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## The Joint Force and Lessons from 1971

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Jonathan P. Klug

**ABSTRACT:** In 1971 Colonel Duane H. Smith analyzed the unified command structure, examined an existing proposal for change, and suggested improvements. He illustrated how this structure must account for the challenges of the contemporary strategic environment and balance several tensions, such as effectiveness versus efficiency, flexibility versus focusing on a specific mission, and forward-deployed versus home-station forces. Many of Smith's insights remain applicable to the unified command structure and global force management processes today.

Since 1946 the Unified Command Plan and its inherent unified command structure (UCS) have directed how the US Department of Defense organizes its forces.<sup>1</sup> In his 1971 *Parameters* article, Colonel Duane H. Smith, US Army, evaluated the UCS by exploring the following questions: “Is the present unified command structure adequate for ensuring unity of effort of land, sea, and air forces? Would the peacetime organization require change if the US went to war? If change is indicated, what should the change be?”<sup>2</sup> In his analysis Smith examined an existing proposal for change and suggested his own improvements. His approach and many of his recommendations remain relevant today.

The strategic environment and strategic goals are the basis for each iteration of the plan, which aims to create an effective and efficient structure. Additionally this framework provides unity of effort for cooperation, competition, and armed conflict. Striving for an optimal organization has resulted in many iterations of the UCS over the decades, reflecting the dynamic nature of both the strategic environment and options for advancing national interests. In fact, 10 USC § 161 directs a review of the Unified Command Plan and its UCS at least every two years.

### 1971 Analysis

Smith highlighted the US military's four strategic goals, derived from then Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird's military posture statement to Congress in March 1971, to be executed through the specified and unified commands:

- “strategic nuclear retaliation against a nuclear attacker”

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1. Edward J. Drea et al., *History of the Unified Command Plan, 1946–2012* (Washington, DC: Joint History Office, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), 2013), iii, [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/History/Institutional/Command\\_Plan.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/History/Institutional/Command_Plan.pdf).

2. Duane H. Smith, “The Unified Command Structure,” *Parameters* 1, no. 2 (Fall 1971): 14.

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- “defense of the United States”
- “peacetime participation of US forces in mutual security arrangements, including deployment in strategic areas overseas”
- “rapid deployment of mobile forces based in the United States to conduct operations as directed”<sup>3</sup>

The unified and specified commands of 1971 were as unique as their geographic areas or functions. United States Pacific Command (USPACOM) focused on a single geographic area, which contrasted sharply with command responsibilities on the other side of the globe: the Atlantic region had two separate commands—United States European Command (USEUCOM) and United States Atlantic Command (USLANTCOM). While USEUCOM was a unified command responsible for the geographic area, USLANTCOM consisted of naval forces oriented on a maritime mission. United States Strike Command (USSTRICOM) was responsible for rapid overseas deployments. The primary mission of United States Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) was the defense of the Panama Canal, and United States Alaskan Command (USALCOM) focused on air defense.

Strategic defensive forces were separate from strategic offensive forces and resided in United States Continental Air Defense Command (USCONAD). Three commands controlled strategic offensive forces: United States Strategic Air Command (USSAC) was a specified command that contained bombers and land-based missiles, and USPACOM and USLANTCOM controlled sea-launched missiles. Thus strategic retaliation to a nuclear attack required the coordination of three US commands.

After describing the commands Smith examined the 1970 Blue Ribbon Defense Panel report, which was critical of the UCS. The panel offered several recommendations, most of which revolved around creating a layer of three new unified commands. These new commands would have been functionally oriented and would command the existing, although reorganized, specified and unified commands. Strategic Command was the first of the three new unified commands and would be responsible for all strategic weapons—offensive and defensive—and strategic targeting. This new organization would have commanded the Joint Strategic Targeting Planning Staff, USSAC, USCONAD, and the Navy’s fleet of ballistic missile submarines formerly belonging to USPACOM and USLANTCOM.

