

WHY KM MATTERS

Look at the French Revolution, the Holy Roman Emperor Francis II, and the Ulm Campaign of 1805

By COL Kristin A. Ellis

Why knowledge management is vitally important is revealed through the French Revolution, the Holy Roman Emperor Francis II, and the Ulm Campaign of 1805.

Many Signal Soldiers will argue that the “why” behind KM is so intuitive that it doesn’t merit serious consideration. The apparent answer is that in this information age technology has so dramatically increased the volume, fidelity, and velocity of information available to commanders, that we are at the point where a new discipline and new functions are required.

However this answer completely misses the mark for why we must have vigorous knowledge management.

Everything we do in the Army is intended to produce an effect. Using the Signal Corps’ approach to KM, the effect we seek with KM would seem to be, “dominant knowledge.”

However, in this essay, I intend to show that the Army is absolutely not chasing “knowledge” with KM, and that the main effects we intend to produce with KM are not internal (inside our collective brain housing group) but almost entirely external.

Once we better understand the effects the Army seeks with KM, we can better shape the Signal Regiment’s role in supporting the effort. Knowledge is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as (i) expertise, and skills acquired by a person through experience or education; the theoretical or practical understanding of a subject; (ii) what is known in a particular field or in total; facts and information; or (iii) be absolutely certain or sure about something. By any of its definitions, knowledge would appear to be a very powerful commodity in war. Unfortunately, military leaders throughout history have admonished that the pursuit of knowledge in warfare is almost pointless.

Commanders have long struggled with the dichotomy of knowledge in war which offers too much information and no information at all. As far back as the Battle of Salamis (480 BC), commanders

have wrestled with being completely blind to the current situation, and being completely overwhelmed by information. Clausewitz speaks in depth about this dichotomy in Chapter VI, Book I, of “On War” (a chapter entitled “Information in War”). So does Robert S. McNamara in the documentary “The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara.” John Keegan’s “Intelligence in War: Knowledge of the Enemy from Napoleon to Al-Qaeda” describes how dozens of commanders have struggled with knowledge in war.

For the past 2,500 years, commanders have lamented their problems with the volume, quality, and velocity of information.

There is nothing new or revolutionary about KM hurdles. Information overload is the immutable, natural state of war. So is an absolute lack of information.

The title of TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-0, The Army Capstone Concept, is “Operational Adaptability: Operating under Conditions of Uncertainty and Complexity in an Era of Persistent Conflict, 2016-2028.” BG H. R. McMaster was one of the main authors of the ACC, and knowing a little about BG McMaster helps put the ACC and knowledge/certainty in war into greater context. In November 2003, then COL McMaster published a paper entitled “Cracks in the Foundation: Defense Transformation and the Underlying Assumption of Dominant Knowledge in Future War” which he had written while he was at the Army War College. The paper was a scathing indictment of (then) Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s model for defense transformation. The fact that COL McMaster authored a paper directly challenging the intellectual underpinnings of Secretary Rumsfeld’s vision of defense transformation while the secretary was at the pinnacle of his political power is a testimony to the strength of BG McMaster’s convictions regarding “knowledge” and warfare.

The ACC is a natural continuation of the

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positions that COL McMaster outlines so strongly in "Cracks in the Foundation." By way of example, while the word "knowledge" appears 10 times in the ACC, the word "uncertainty" appears 41 times. The ACC does not make an underlying assumption of dominant knowledge in future war – quite the opposite - it assumes uncertainty in future war. So, if the Army has officially embraced "uncertainty" over "knowledge" with the ACC, why all this talk of KM in 2011? Shouldn't we be talking of UM--uncertainty management instead? And why, after 2,500+ years of frustration, would KM suddenly be raising its head as a new discipline?

I think the answer to "Why KM" is much deeper than knowledge. In fact, I think the "K" in knowledge management has little to do with "knowledge" as most of us understand the word.

As I sit here typing this essay in February 2011, I am watching events unfold in Egypt and Libya. During the last few years, I have also seen Howard Dean's 2004 campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination use the Internet to revolutionize political fundraising. I watched the birth of Wiki Leaks. I saw "Google" and "Friend" become verbs. I witnessed the power of eBay and its customer-driven ratings system. I watched smart during the 2005 civil unrest in France. I witnessed the rise of electronic civil disobedience. I saw international flash mobs like Worldwide Pillow Fight Day in 2008. I watched as celebrity dimwits, political visionaries, party hacks, struggling freelance writers, loud-mouthed pundits, and just plain folks have become as influential to molding public opinion as academics, professional columnists, elected officials, and policy experts.

I watched Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld express frustrations about confronting al Qaeda (with an annual operating budget in the low seven-figures) with a multi-trillion dollar organization (the Department of Defense). I saw Encarta, an encyclopedia funded by one of the richest and most technologically savvy companies on earth (the Microsoft Corporation), with paid contributors and world-class editors, being crushed by a free, volunteer, collaborative encyclopedia (Wikipedia). I watched as third-generation militaries stood by completely unable to provide utility during the Orange Revolution, the Bulldozer Revolution, the Cedar Revolution, the Tulip Revolution, and the Velvet Revolution.

