the strategy. Combatant forces in the field were grouped into unified commands for joint (more than one service) and combined (more than one nation) operations.

"Many high officers are firmly convinced that there must be a merger of the Army and the Navy," *The New York*

Times reported in October 1943. Commanders on the fighting fronts had to overcome an "antiquated system" in which "the Army fought on land and the Navy on sea and their zones of operation seldom merged. ... Many officers say the old style of warfare will never return. And from here on, they contend, Army, Navy, and Air Force must fight together."

Wartime unified command worked better in Europe than it did in the Pacific, where relationships were such that the only solution was to draw a line down the middle of the ocean with Gen. Douglas MacArthur as joint commander on one side of it and Adm. Chester W. Nimitz in charge on the other side.

Postwar, the transition continued. The Army and the Air Force were in favor of further unification. The Navy was vehemently opposed, fearful that in any kind of consolidation, naval airpower might

be lost to the Air Force and the Marine Corps—which could be seen as a second land army—subsumed by the Army. In 1946, the Unified Command Plan formed US combat forces into unified commands but the individual military departments remained in control as agents of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The National Security Act of 1947 as amended in 1949 unified—at least nominally—the Army, Navy, and newly created Air Force under the new Department of Defense. However, the individual services, aided by supporters in Congress, managed to keep their forces effectively within their own chain of command.

Today, the Goldwater-Nichols Act, adopted with great fanfare in 1986, is widely accorded to be the cornerstone of "jointness." It clarified beyond any doubt that the chain of command runs directly

Photo: Library of Congress

from the “national command authorities,” the President and the Secretary of Defense, to the combatant commands. The service Chiefs are not in it.

It is infrequently remembered that it was the Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1958 and related executive actions that initially took individual military services out of the operational chain of command, which ever since has run from the President and the Secretary of Defense to the combatant commands.

EISENHOWER LEADS CHARGE

In the middle of the transition to joint and unified operations all the way was Dwight D. Eisenhower, who understood from firsthand experience the necessity of unified command and control.

As an Army general in World War II, he commanded the combined US and British land, sea, and air forces in North Africa, the Mediterranean, and in the D-Day invasion of Europe. “There is no such thing as separate land, sea, and air war,” Eisenhower said in 1945. “At one time I was an infantryman, but I have long since forgotten that fact under the responsibility of commanding combined arms.”

As Army Chief of Staff after the war, Eisenhower was a strong advocate of unification. Later, as President, he proposed the Defense Reorganization Act of 1958 to Congress, which eventually followed his recommendations almost completely in passing the legislation.

In the 1960s, a plaque from a fighter wing in Thailand hung by the door to the office of the USAF Chief of Staff in the Pentagon. It said, “The mission of the United States Air Force is to fly and fight and don’t you ever forget it.”

That got the spirit and emphasis right, but according to Title 10 of the US Code, the assigned mission of the Air Force since 1958 had been to organize, train, and equip forces for the unified and specified commands. None of the service Chiefs held operational command over any of their combat units.

In 1958, there were eight combatant commands, six of them unified and two specified. Depending on what their missions required, the unified commands—responsible for large geographic areas—had air, land, and sea components. The specified commands—USAF’s Strategic Air Com-

“THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS SEPARATE LAND, SEA, AND AIR WAR.”

—Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower

mand being the prime example—were single-service organizations under joint control.

As a popular saying from the time put it, the war-making powers of the United States were vested in the President, the Secretary of Defense, and eight warlords.

A CHARTER FOR THE CHIEFS

A joint Army and Navy board was set up in 1903, but it was of minor consequence. Its best-known products were the “color” contingency plans in the 1930s, so called because each plan was designated by a color. Plan Orange, for example, was for a war with Japan.

With great reluctance, the Army put units of the American Expeditionary Force under foreign command in World War I. There was little choice, since the United States had only four divisions in France in December 1917. Up to the summer of 1918, US forces were “amalgamated” with the British and French at division level, although Americans below the grade of two-star general got their direct orders from US officers.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff were created in February 1942 as an interface with the British on the Combined Chiefs of Staff. They had nothing to go on except an instruction from President Franklin D. Roosevelt. There was no written charter, no definition of their authority and functions, and no statute or executive order to legalize their existence.