Tactical Command was the second of the recommended new unified commands and would have required many changes to implement. Tactical Command would have subsumed the missions of USLANTCOM, USSTRICOM, and USSOUTHCOM and would have commanded

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3. Smith, “Unified Command Structure,” 14.

the conventional forces of the United States including USEUCOM and USPACOM. Logistics Command was the third and final unified command the panel recommended. This organization would have commanded supply distribution, maintenance, and transportation for all combat forces. Overall, the panel's recommendations were sweeping in nature and met with resistance.

Smith first provided a detailed analysis of the panel's recommendation to create a Strategic Command. This recommendation centered on the ability to retaliate against a strategic attack quickly while maintaining the readiness of the three legs of the nuclear triad—intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and long-range bombers. Quick retaliation relied on effective planning and a key question was: Could the Joint Staff effectively complete centralized planning for deployment of these weapons?

Similarly the question of readiness focused on whether four separate unified commands could maintain the readiness of strategic weapons while effectively executing the Joint Staff's war plans. Smith argued, "the concept of a unified command for all strategic forces is sound; that we have never established one is a consequence of divergent Service views."<sup>4</sup>

Smith supported the creation of a new Strategic Command, but he argued against the proposed Tactical Command. These tactical forces belonged to six area unified commands, which the Department of Defense continually rearranged due to new concepts and political realities. Following an examination of the nature, employment, and organization of tactical forces, Smith argued, "the panel has gone too far" with their recommendation for a Tactical Command, as it was cumbersome and increased the number of headquarters personnel.<sup>5</sup> Smith did not investigate the proposal for a Logistics Command due to the inherent complexities of the organization's broad and complex responsibilities, noting that any analysis of such an organization would be challenging for the same reasons. Furthermore the panel did not discuss the organization in detail—it only recommended its creation, which gave Smith little to analyze.

Smith concluded his article with some recommendations. He argued to disestablish Alaskan Command, disestablish USSOUTHCOM, and merge USLANTCOM with USEUCOM, with the latter serving as the former's naval component commander. Also he proposed USSTRICOM and United States Middle East/Africa south of the Sahara/South Asia Command reorganize to become Mobile Command. United States European Command would have been responsible for the Middle East, and USPACOM would have been responsible for South Asia. Thus, Smith's recommended unified command structure would have had four commands: Strategic Command, Pacific Command, European Command, and Mobile Command.

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4. Smith, "Unified Command Structure," 17.

5. Smith, "Unified Command Structure," 19.

## Still Relevant Today

Smith methodically and fairly evaluated the UCS, analyzed the Blue Ribbon Panel report, and provided his recommendations. The approach he used remains relevant today. First, his analysis of strategic goals captured the essence of long-term US defense objectives, as the 1971 strategic goals detailed above are remarkably like those articulated in the unclassified description of the *2018 National Military Strategy*:

- “Respond to Threats
- Deter Strategic Attack (and Proliferation of [weapons of mass destruction])
- Deter Conventional Attack
- Assure Allies and Partners
- Compete Below the Level of Armed Conflict”<sup>6</sup>

The goals in the *2018 National Military Strategy* explicitly emphasize deterrence, where Smith’s 1971 strategic goals implicitly included deterrence—unsurprising given the Cold War era of mutually assured destruction. Similarly Smith’s strategic goal of “peacetime participation of US forces in mutual security arrangements, including deployment in strategic areas overseas” demonstrated the United States needed to assure allies and partners in peace and war; as indicated above, the *2018 National Military Strategy* also addresses assuring allies and partners.<sup>7</sup> And the United States needed access, basing, and overflight in 1971 just as it does today. Notwithstanding differences in national security vernacular and allowing for implicit aims, Smith began his analysis of the UCS articulating strategic goals similar to current strategic goals.

Smith identified several important features in creating and maintaining the UCS including the inherent tensions involved in designing and operating the commands. Smith effectively captured the interservice tension between operational-level flexibility and operational-level effectiveness, noting service interests more than US national interests drove the UCS and its commands. The Navy preferred commands based on a geographic area of responsibility, which tended to preserve flexibility at the expense of the effectiveness of local control. The Army and the Air Force advocated for commands based on missions and forces, which were more effective in addressing their particular function, but such an arrangement diluted the potential combat power that could respond to an actual crisis.<sup>8</sup>

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6. US Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Description of the National Military Strategy 2018* (Washington, DC: Office of Primary Responsibility: Strategy Development Division, Office of the CJCS, 2019), [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Publications/UNCLASS\\_2018\\_National\\_Military\\_Strategy\\_Description.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Publications/UNCLASS_2018_National_Military_Strategy_Description.pdf).

