

Under His Master's Command or what Shakespeare can teach us about command and control

Topic 9: Other C2-related research and analysis

Steve Rohan-Jones
University of Queensland
steverj97@gmail.com

Abstract

Writing during the Elizabethan age of England during the 1590s and early 1600s, playwright William Shakespeare pursued the topic of war, civil unrest and related uncertainty in 21 of his plays. This pursuit reflected the wider tumultuous environment of the Elizabethan age (1558-1603), which was witness to considerable mutability of language, religion, ideas, identity, work, the social order, and command and control. Old sensibilities, certainties and behaviours were in flux from factors such as rising commercial transformation and business wealth that threatened the power of the landed aristocracy, the rule of a virgin queen in a world of men, and uncertainty from the ever-present threat of war and civil unrest to Elizabeth's rule and her nascent nation. This paper examines Shakespeare's representation of command and control in a period of friction and complexity with a focus on human behaviours. I will argue that understanding the dynamic interplay of key actors within a system, their decision-making process, their self-consciousness and employment of the system is essential to the effective application of the overall system. Current commentators insist that our current age is unparalleled with unprecedented events, Black Swans, and levels of complexity hitherto unseen. Accordingly, I will show that the comparable level of uncertainty during the Elizabethan age to contemporary times affords an opportunity to draw on Shakespeare for lessons on human actions in command and control systems for the present.

1 AN AGE OF UNCERTAINTY

In an age of uncertainty and transformation with war in Europe, the international order in flux, a rising power challenging the status quo, internal strife, the end of history (maybe), a mutable language where truth required discernment and discretion, plague causing death and widespread economic decline, events were seemingly unprecedented. What decade are we talking about?

Sounds like the 2020s. Instead it is England in the 1590s. The long reign of Elizabeth I neared the end leaving succession unclear. Internationally the continent remained embroiled in a series of conflicts or cagey hostilities, and the Nine Years' War against English rule started in Ireland in 1593. Internally, plague caused 15,000 deaths in London and forced closure of the theatres – a new economic enterprise – on several occasions. Censors and spies kept careful watch of potential plots, sedition and rebellion. While, the first English language dictionary was yet to be published

(1604) to create a semblance of linguistic order and shared meaning [1]. So, to paraphrase George Santayana those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. Specifically, for this paper, we will turn to the prolific playwright and 'poet of nature' William Shakespeare (1564-1614) to learn from history and literature [2].

1.1 SHAKESPEARE AND STRATEGY

Published in 1623, *The First Folio* contains 36 of Shakespeare's plays including the world-renowned *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Henry V*. Known for his nuanced depiction of humans and the complex nature of their behaviours and decisions, Shakespeare has bequeathed us memorable characters such as Lady Macbeth, Iago, Falstaff, and Cleopatra. Certainly, over 400 years after his death, Shakespeare continues to influence language, literature and our understanding of being human. Familiar phrases drawn from his quill such as 'To be or not to be', all the world's a stage, 'brevity is the soul of wit' and 'et tu

Brutus' remain relevant and contemporary. And the playwright's impact has reached into military and strategy affairs with the then Major Dwight Eisenhower, later Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force during the Second World War and subsequently the 34th US President, educated in Shakespeare to prepare for his later role at the highest levels of strategy, military and politics [3]. Clearly, Eisenhower was not unfamiliar with the concept of 'command and control', even if the term during his time was in its infancy. Of course, neither, therefore, was Shakespeare's, although his plays include over 300 uses of the words command and control [4]. Rather, as we shall see, it is in kingship that there lies a parallel with our understanding command and control.

You may rightly point out that our present locus lies in the grip of the second quantum revolution, which exploits the behaviour of individual quantum systems and will likely transform many fields such as sensing, navigation, decision making, communications, risk assessment and climate modelling [5]. Such technological and temporal displacement from Shakespeare begs the question what can a sixteenth century English dramatist tell us about command and control in the modern world?

2 AIMS OF THIS PAPER

An exploration of kingship or what we would term command and control provides important insights concerning its political nature, the need for legitimacy within both the appointment and the person of the commander, the misnomer of the separation between reason and emotion, and understanding the decision-making process. So, what is kingship and how does it relate to command and control?

