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Book Review: A Call to Action: Lessons from Ukraine for the Future Force

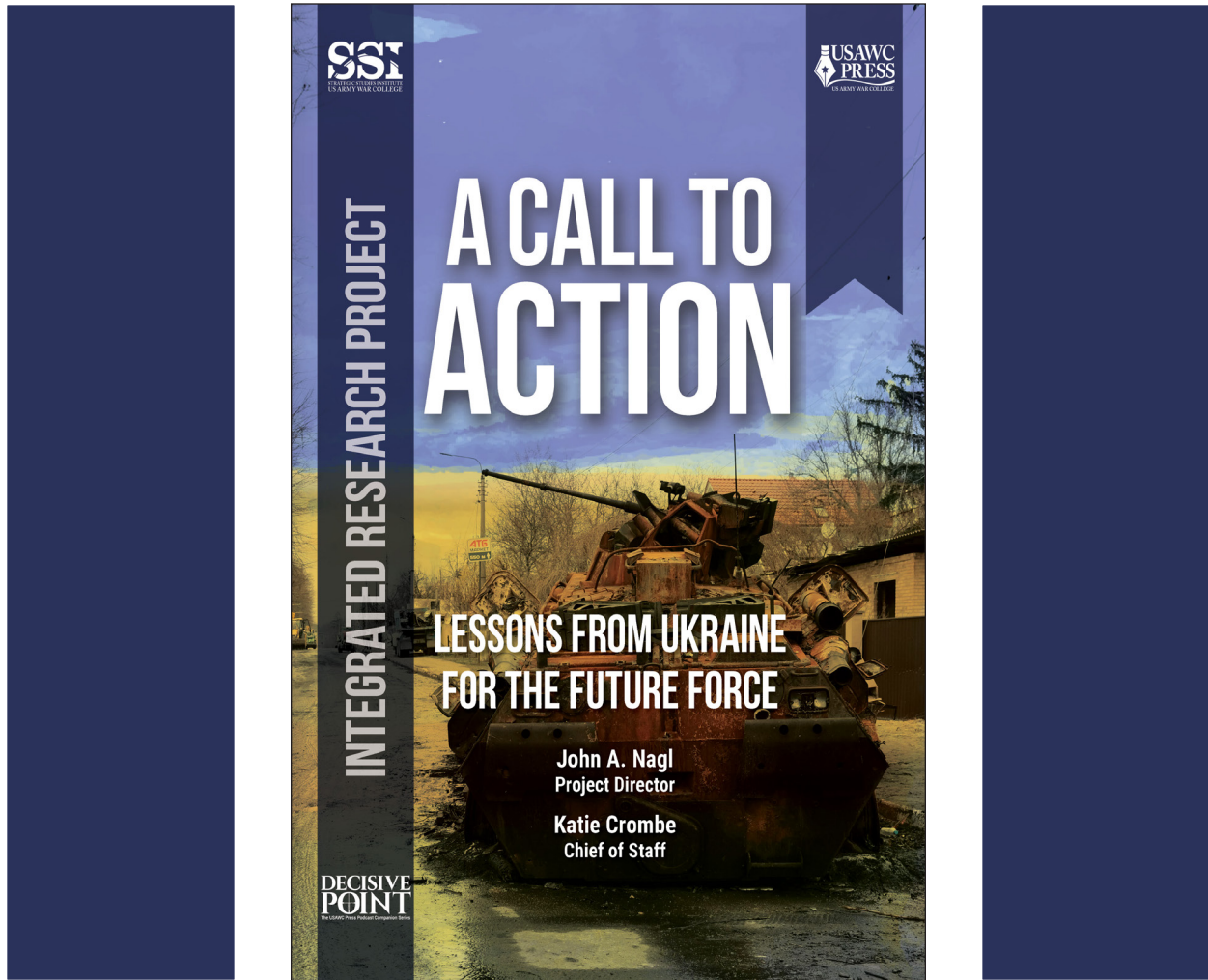
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Too often, peacetime armies prepare to fight their previous wars. At the US Army War College, however, and in key commands throughout the force—notably, the United States Army Futures Command and the United States Army Combined Arms Center—hundreds of brilliant officers and academics wrestle with what the next war will look like and what the future Army needs to be to prevail. Unfortunately, apart from trends analysis and the predictive models built on them, few tools exist that allow those analysts and planners to work with certainty. The horrific Russian invasion of Ukraine has provided futurists two advantageous abilities: to see the real-world direction combat is heading and to analyze other militaries’ mistakes and wins.