7. Smith, “Unified Command Structure,” 14.

8. Ronald H. Cole et al., *The History of the Unified Command Plan, 1946-1993* (Washington, DC: Joint History Office, Office of the CJCS, 1995), 11–12, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a313508.pdf>.

The Navy approach allowed the Pacific Fleet to operate together more effectively. If the UCS instead called for two or more functional commands within the Pacific area, each command would have had its own naval component. Dividing the Pacific Fleet in this manner would have diminished its combat power and effectiveness, not to mention exposing the smaller naval elements to defeat in detail. These tensions remain to some degree as service realities and perspectives are alive and well.

The ability of the UCS and the specified and unified commands to smoothly transition between peace and war was a vital concern in 1971. Likewise, the 2018 NMS calls for quickly and effectively shifting from peace to war. Contemporary global security challenges demonstrate the need for a more detailed framework to understand this complex strategic environment and operate within it. In response, the 2018 *Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning* proposed a competition continuum outlining how the US military had roles in “cooperation, competition, and armed conflict.”<sup>9</sup> A year later, Joint Doctrine Note 1-19, *Competition Continuum*, refined this continuum.<sup>10</sup>

Although seen through the lens of the bipolar international state system, Smith’s 1971 analysis reflected an understanding of what was necessary for success throughout what we would today refer to as the competition continuum. Major unified commands then and now continually conduct peacetime cooperation with allies and partners, compete with other major powers, transition smoothly to and from armed conflict, and succeed in armed conflict.

The balance between mobile and area commands is another recurring tension Smith examined that has implications today. Area commands and their forward-deployed forces are more expensive to maintain, are exposed to potential attacks, and can lead to international tension. But the presence of forward-deployed forces can also reassure allies and have diplomatic and deterrent effects. Keeping military forces in US territory has advantages as well; maintaining force readiness is generally more cost effective and is far less likely to create tensions with potential adversaries.

Smith recommended an approach that used both forward-deployed forces and forces in the continental United States. A crucial part of his recommendation was a new Mobile Command responsible for contingencies occurring outside the USPACOM and USEUCOM areas of responsibility. (Smith did not mention continually rotating units to maintain forward-deployed forces, such as in South Korea or Poland. These heel-to-toe rotations impair unit readiness and require substantial institutional efforts to prepare, rotate, and recover.)

The Mobile Command Smith envisioned would have had immense responsibilities, including five major tasks broad in scope and diversity:

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9. US Department of Defense (DoD), *Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office (GPO), March 16, 2018), 12.

10. DoD, *Competition Continuum*, Joint Doctrine Note 1-19 (Washington, DC: US GPO, 2019).

deploy forces under a mobile headquarters, defend the United States from conventional attacks, provide military assistance outside of the areas of responsibility of USEUCOM and USPACOM, bear responsibility for Joint training and doctrine, and augment other unified commands as needed. Additionally, warfighting responsibilities potentially would have involved an immense span of control. Collectively, these five tasks would certainly have overwhelmed one headquarters whether during the Cold War or in a large-scale conflict today.

The tasks Smith proposed for the Mobile Command, comprehensive then, have only grown in size and scope in the intervening 50 years, so much so that several organizations are required to address them. Collectively today's combatant commands have global responsibility. They also provide military assistance: several combatant commands, principally United States Northern Command, defend the United States from conventional attacks.