There are powerful and revolutionary social and political forces at work in the world.

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From Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's use of satyagraha (total nonviolence) to defeat the British Empire (and the British Army) in the 1940s, to Jody Williams' pioneering use of "People Power" (massively distributed collaboration) to drive trans-national political action in the 1990s, these forces are redefining our understanding of social and political power, and military utility.

Our senior military leaders are watching. The French Revolution was a period of radical social and political upheaval in French and European history. The absolute monarchy that had ruled France for centuries collapsed in three short years. French society underwent an epic transformation as feudal, aristocratic and religious privileges evaporated. Old ideas about hierarchy and tradition succumbed to new Age of Enlightenment principles of citizenship and inalienable rights.

The Holy Roman Emperor Francis II watched closely from Vienna as events unfolded in Paris, but he failed to understand. He misunderstood the social and political forces at work in The French Revolution, and he completely missed the military utility that was being created. When the Grande Armée took the field against the Austrian army in September of 1805, the Austrians saw an untrained, undisciplined, poorly led rabble, without an adequate supply system and with little administrative structure. Less than a month later, the Grande Armée had crushed the Austrians at the Battle of Ulm. In November, the French captured Vienna. On December 2, the decisive French victory at Austerlitz removed Austria from the war.

Napoleon Bonaparte understood the forces that were unleashed during the French Revolution, and he exploited the intrinsic benefits of the revolution to create a new form of military utility. The French Revolution produced a highly motivated and ultra-patriotic citizenry, and this enabled Napoleon to create the first, true, "nation in arm." The French armies were able to successfully break rules because French politicians could disregard

all the normal political and economic restraints imposed on the European armies. For manpower, the French politicians depended not on highly trained and expensive regular troops but on patriotic volunteers and conscripts (in almost unlimited quantities) whose services were virtually free. These hordes of self-sacrificing infantry were the terrible instrument with which Napoleon conquered Europe. They were only available to a government that was prepared to put out men and money without stint, supported by a people who identified themselves with its objectives and who submitted uncomplainingly to the sacrifices it demanded.

Furthermore, the mass exodus of nobility during the revolution purged the army's leadership (which the Austrians saw as a flaw), and opened the officer corps to "natural born" commanders. Napoleon's comment that a marshal's baton could be found inside the knapsack of every soldier adequately described the real possibility of promotion based on talent in the Grande Armée.

Napoleon found military strength in the proper utilization of the social and political forces that drove the French Revolution.

Karl Mack von Leibrich lost the Battle of Ulm in 1805, but the Holy Roman Emperor Francis II lost the war almost a decade before that. Francis II failed to understand the radical social and political forces at work in France in the 1790s. He failed to recognize that these very same forces would revolutionize warfare.

None of our senior leaders want to be Karl Mack or the Holy Roman Emperor Francis II. Senior Army leaders recognize that transformational social and political forces are at work in the world in 2011. And just as Clausewitz puzzled over the performance of the French revolutionary armies, our generals are puzzling over the U.S. Army's performance in Iraq and Afghanistan. Military leaders around the world know that many of the old rules no longer apply, but they are struggling to understand the new rules.

One of the ways Army leaders are grappling with these new rules is with the term "Knowledge Management." (Think it's not a struggle? Then why can't we even agree on the definition of the term?)

KM isn't about information usage patterns, information access points, taxonomy, or information flow. It isn't about connecting those who know with those who need to know. KM isn't about the art (or science) of creating, organizing, applying, and transferring knowledge to facilitate situational understanding and decision making. KM isn't about an integrated approach to identifying, retrieving, evaluating, and sharing an enterprise's tacit and explicit knowledge assets to meet mission objectives.

KM isn't about knowledge at all - not in the traditional sense of the word. Instead, KM is about the Holy Roman Emperor Francis II, Jody Williams, satyagraha, smart mobs, the death of Encarta, and the 2011 revolution in Egypt. KM is about social and political

forces that we don't yet fully understand, can't name, and have little or no idea how to harness.

KM is about accurately predicting why, where, when, and how these same forces will act next. KM is about senior military leaders knowing that they are becoming bystanders to history, and not liking it. Creating a brilliantly integrated approach to identifying, retrieving, evaluating, and sharing an enterprise's tacit and explicit knowledge assets will be successful if and only if that approach leads to the U.S. Army harnessing transformational social and political forces to achieve mission objectives. That is "Why KM." And once we understand that, it may take us down some very different paths than KM for the sake of mere knowledge management. Beware the cool rationality of our traditional approach to KM.

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ACRONYM QuickScan

ACC - Army Capstone Concept
KM - Knowledge Management

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