A Call to Action: Lessons from Ukraine for the Future Force will appeal most to readers interested in these topics. This scholarly analysis from project director John A. Nagl, chief of staff Katie Crombe, and a diverse array of researchers details the first 10 months of the Russia-Ukraine War, capturing lessons learned and providing recommendations for America’s future military to deter or win against peer adversaries.

Published by the US Army War College Press in June 2024, the monograph's contributing authors include Army officers, international officers (including one Ukrainian officer), one US Navy civilian, one Department of State officer, and two university students.

The monograph consists of 18 chapters divided into three logical divisions. The first part has three chapters providing a salient overview of Ukraine's history, US-Ukrainian security cooperation, and a deterrence theory examination of the war. The second section includes chapters 4 through 16, which examine different facets of the war, address lessons learned, and provide recommendations through the lenses of operational art, combat power (including intelligence, fires, sustainment, maneuver, protection, medical, and attrition and manning), combat leadership, multidomain operations, sea power, and airpower. The final portion of the book, chapter 17 analyzes how the Russia-Ukraine War can end peacefully, and chapter 18 contains final conclusions and recommendations for the future force.

Nagl and Crombe explain the reason for the integrated research project and subsequent monograph in their introduction, where they illustrate the concept of a "strategic inflection point" with the confluence of circumstances post-Vietnam (xxi). In 1973, the nation witnessed the near defeat of the Israel Defense Forces at the hands of a Soviet-backed Egypt while American military and political leaders were coming to grips with strategic failures in Southeast Asia (xxi). In response to this low point in American defense strategy, US Chief of Staff of the Army Creighton Williams Abrams Jr. tasked General William E. DePuy and his newly created United States Army Training and Doctrine Command with adapting US doctrine to counter the Soviet threat (xxi). DePuy's analyses and recommendations led to seismic changes in concepts and doctrine, new processes of procurement, and (at the time) futuristic tanks, helicopters, and missile systems.

Similarly, Nagl and Crombe argue, the United States today is recovering from nearly 20 years of counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan and Iraq and again faces the prospect of large-scale combat operations against other great powers at the same time the world is watching Ukraine's valiant struggle to remain independent in the face of a revanchist Russia (xxi-xxii). Nagl and Crombe assert that this similar strategic inflection point necessitates another fundamental shift and reinvestment in the US military (xxii).

The monograph includes at least 10 noteworthy themes (outlined below).

1. Without unity and commitment between the American people, government, and military—reflecting the Clausewitzian triad—there is no path to success. The final chapter poignantly states, "If the United States is to win the next war, Americans must subscribe to a common narrative and a common cause" (314).
2. *A Call to Action* emphasizes the concept of *mission command* as the most effective combat leadership allowing for distributed operations and nimble adaptation to dynamic battlefield conditions (115ff). The monograph demonstrates how the use of mission command philosophy—or a lack thereof—influenced Russian and Ukrainian forces during the first months of the war.
3. The scale of combat operations necessitates planning for a volume of casualties not seen since Korea. Properly planning for this scenario would require expanding manpower across the active and reserve components and exploring the activation of the Individual Ready Reserve (167).