3 KINGSHIP AND COMMAND AND CONTROL

With wars and civil unrest and related uncertainty featured in 21 of Shakespeare's plays kingship and related subjects – power, legitimacy, rule, command, politics – are well trodden paths for literary and political exploration. *Julius Caesar* deals with power and government, *1 Henry IV* and *2 Henry IV* deals with succession and legitimacy, *The Tempest* with control, *Coriolanus* with tactics and strategy, *Cymbeline* with war and peace, *Measure for Measure* with the rule of law, *Henry V* with command and leadership, *Hamlet* with decision making, and *Richard III* with the exercise of power. The plays demonstrate that kingship lies at the intersection of the king, church, state, subject and self. But what is kingship?

During Elizabeth's reign England experienced profound changes and decisive social pressures: religious warfare,

the rise of nationalism, and foreign wars characterised the era. In this multi-dimensional environment kingship is the art of ruling through making complex ethical judgments in and using religion, state, war and rhetoric to preserve both the state and the state of being. Kingship lies clearly in the realm and remit of a king to perform and is linked to military action and conflict.

Sir Thomas Smith, one of the key political theorists of Elizabethan England, in his influential *De Republica Anglorum* (1583), asserted that the king "hath absolutely in his power the authority of war and peace, to defy what Prince it shall please him, and to bid him war, and again to reconcile himself and enter into league or truce with him at his pleasure or the advice only of his privy council" [6]. In the Elizabethan state, Smith claims, a king or in this case, the queen, is the legitimate authority for the initiation of war. As represented in Shakespeare's plays, including *1 Henry IV*, *Henry V* and *Richard III*, a king, as part of their job description is expected to command troops at war. Richard II outlines the role of a king to his court and bickering subordinates (the Dukes of Hereford and Norfolk) as "We were not born to sue but to command" (*Richard II* 1.1.196). Richard's public proclamation testament to the authority, direction and power to issue orders associated with a king. Further both *Richard II* and the aforementioned history plays show no separation between head of state, head of government and army commander. Within the chaos, uncertainty and violence of both the times and war, a king holds the legal authority over subordinate forces to accomplish the mission.

3.1 MODERN DEFINITIONS OF COMMAND AND CONTROL

Likewise, for military operations, NATO defines command and control as the exercise of authority and direction by a designated commander over assigned forces to accomplish a military mission. It encompasses the leadership, direction, and arrangement of personnel, equipment, communications, facilities, and procedures to effectively plan, monitor, and control military operations. Command and control is crucial for enabling effective decision-making and coordination within military operations. Table 1 shows this highly rational and functionally focussed definition shares a considerable overlap between the United States (US), Australia and NATO, including the role of a military commander and the lawful exercise of authority. Likely the close ties of these Western based forces contribute to this similarity of language within the definition, which has hardly varied since the 1980s. Indeed prior to this period military doctrine primarily referred to "command" rather than "command and control."

As we have seen, there is a parallel between kingship and command and control, which, despite their temporal separation, are mostly synonymous. Both require the appointment (whether divine, democratic or delegated) of a commander to exercise lawful authority over forces to accomplish an aim. What varies is the *who* of the appointment: king (both ruler and military commander) or military officer (commander only). Importantly, the *what* of command and control remains the same – the function being to use resources to achieve a designated mission.

4 POLITICS AND COMMAND AND CONTROL

Modern Western democracies accept civilian supremacy over their armed forces as a fundamental principle. This level of civilian control extends to “those civilians who control the military and police must themselves be subject to the democratic process” [7]. Writing prior to the development of the modern state, this traditional view starts with Plato wrestling with the philosophical and practical problem of who guards the guardians themselves? In other words, can we trust the armed protectors of the city from foreign threats to resist becoming an internal danger to the city. For Plato, lacking the financial, legal and bureaucratic norms available to modern states to restrain or constrain the military, the answer to this paradox is psychological. Educating the noble puppy to bark at strangers and respect the hand (the city) that feeds it provides the basis of this approach along with promoting and rewarding virtue through honour.

Within contemporary democracies the popularly elected government holds legitimate authority from electoral success and the military owes allegiance or is subordinate to the government rather than the state [8]. In short, the command of the armed forces rests in the hands of politicians; there is a separation between commander and president or prime minister.

