

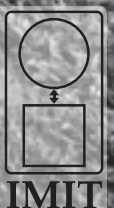
MANAGEMENT

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**Military incompetence
revisited**



Military incompetence revisited

Norman Dixon's 'On The Psychology of Military Incompetence' published forty years ago is still relevant.¹ Today, competence, excellence and professionalism are perennial themes in research and policy circles. However, there is every reason to pay equal attention to incompetence. When it comes to executive functions and high positions the dangers of incompetence often match or even outweigh the promises of excellence.

av Christopher Dandeker

Examples of military incompetence are legion. The US led invasion of Iraq in 2003 - especially the post-conflict phase of operations - was criticised as a defeat or a fiasco. The recently published 'Chilcot Report' into the UK's role cataloguing many unnecessary errors, should make for sobering reading by senior military officers, and civilian government officials involved in the decision-making processes.² Paradoxically, in today's military circles most talk is not about incompetence but focused on professional excellence as the basis of military effectiveness, the self-identity of military personnel and how the military projects itself to wider society from which it garners resources.

There has always been what might be called a 'dark side' of military professionalism: a potential for technical and/or moral incompetence leading to organizational dysfunction. For Dixon, incompetence might appear to comprise 'stupid acts' but these are rarely caused by stupidity or stupid people and much more likely to be the result of authoritarianism.

The authoritarian general is described as one who is conforming, submissive to authority, punitive, sexually inhibited, over-controlled, ethnocentric, anti-intellectual, assailed by doubts as to his virility, anal-obsessive, superstitious, status-hungry, rigid, possessed of a closed mind, and saturated in discipline. Given this basic personality core, several other characteristics such as fear-of-failure and group-think are derived as logical extensions.³

A combat commander with these characteristics is likely to be in trouble when dealing with the fast moving complexity of real operations. However, such qualities are, in fact, well suited to the context in which armed forces spend most of their time - namely at peace and conducting peacetime routines. The military profession is most unusual in that, unlike other professions, it spends most of its time

of losing the approval of others...⁵ Gordon discusses Rear Admiral Markham in command of a division of ships, based in his flagship HMS Camperdown and under the overall command of the Commander in Chief of the Mediterranean station, Vice Admiral Sir George Tryon, whose flag flew in HMS Victoria. HMS Victoria was rammed by HMS Camperdown when the latter ship sought to obey what was an impossible

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training for war rather than actually practicing it. When faced with the reality of war, some commanders who seem perfectly acceptable in peace prove hopeless and have to be removed. However, the trouble with Dixon's approach is that he explains incompetence in terms of psychological universals not the contexts in which commanders find themselves: some officers, such as General Douglas MacArthur in the Korean War, could be authoritarian and incompetent in one setting yet 'autocratic' and effective in another.

Andrew Gordon develops Dixon's distinction or spectrum between autocratic and authoritarian commanders.⁴ Dixon himself illustrates the opposite of authoritarianism with the example of Admiral Jacky Fisher, the driving force behind pre-1914 Royal Navy reforms. Fisher was 'autocratic but non-authoritarian, highly motivated to achieve but not deflected by the fear

command in terms of a safe turning circle given the current disposition of ships especially the distance between their lines. The critical point here was - and remains - whether an officer should always obey an order even if, although legal, it appears incompetent and impossible to obey without causing danger and loss of life, as was the case in this instance. It might well be that commanders least prone to disaster are not autocrats per se but assertive leaders with a clear sense of direction, a capacity to listen to subordinates and carry them with him or her.

Whichever audience is judging performance, what is the standard of incompetence being applied? The field of negligence suggests that incompetence can be understood as 'negligent error'. Legally, negligence involves three elements, which together entail an obligation to pay compensation for loss: the person must be shown to have a duty of care for the

client; the action or failure to act must be demonstrated to have fallen below the standard expected of a competent individual equivalent to the person under investigation; and the breach of duty must be shown to have caused loss – either financial or in some other significant way, for example physical damage to a person and/or the property of that person. In the field of negligence there are two trends: first, the spread of claims for negligence in society because more people make use of a variety of professional experts in their daily life. Second, citizens have become more aware of their rights and less trusting or sceptical of authority figures, including the very experts on which they have to rely in their lives.

Responses to negligent error depend on whether the professional group concerned is housed in a client-controlled organization [as is the military in the state controlled armed forces] and the extent to which individuals are more or less insulated from scrutiny and judgement by agencies outside the employing organization. Transparency and wider regulation have become dominant norms so that once relatively insulated professionals such as academics and the military are so no longer. In the UK for example, the Supreme Court rulings of June 2013 confirmed that the Ministry of Defence could be sued for negligence; the scope of Human Rights was extended into military space, particularly operational areas; and there was a narrowing of the interpretation of the idea of combat immunity.

Professional assertive action challenges incompetent or ill-informed orders - ones that will lead to unacceptable risk such as death and injury of personnel and the destruction of an aircraft, ship or other unit. Of relevance here is civil aviation and the 'cross-cockpit authority gradient'. Officers under Admiral Beatty in 1913 were encouraged to act in ways that 'entailed reflex-responding to certain situations – taking their orders from the enemy – unless told otherwise...'

[w]here the gradient is steep, the co-pilot is reluctant to intervene when he thinks the senior pilot may be doing something wrong; and, allegedly, those airlines are the safest which foster the shallowest gradients.⁶

As is well known, the gradient issue is connected with the culture not only of the organization but that of the wider society: this is a key theme in the cross-cultural

work of Hofstede, especially on the relative power-distance relations in difference cultures.

culture encouraging the reporting of errors without punishment, with time and support for professional reflection. Even

” *Transparency and wider regulation have become dominant norms so that once relatively insulated professionals such as academics and the military are so no longer* ”

To conclude: a key problem is the potential clash between rank and professional authority: when one's professional knowledge leads one to conclude that an incompetent order is either impossible to follow or will materially damage the unit. Competence is based not only on knowledge and practice of routines, essential as these are for effective performance, but imagination and flexibility to deal with the sudden and unexpected. This is the heart of true professional competence. It will not flourish unless there is a high trust, 'just'

when decisions are urgent, with only seconds to act, thinking before acting are watchwords. What have been called high-reliability organizations blend professional expertise with the authority of rank to best respond to crises or hazards when error could lead to disaster: the nuclear submarine is the classic example – here wartime hazards converge with those of peace.

Future research should focus not only on how competence is nurtured but how incompetence is identified and weeded out. ●

¹ Norman Dixon, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence*, Jonathan Cape, 1976

² <http://www.iraquiry.org.uk/the-report/>

³ Donald D. Penner, *Review of Norman Dixon, The Psychology of Military Incompetence*, Pimlico 1976, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Jun., 1981), 307-310, 308

⁴ Andrew Gordon, *The Rules of the Game: Jutland and British Naval Command*, John Murray 1996,

⁵ Dixon, 337.

⁶ Andrew Gordon, *The Battle of Jutland and the cross-fleet authority gradient*, *Naval Institute Proceedings*, forthcoming.

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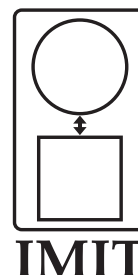
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