4. Industry has a critical role in supporting war efforts, highlighting the need for strategic planning that incorporates the defense industrial base (153–55).
5. Enhancing cybersecurity measures is essential to protect critical infrastructure and counter evolving threats (314).
6. The effective use of intelligence, including open-source intelligence (OSINT) and artificial intelligence–supported technologies, is crucial for adapting to modern warfare (69ff).
7. The importance of adapting operational art in a post-counterinsurgency era and integrating modern technologies like unmanned aerial vehicles underscores the need for military modernization (196ff).
8. Reinforcing logistical capabilities and munitions production will support sustained conflict efforts (155–56).
9. Public engagement and resilience are necessary to sustain national support and ensure strategic readiness (33ff).
10. Leveraging historical lessons about Ukraine and contemporary insights from security-cooperation efforts will guide future military strategies and enhance the US Army’s capability to confront peer adversaries (1ff).

Most of the thematic recommendations can be implemented easily with good policy and wise decisions. Nagl and Crombe, however, tackle heavy challenges with the first two themes mentioned above: trinitarian harmony and mission command. Aligning an American populace that increasingly cannot agree on basic values and a legislative branch overcome by partisanship with the military in a national security objective—as important as that alignment is—calls for a societal shift far larger than our flag officers can effect. Their recommendation, however, is a poignant warning: if the United States cannot be united in will and purpose in a crisis, it may not survive its next battlefield test.

Laypeople often interpret *mission command* as the function of commanding a mission through troop-leading procedures, operational orders, and relevant communication systems. While this interpretation is correct, mission command is also a philosophy rooted in the Napoleonic corps that delegates tactical initiative to the lowest level. Field Marshal Count Helmuth von Moltke the Elder recognized that modern armies were growing too large for generals to manage every action. He summarized the spirit and intent of mission command philosophy when he declared that subordinate commanders should be “assigned general missions, related to fundamental, clearly understood objectives, and then instructed to accomplish those missions by carrying the fight aggressively to the enemy” (T. N. DuPuy, *A Genius for War: The German Army and the General Staff, 1807–1945* [Macdonald & Jane’s, 1977], 35, as quoted in Jim Storr, “A Command Philosophy for the Information Age: The Continuing Relevance of Mission Command,” *Defense Studies* 3, no. 3 [Autumn 2003]: 121, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702430308405081>).

The principle has always been part of the American way of war and a strategic advantage, but *A Call to Action* makes clear that the evolving battlefield is one where forces will be distributed or be targets. Commanders who try to micromanage or subordinate leaders hesitant to take initiative will find themselves ineffective in twenty-first-century large-scale combat operations. The modern military will need more than mission command to be successful. Leaders throughout the military

are still all too commonly overcontrolling or timid. The Department of Defense must make mission command a bedrock value of the armed services and an inherent part of training and culture—from the lowest private to the combatant commander.

Nagl and his team are working on a follow-up volume treating the later stages of the war and the trends resulting from maturation of the conflict. Meanwhile, this first volume is one of those rare, important academic works that is accessible, practical, and useful for other scholars. There are excellent materials, case studies, and analyses in each chapter. The authors clearly researched their topics and present their findings in a readable fashion. Certainly, experts throughout academia will find much in this work upon which to base future research.

This publication can also be useful across the national security enterprise. Many lessons in it can—and should—be adapted for use in professional military education and as a foundation for government intelligence analysis. Policymakers should read this integrated research project to educate themselves on the importance of relationships with America’s allies and partners and the “strategic resilience” they provide. Military personnel should contemplate how all elements of combat power are affected within a dispersed command-and-control environment and the importance of incorporating mission command philosophy into the training and culture of the institution. Flag officers should use this information as they make recommendations to policymakers regarding the optimal size of the military. Private industry should consider ways to be more responsive to equipment and ammunition production demands, especially the surge required if the United States must engage in a large-scale combat operations contingency. Most importantly, Army Futures Command leaders must consider the lessons in *A Call to Action* as they make decisions about the structure of the future force, modernization initiatives, and acquisition commitments.

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