The Joint Chiefs were not established in law until 1947 and had no official chairman until 1949. Roosevelt designated his military advisor, Adm. William D. Leahy, to preside at JCS meetings, which he did for the next seven years. Leahy was not the spokesman for the JCS, deferring to the Army Chief, Gen. George C. Marshall, and the Chief of Naval Operations, Adm. Ernest J. King.

During World War II, the JCS acted as executive agents in dealing with theater and area commanders. After the

war, a service Chief was selected as executive agent for each of the unified and specified commands, an authority they held until it was abolished in the 1950s.

In simpler times, orders from Washington tended to provide general guidance and leave details to the discretion of the commander in the field. Command and control took on new meaning with the arrival of nuclear weapons.

In July 1945, a specifically worded order to deliver the atomic bombs against Japan was given in writing from the War Department to Gen. Carl A. Spaatz, commander of US Army Strategic Air Forces in the Pacific. It was reviewed and approved in advance by President Harry S. Truman.

TOWARD UNIFICATION

There was talk of a “merger” of the services, which meant different things to different people, but the term that caught on and remained in use was “unification.”

In 1943, the War Department proposed a single military service with air, sea, and land elements. Congress began hearings in 1944 on a “Proposal to Establish a Single Department of Armed Forces.”

The Navy and the Marine Corps were fiercely against it. Assistant Secretary of the Navy Artemus L. Gates said the only acceptable consolidation would be to merge the “whole military organization into the existing Navy,” which, with its air arm and Marine Corps, could already “operate on sea, under the sea, in the air, in amphibious operations, and on land.”

Some officers—notably MacArthur and Spaatz—favored “complete amalgamation” with “identical uniforms and ranks for both services.”

Truman, then a senator, was an early advocate of unification, convinced that service rivalry and competition led to duplication of effort, waste, and disjointed operations. As President in 1946, Truman attempted to combine the War and Navy departments, but was thwarted by congressional opponents.



This plaque hung outside the office of the USAF Chief of Staff at the Pentagon in the 1960s.



The Joint Chiefs of Staff meet in their Pentagon conference room in November 1949. From left: Gen. of the Army Omar Bradley, JCS Chairman, and the service Chiefs, Air Force Gen. Hoyt Vandenberg, Army Gen. Lawton Collins, and Adm. Forrest Sherman.



A ground crew pulls chocks from the wheels of a Strategic Air Command B-52. The massive bombers were mainstays in SAC, a specified command.

In 1947, Truman finally got a watered-down version of what he wanted in the National Security Act, which created a “National Military Establishment” headed by a Secretary of Defense. It also established the Joint Chiefs of Staff in law and made the Air Force a separate service.

The Secretary of Defense was given “general direction, authority, and control,” but the service departments kept their Cabinet-level status, alongside the Secretary of Defense who also had Cabinet rank. This arrangement was later described by Eisenhower as having been “little more than a weak confederation of sovereign military units.”

Amendments to the Act in 1949 converted the National Military Establishment into the Department of Defense and stripped the three service departments of their Cabinet status. The Secretary of Defense was upgraded to “direct” rather than “general” control. The service Chiefs remained in the chain of command as executive

agents for the unified and specified commands.

Resistance to unification continued. During the Korean War, the Navy was reluctant to place its carriers under control of the air component commander, even though carrier aircraft were used mainly for attack of land targets.

When Eisenhower became President in 1953, he took the Joint Chiefs of Staff out of the operational chain of command with an executive order that made the civilian service Secretaries—rather than the military Chiefs—the executive agents for the combatant commands.

In 1952, the Commandant of the Marine Corps was authorized to participate in JCS meetings when matters of interest to the marines were discussed. Full Marine Corps membership on the Joint Chiefs came in 1978.