Today's solutions to Joint planning, capability development, force development, readiness, and doctrine are also much more involved than Smith could have foreseen. The nature of today's tasks and the global and multifunctional nature of contemporary warfighting require today's chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to act as the global integrator of these functions using the Joint Strategic Planning System, which includes the global force management (GFM) process. Smith's call for the Mobile Command to support the other unified commands was an early indicator of the requirements behind the GFM. The GFM integrates "readiness, assignment, allocation, apportionment, and assessment."<sup>11</sup> Within GFM, the dynamic force employment process allows combatant commands to "more flexibly use ready forces to shape proactively the strategic environment while maintaining readiness to respond to contingencies and ensure long-term warfighting readiness."<sup>12</sup>

Finally, dynamic force employment as a process speaks to the challenge of expanding requirements and diminishing resources. Two developments after Smith's article was published highlighted these requirements and resources challenges—the establishment of the all-volunteer force in 1973 and the reduction of forces after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Smith's recommendations that USPACOM and USEUCOM control all conventional forces also reflect timeless questions concerning forward-deployed forces, pre-positioned equipment, and sufficient airlift and sealift capacities. For example, concerns have recently been raised regarding the size and state of US airlift and sealift capabilities as

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11. "Global Force Management," The Lightning Press, <https://www.thelightningpress.com/global-force-management-gfm/>.

12. James N. Mattis, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, January 19, 2018).

the latter has shown to be insufficient and of questionable readiness.<sup>13</sup> These capabilities are elements of the broader processes by which the Department of Defense considers certain activities such as establishing a forward element of the Army V Corps in Poland.<sup>14</sup>

Smith's analysis and recommendations foreshadowed the need for the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 and today's unified command structure. The law restructured the Department of Defense and the Joint Force, streamlining the chain of command in an effort to ensure effective Joint operations. Accordingly, the legislation addressed some of the issues highlighted by the Blue Ribbon Panel and by Smith. Smith's recommendations also pointed toward today's UCS, which has seven geographic combatant commands, four functional combatant commands, and the Defense Logistics Agency. For example, he advocated for the Strategic Command and what later became the Defense Logistics Agency.

There were several things Smith did not foresee, such as the need for a unified transportation command and the proliferation of area unified commands to encompass the entire globe. Perhaps more importantly Smith did not foresee the immense changes in the space and cyber domains that would emerge by 2020. Even science fiction of the day, such as Stanley Kubrick's 1968 masterpiece *2001: A Space Odyssey* and its antagonist HAL, the spaceship's computer, only hinted at the challenges space, cyber, and artificial intelligence would come to present. These challenges were driving factors for the global integration concept, intended to win future wars in which belligerents vie for superiority in the cyber, space, air, sea, and land domains across the globe. Winning such wars requires maximizing effectiveness across the Joint functions.

## Conclusion

For its time, Smith's article was accurate and insightful, demonstrating the kind of analysis necessary for periodic reviews of the unified command structure. He understood such a study had to balance multiple tensions including effectiveness versus efficiency, service preferences for flexibility versus a focus on a specific mission, forward-deployed versus home-station forces and equipment, and the amount and type of airlift and sealift capabilities needed versus their cost. Some of Smith's more extensive recommendations were prescient. The Department of Defense would later consolidate strategic attack and defense forces under one unified command and create a unified command for logistics.

Smith's article is an exemplar of the importance of reading old works. His fellow US Army War College faculty member Colonel John

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13. David B. Larter, "The US Army Is Preparing to Fight in Europe, but Can It Even Get There?" *Defense News*, October 8, 2018, <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2018/10/08/the-army-is-preparing-to-fight-in-europe-but-can-it-even-get-there/>.

14. John Vandiver, "Army's V Corps, with a Long History in Europe, Is Back in Action," *Stars and Stripes*, October 16, 2020, <https://www.stripes.com/news/army-s-v-corps-with-a-long-history-in-europe-is-back-in-action-1.648804>.

“Jack” McCuen’s 1966 book, *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War*, remains an essential part of any counterinsurgency reading list.<sup>15</sup> McCuen’s book and personal efforts were invaluable in crafting the counterinsurgency doctrine in Iraq and Afghanistan, which came full circle to the 1960s challenge of insurgency. Similarly, Smith’s efforts have come full circle to the broader questions on how to organize US military forces at the strategic level. Both officers based their writing on Korean War and Vietnam War experiences. They gained their wisdom through study and practice—the old-fashioned way; in short, they earned it. Today’s readers can profit from their efforts.

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15. John J. McCuen, *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War* (1966; repr., St. Petersburg, FL: Hailer Publishing, 2005).