Good Morning…
GEN(Ret) Sullivan (AUSA President). It’s great to be in Kansas City.

Good morning everyone. I appreciate everybody taking the time to come out and participate. The work you are doing is extremely important, and I look forward to the outcome of your efforts over the next few days. There is nothing more important to us as an institution than defining Mission Command as we move to the future.

I’d like to offer a few thoughts on the broader context in which that work will take place and, then what I think this means specifically for mission command.

First, we must recognize the growing complexity of the strategic environment. Second, the convergence of technological and political forces has elevated the importance of what might be termed the ‘human aspects’ of that environment, and therefore of military operations. Appreciating what is different, along with what remains the same, will be critical to our future effectiveness. Third, it is only through a cultural shift in the way the Army educates leaders, organizes forces, and conducts operations that we can actually employ mission command in a way that results in the effectiveness we desire.

We cannot afford to tinker on the margins, retaining only the tactical lessons of the past ten years while we return to a traditional comfort zone dominated by force on force, conventional thinking. We should and will capture lessons learned from a decade at war, but our challenge is larger than that…the art of our profession continues to change, and we must change with it. This must be an intellectual and cultural transformation, not one based solely on platforms and precision that we must pursue.
In other words, mission command is absolutely the right approach to current and future military operations. However, it must be a mission command informed by an understanding of our complex environment and executed by an Army that is fully aware of the critical importance of the cultural lenses and technological capabilities through which all our actions will be interpreted.

Let me describe what I mean when I talk about changes in the strategic environment. As you are all aware, much has changed since the world was shaped by the balance of two superpowers.

In the past, relations between states were dominated by central governments with a substantial ability to enforce their borders and to speak for their populations. That framework, while still present, is weaker now, and previously latent actors have emerged to take full advantage of this change. Some of the forces that we deal with today, like criminal groups and social movements, have always existed, but they have become vastly more influential as the norms of the international system have weakened. New actors have emerged, like the global audience that instantaneously observes and interprets our actions or communities of like-minded individuals who come together only in cyberspace.

As our experiences in both Afghanistan and Iraq have shown us, it is difficult to imagine any future situation in which a relationship exists solely between two states, whether an alliance or a conflict. Other regional actors can and will seek to advance their own interests in every situation, and have more tools at their disposal to do so. Sometimes they will work in concert with our own objectives, but at other times we may be in opposition. Regardless of the path they choose, as an Army we need to develop an awareness of these dynamics and use it to inform our actions at all levels, from the strategic to the tactical.
The most fundamental element of the shifts I have described is the growing importance of people, whether we are talking about individuals, local or virtual communities, or entire populations. I don’t mean to imply that humans did not matter in the past. However, much has changed in the way people and governments relate to one another, and a larger number of people are able to affect strategic, operational and tactical outcomes than ever before. Just a few years ago, the concept of the ‘strategic corporal’ whose tactical actions could have strategic effects was revolutionary.

Today, the landscape is populated by strategic soldiers, civilians, and adversaries, each with the ability to instantly broadcast an image or message to a global audience. Consider the crowds in the Arab Awakening, or the internet radicalization of terrorists for evidence of this phenomenon in action.

One consequence of these new ways to share information is the formation of entire communities in cyberspace. Sometimes these groups are composed of individuals widely separated by distance, but united in thought around a cause or an idea. Other times, they appear as a virtual reflection of relationships on the land, like the digital signature of a networked military formation. Regardless of the form they take, such virtual human relationships are not bounded by geography, and represent a new space we must embrace and integrate into our operations alongside the physical terrain as we plan and conduct operations.

At the most basic level, these rapid advances have real ramifications for the future conduct of military operations. For much of the world, the balance between the state, the Army, and the people that Clausewitz described many years ago as the “Golden Trinity” must be looked at differently now. In some cases, defeating an army or deterring a
government may still lead to decisive effects. However, in many future operations, such straightforward outcomes are less and less likely.

As an Army, we must adapt to these changes. That does not mean that we neglect the lessons of the past two hundred years. We remain ready to deploy, to fight, and to win the nation’s wars. However, knowing when, why, and how to change is key to maintaining our effectiveness. That means we overlay our core warfighting skills with a better understanding of human behavior and different cultural lenses.

As the noted British historian John Keegan wrote many years ago in his book *The Face of Battle*: “every battle in world history may be different from every other battle, but they must have something in common if we can group them together at all…it is not something strategic, nor tactical, nor material, nor technical. What battles have in common is human: the behavior of men struggling to reconcile their instinct for self-preservation, their sense of honor and the achievement of some aim over which other men are ready to kill them.” We must expand this enduring insight into all that we do as an Army, from deterring conflict to partnering with allies to decisively winning our nation’s wars. Our charge is to recognize the human aspects of the environment, both physical and virtual, and incorporate them into our thinking, our training, our planning, and our execution.

This brings me to mission command. It has been said that ‘wartime experience often inspires a return to the fundamentals of mission command.’ That remains as true today as when it was first written to address the problems the rigid Prussian Army command had in dealing with challenges presented by Napoleon’s dispersed, flexible forces.

I see Mission Command as the conduct of military operations through decentralized execution, using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander’s intent. Done well, it empowers agile
and adaptive leaders to successfully operate under conditions of uncertainty, exploit fleeting opportunities, and achieve unity of effort. Importantly, it helps establish mutual trust and shared understanding throughout the force. Mission Command is fundamental to ensuring that our Army stays ahead of and adapts to the rapidly changing environments we expect to face in the future.

Put another way, our environment is simply too complex, and our Soldiers and leaders too talented, to attempt to operate through centralized command and control. However, we cannot allow mission command to refer simply to the decentralized execution of commander’s intent. As we continue to refine this concept in our doctrine, Mission Command must integrate all of our Warfighting functions effectively in pursuit of desired objectives. It must serve as the bridge between physical maneuver on the ground and virtual maneuver in cyberspace. It must take the heightened importance of the social and cultural aspects of our actions into account.

It must consider the plethora of information now available and how that information is managed and prioritized to ensure commanders at all levels can make timely effective decisions. This is ultimately the test of Mission Command.

Yes…our leaders must consider the second and third order effects of their actions…but they must also appreciate how others interpret, evaluate and understand.

In my mind, this may either require a seventh Warfighting function to capture the set of tasks related to working with foreign cultures that has become so integral to our current and future missions; Or as a minimum, it demands that we fully reflect the human aspects of this environment within each of our existing six functions. Many in the
Army community have been thinking about these issues, and I am interested in your thoughts on how we can best achieve these goals.

Ultimately, the bottom line is this: for mission command to work, it requires decentralized execution of commander’s intent by leaders and Soldiers at all levels who understand not only what we as an Army intend to achieve, but how those actions and messages will be interpreted by others through their own cultural lenses. As a ground force, we must dominate the land domain and the cyber domain, effectively influencing the behavior of the humans that occupy both. This is only possible with a full understanding of the strategic environment. Absent that understanding, initiative alone will not lead us to the mission command we desire.

I appreciate the opportunity to be here today, and I look forward to the discussions.