SHORTENING THE CHAIN

In August 1957, the Soviet Union launched the world’s first ICBM and

two months later, used the same kind of rocket to put the Sputnik satellite into orbit. That drastically altered the time within which a strategic attack could occur as well as the responsiveness required from the US chain of command.

In his State of the Union address in January 1958, Eisenhower pointed to “the advent of revolutionary new devices” and “important new weapons which technology has produced that do not fit into any existing service pattern.”

Strategic planning and control were hampered, he said, by jurisdictional disputes, “harmful service rivalries,” and “mistaken zeal in promoting particular doctrine.” He would address part of the problem by executive action, he said, followed by recommendations to Congress on a defense structure to deliver top efficiency without friction.

Shortly thereafter, Eisenhower abolished the executive agent system altogether. That was as far as he could go on his own authority. That still left the lines of military command to “meander through subordinate elements of the Defense Department before they reach the fighting forces,” he said. “The Congress willing, we will free the flow of military commands from unified authority down to the man with a gun.”

In a message to Congress in April 1958, Eisenhower said the unified commands were the “cutting edge of our military machine” and “our entire defense organization exists to make

Photos: Defense 81; Harry S. Truman Library and Museum; DOD

Chief of Staff Gen. Nathan Twining (left), and Air Force Secretary Donald Quarles speak to the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Rep. Carl Vinson (D-Ga.), at a hearing in 1957.



them effective." With few exceptions, operational forces should be organized into "truly unified commands" that were "in the Department of Defense but separate from the military departments."

The present chain of command was "cumbersome and unreliable in time of peace and not usable in time of war," he said, asking Congress to "repeal any statutory authority which vests responsibilities for military operations in any official other than the Secretary of Defense" and establish a command channel in which "orders will proceed directly to the unified commands from the Commander in Chief and Secretary of Defense."

The three military departments would continue "as agencies within the Department of Defense to administer a wide range of functions." The Joint Chiefs of Staff would serve as "operational advisors" to the Secretary of Defense. Eisenhower also asked that Congress "raise or remove" the statutory limit on the size of the Joint Staff, which would "provide the operational planning assistance heretofore largely furnished by staffs of the military departments."

FROM AIR AND SEA

Opposition to Eisenhower's proposal was led by Rep. Carl Vinson (D-Ga.), chairman of the House Armed Services Committee and longtime patron of the

Navy and the Marine Corps. Vinson warned of the danger in creating a Prussian-style general staff and said the expanded powers of the Secretary of Defense were an "open invitation to the concept of a man on horseback."

Both Eisenhower and JCS Chairman Gen. Nathan F. Twining pointed out that neither Prussia nor Germany ever had in actuality an all-powerful general staff of the kind sometimes imagined, but that was not the big issue anyway. The main concern of the sea services was the threat to naval airpower and the marines.

USMC Commandant Gen. Randolph McC. Pate said the reorganization plan could enable some future Secretary of Defense to give the Marine Corps the "bum's rush." Former Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Robert B. Carney said the bill would reduce the service Chiefs to the "status of glorified consulting staff advisors."

Adm. Arthur C. Radford, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, broke with most of his navy colleagues in supporting the proposal.

The strongest advocacy for change was expressed in April 1958 by the Air Force Association, which said the plan "does not go as far as we would like," by stopping short of establishing a single military service. This followed an AFA statement of policy in 1956



that declared, "We must have a single military service with one secretariat, one Chief of Staff, one promotion list."

This was an astounding position, coming less than 10 years after the Air Force achieved its hard-won independence as a separate service, but it reflected the view of many Air Force leaders, active and retired. The 1956 AFA policy was drafted by a committee that included Generals Spaatz, George Kenney, and Jimmy Doolittle.

Gen. Thomas D. White, USAF Chief of Staff, spoke in favor of "more complete unification" and "a military organization that will help all of us to be free of conflicting service loyalties and confusing influences." Thomas K. Finletter, former Air Force Secretary, called for putting the Army, Navy, and Air Force into a single service. Spaatz said the Defense Department would not be properly organized until the Secretary of Defense had control of "the whole shebang."