4.1 KING AND COMMANDER

We see within Shakespeare’s plays, especially the histories, a king is frequently both head of state and military commander. King Henry V successfully, at least temporarily, defeats the French in the Battle of Agincourt 1415. His father, King Henry IV, quells an internal rebellion at the Battle of Shrewsbury. Kings are expected to be both commanders and leaders. For Shakespeare’s kings command and control is inherently political for they are the legitimate authority if not the legitimate government, parliament notwithstanding. The opening scene of *Henry V* depicts the military expectations of the king:

Then should the warlike Harry, like himself,
Assume the port of Mars, and at his heels,
Leashed in like hounds, should famine, sword, and fire
Crouch for employment. (*Henry V*, Prologue 5-8).

As commander, Henry V must imitate the God of War and in doing so his army will ‘crouch for employment’ and enact his authority on the battlefields of France. Yet, as king Henry bears a wider remit for administration and order within the state. The Archbishop of Canterbury lauds him for his all-round ability saying if you: “Turn him to any cause of policy, / The Gordian knot of it he will unloose” (*Henry V*, 1.1 45-46). For Henry policy, politics and command are intertwined.

While the norm for military commanders in democracies is to remain apolitical, their need to navigate politics and understand political contexts remains true for them as much as Henry. Since Clausewitz’s oft quoted phrase where war operates as an instrument or continuation of policy by other means directly associates war with politics, organisation and the state as both the instigator and means of organising, we continue to see the military used as an instrument of politics including the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the US and Israeli bombing of Iranian nuclear facilities [9]. Yet these present day actions, taken outside of the sanction of international law, call into question the potential legitimacy of command and control.

5 LEGITIMACY AND COMMAND AND CONTROL

The current definitions of command and control (Table 1) are a rational, bureaucratic administrative summation of the function. The assumption, ongoing since the 1980s, is that to lawfully exercise authority (as a commander wielding command and control) you must have legitimacy. Where does this come from? From the appointment as a commander? Maybe, this is the case for Shakespeare’s Henry V, who is both king and commander, and as we see from Smith the ‘king is a legitimate authority.’ This raises the question of how such legitimacy is attained for modern commanders within Western democracies. If the popularly elected government of such democracies acts unlawfully regarding war and the use of military force, how does this impact the command and control?

Shakespeare explores this thorny issue in a scene within *Henry V* when a disguised King Henry encounters his troops on the eve of the forthcoming battle of Agincourt. The concealed king announces to his soldiers he would be content to die in the King’s company ‘his cause being just and his quarrel honourable’ (*Henry V*, 4.1.119). Williams, a soldier, responds: ‘That’s more than we know’

(*Henry V*, 4.1.120) and Bates, a fellow soldier, enjoins ‘we know / enough if we know we are the King’s subjects. If his cause / be wrong, our obedience to the King wipes the crime of it / out of us’ ((*Henry V*, 4.1.121-124). Here responsibility, according to Bates, as a cipher for Henry’s army, lies with the appointee, the commander, which in this case is the king. While we seem to be straying into justness and legitimacy, we must accept in our current world these terms have considerable weight. For example, based on their operational experiences through the first quarter of this century, the US added legitimacy to its principle of joint operations stating “The perception of legitimacy maintains legal and moral authority at both the national and international levels” (JP 1-1 *Joint Warfighting*, 2023, II-15). Noting these changes and Shakespeare’s intimation that legitimacy is essential to the initiation of war and its conduct, is it time to reconfigure the definition of command and control to incorporate aspects of legitimacy rather than assume its existence? At the very least we need to explore these assumptions of legitimacy cloaked, like Henry with his troops, within the bureaucratic formality of the current definition.

6 LEGITIMACY OF THE SELF

This state or system level view of legitimacy neglects the individual level. The formation of identity or self occurs through a dynamic intersubjective exchange between the self and other. These interchanges often create friction and discomfort as the self responds to this experience. The legitimacy of a commander and therefore command and control rests on a combination of state or system level investiture and individual validation or personal legitimacy. The Elizabethan age was part of the early modern period where Stephen Greenblatt has asserted that there was an increased “self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity” [10].

In Shakespeare, the king self-fashioning implies a search for individual legitimacy and validity, which occurs through exchanges with other characters. This occurs in the so-called wooing scene between King Henry V and Princess Katherine of France. In this scene Henry seeks to seek the love of Katherine having just defeated the French army at Agincourt. Despite his entreaties for love from Katherine and thus validating his identity as a lover, Henry, despite his much vaunted linguistic mastery, is unsuccessful. In settling for duty he may have failed to convince both us and Katherine, and himself, his attempts are no less significant for their occurrence and validation of his self and identity. Validation does not always mean success, nor acquisition of a new arrow to your quiver, it can just as equally mean failure and

confirmation of what you are not or not yet.

Similarly in *Henry V* subjects such as Falstaff and Michael Williams are not mere ciphers, rather they show a similar propensity for inwardness and imagination arising from encounters with the king. The dramatic interplay between the characters actively represents a more complex understanding of legitimacy than we see captured in the field. This is significant because this concept expands legitimate authority (and thereby legitimacy) beyond a narrow legalistic and rationalistic approach to encompass Shakespeare’s representation of a human centred approach to the concepts. Moreover as this concept of self parallels with our notions of the self, we must incorporate, or at least consider, the impact of the individual level of legitimacy within the modern concept of command and control.

7 THE RATIONALITY OF COMMAND AND CONTROL

The current definition of C2 is highly rational, it assumes a rational actor within a rational world. This creates a binary between reason and emotion, simplicity and complexity, bureaucracy and clarity. The current definition appears to excise the human (the commander) and the decision-making process from consideration. This is especially relevant in a world of uncertainty and rapid technological shifts where nanotechnology, quantum computers, quantum information processing, and others will soon shape our daily lives, which will have profound implications for a wide range of fields, including global peace and security, and therefore the employment of military force. A commander decides and is fundamental to command and control. What can we learn from Shakespeare in this regard?

7.1 HAMLET AND DECISION MAKING

Let’s focus our attention on *Hamlet*, which is about decision making. Early in the play the Ghost, which we discover is Hamlet’s father and the previous King of Denmark, urges Hamlet to revenge his (the dead king’s) regicide at the hands of his brother, Claudius. A friend of Hamlet, Horatio pronounces the sight of the Ghost “wondrous strange” (*Hamlet*, 1.5.166) to which Hamlet responds, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in our philosophy” (*Hamlet*, 1.5.168-169). Here Hamlet decries the limits of human knowledge of reason in decisions as Sarah Shea argues “reason alone cannot be the sole arbitrator for decision making for Hamlet” [11]. Ironically Hamlet, caught by his passions, or what we might call emotions, must marry these seemingly competing forces to arrive at a decision. In fact, the whole play works through Hamlet’s decision-making process during the extreme pressure of

a personal and political crisis.

Hamlet's famous 'to be or not to be' speech shows the depth and weight of his emotions as he struggles to align decision with action. He is often criticised for his delay and inaction, yet he is trying to form a coherent picture through the competing lens of reason and emotion. Indeed, from an economic perspective of rational choice there is evidence to suggest his delay to gather evidence is entirely rational given the situation. If he kills his uncle will this precipitate a crisis – constitutional, familial, political, and strategic. As Shakespeare makes clear through Hamlet when making choices, a human being formulates their cognitive judgments on the basis of their affective experience. Modern research confirms intense emotions moderate or modify the cognitive processes that are a part of decision making [12]. Therefore, in the light of both Shakespeare's representations and current scientific knowledge, the complexity and importance of emotional processes must be accounted when analysing the decision-making processes.

Commanders make decisions, which automatically comprise affective experience and judgement. The apparent 'cold logic' of formalism of the now almost 50 year old definition of command and control may require a similar infusion of Shakespeare and current science to modernise it.

8 A WAY FORWARD

The critical reception of Shakespeare started with the first patrons to his plays. Since then both theatre goers and critics have wrestled with interpreting his plays. Modern scholars contend Shakespeare's ability to elicit the nuance of human behaviours, emotions, actions, politics in an age when a misstep may result in imprisonment, ruin or death that is at the heart of his success. Similarly, we can invoke the lessons of this past to reconsider the validity, legitimacy and utility of command and control for both now and in the future. For, if nothing else, unlike Shakespeare such an exploration is unlikely to get us censored, closed or cancelled.