Air Force retrospectives do not dwell on this interlude and offer few expla-

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President Dwight Eisenhower, center, visits the Eastern Test Range at Cape Canaveral, Fla., in 1960. At the time, there were eight unified commands, and the services preserved their organize, train, and equip roles.

nations. The best guess, formulated by USAF historian Herman S. Wolk, is that “air leaders reasoned that a stronger OSD [Office of the Secretary of Defense] would institutionalize the Air Force’s justifiable domination of the defense structure.”

By the time the bill passed Congress and was signed by Eisenhower in August 1958, Navy opposition had melted away. The reason is found in the first full paragraph of the new law—well ahead of the sections about the chain of command—which amended the National Security Act of 1947 “to provide for three military Departments of the Army, the Navy (including naval aviation and the United States Marine Corps), and the Air Force.”

THE NEW ORDER

The Reorganization Act, repeatedly patched and pasted by legal technicians on Capitol Hill, was a mishmash of language that required considerable interpretation to decipher. It did not differ in any important way from the substance of Eisenhower’s proposal.

In December 1958, Secretary of Defense Neil H. McElroy issued the implementing directive, which said, “The chain of command runs from the President to the Secretary of Defense and through the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the commanders of the unified and specified commands.” The phrase “through the Joint Chiefs of Staff” was not in the law although it could be inferred from the tangled wording.

At that time, there were eight combatant commands: the US European, Caribbean, Atlantic, Pacific, Alaska, and Continental Air Defense Commands (unified), the Strategic Air Command, and the Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean Command (specified).

The Joint Staff was increased to 400 from the previous limit of 210 and organized in conventional military style with functional numbered directorates, with J-1 as Personnel, J-2 as Intelligence, J-3 as Operations, J-4 as Logistics, J-5 as Plans, and J-6 as Communications and Electronics.

A separate administrative chain of command was preserved in which the services kept control of nonoperational units and matters pertaining to the organization, training, and equipping of their forces.

The Air Force proposed a unified strategic command to include the Navy’s nuclear submarines and USAF’s Strategic Air Command. The Navy would not agree, arguing that for coordination with naval forces, the ballistic missile submarines had to be allocated by geographic area to the unified Atlantic and Pacific commands, which were headed by admirals.

A US strategic command would not be established until 1992, after the Cold War, when SAC ceased to exist.

AGE OF GOLDWATER-NICHOLS

The issue of joint control was renewed by Air Force Gen. David C. Jones near the end of his tour as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1982. Jones said the individual services, which supplied the forces and resources for the combatant commands, still had too much influence and the JCS

was a “five-man committee,” which tended to muddle the advice it gave.

Jones argued that the Chairman rather than the full JCS should be the principal military advisor to the Secretary of Defense and the President and that the role of the combatant commanders should be strengthened. Advocates for another round of defense reorganization also said that the chain of command remained “confused and cumbersome.”

The services were lukewarm in their support for further changes but Jones and his reform agenda got a decisive boost from Sens. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.) and Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.) and the sponsor in the House, Rep. William F. Nichols (D-Ala.).

The Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act, adopted in October 1986, designated the JCS Chairman the principal advisor to the national command authorities and gave additional authority and power to the combatant commanders.

It prescribed a previous joint duty assignment as mandatory for promotion to general officer. It was the beginning of a culture of jointness that prevailed thereafter with new generations of military members.

Goldwater-Nichols established unequivocally that the operational chain of command ran from the President to the Secretary of Defense to the unified and specified commands. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was not in it, nor were the service Chiefs.

The law, which weighed in at a whopping 162 pages, also said that “communications between the President or the Secretary of Defense and the commanders of the unified and specified commands be transmitted through the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.” These provisions are unchanged in the current Joint Publication 0-2, Unified Action Armed Forces, which officially states the chain of command.

In this important respect, Goldwater-Nichols and everything since have clarified the chain of command and unified control of the combatant forces, but they essentially confirm the provisions of the Defense Reorganization Act and associated executive directives of 1958. ★

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