9 REFERENCES

- [1] Ref 1 Dr Samuel Johnson's well-known *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) is typically and mistakenly referred to as the first English language dictionary. However, Robert Cawdrey's *A Table Alphabeticall*, the first English dictionary was published in 1604 - a year after the end of the Elizabethan age – and contained around 3,000 words.
- [2] Ref 2 Dr Samuel Johnson's famous phrase from Johnson, Dr Samuel, 'Preface' (1765) to *Johnson on Shakespeare, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson* edited by Arthur Sherbo, Yale UP, 1968, vol. 7, p. 62.
- [3] Campbell, Peter and Jordan, Richard, 'Forming the Grand Strategist According to Shakespeare,' *Texas National Security Review* Vol. 3, No 1 (Winter 2019/2020), pp. 13-14. Rohde, Peter, P., *The Quantum Internet: The Second Quantum Revolution*, Cambridge UP, 2021, p. 1.
- [4] Online word search of *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd Edition, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, Norton, 2016.
- [5] Rohde, Peter. P., *The Quantum Internet: The Second Quantum Revolution*, Cambridge UP, 2021, p.1.
- [6] Smith, Sir Thomas, *De Republica Anglorum: A Discourse on the Commonwealth of England*, edited by Leonard Alston, Irish UP, 1972, pp.58-59.
- [7] Dahl, Robert A., *Democracy and its Critics*, Yale UP, 1989, p. 245.
- [8] Explored in *The Military and the Problem of Legitimacy*, edited by Gwyn Harries-Jenkins and Jacques van Doorn Sage, 1976.
- [9] Clausewitz, Carl von., *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton UP, 1976.
- [10] Greenblatt, Stephen, *Shakespearean Negotiations: the Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, U of California P, 2018, p. 2.
- [11] Shea, Sarah A., 'A Dionysian Hamlet', *Shakespeare and Politics: What a Sixteenth-Century Playwright Can Tell Us About Twenty-First-Century Politics*, edited by Bruce Altschuler and Michael Genovese, Routledge, 2016, p.59.
- [12] Bechara, Antoine, Damasio, Hanna, and Damasio, Antonio R., "Emotion, Decision Making and the Orbitofrontal Cortex," *Cerebral Cortex*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2000, pp. 295-307. <https://doi:10.1093/cercor/10.3.295>. See also <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/B9780444626042000034>

Annex A – Modern Definitions of Command and Control

Publication	Command and control	Command	Control
Australian Doctrine (ADF-P-0 Command Edition 1 AL 1, 2024)		<p>The authority which a commander in the military lawfully exercises over subordinates by virtue of rank or assignment.</p> <p>Notes:</p> <p>1. Command includes the authority and responsibility for effectively using available resources and for planning the employment of organising, directing, coordinating and controlling military forces for the accomplishment of assigned missions.</p> <p>2. It also includes responsibility for health, welfare, morale and discipline of assigned personnel.</p>	<p>The authority exercised by a commander over part of the activities of subordinate organisations, or other organisations not normally under their command, which encompasses their responsibility for implementing orders or directives</p> <p>Note: All or part of this authority may be transferred or delegated.</p>
NATO Doctrine (AJP-01 Ed F Version 1 Dec 2022)	The authority, responsibilities and activities of military commanders in the direction and coordination of military forces as well as the implementation of orders related to the execution of operations	The authority vested in a member of the armed forces for the direction, coordination, and control of military forces.	The authority exercised by a commander over part of the activities of subordinate organizations, or other organizations not normally under their command, encompassing the responsibility for implementing orders or directives
US Doctrine (JP 1 Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the US 2013)	The exercise of authority and direction by a properly designated commander over assigned and attached forces in the accomplishment of the mission. Also called C2	The authority that a commander in the armed forces lawfully exercises over subordinates by virtue of rank or assignment.	Authority that may be less than full command exercised by a commander over part of the activities of subordinate or other organizations

Table 1: Selected modern definitions of command and control