

“We Just Declared War”: Buffy as General

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[1] Joss Whedon’s character Buffy Summers has been the subject of a great deal of critical study since first appearing in 1992. Very little of this research, however, has focused on Buffy in her role as military leader¹. As Whedon continues to return to military themes in Season Eight of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, as well as in *Firefly*, *Serenity*, and *Dollhouse*, and as the military experience of Captain America has traditionally been a key element in the diegesis of *The Avengers*, military studies will likely prove to be invaluable to the study of Whedon’s work as a whole². This paper attempts to make a beginning in this area by analyzing Buffy’s command style in the Seventh and Eighth seasons of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, how that style changes between Seasons Seven and Eight, and how successful Buffy’s command style has proven to be. Primarily this analysis will focus on how Buffy meets the five “Imperatives of Command” as defined by military historian John Keegan in his seminal work *The Mask of Command* (311-338). While the art of generalship defies any attempts at reduction into a series of universally applicable rules, Keegan identifies certain key challenges of leadership that all commanders must face. Keegan’s imperatives allow us to examine the manner and methodology by which individual commanders, as people of particular political, social, military, and historical circumstances, answer what Keegan posits as the fundamental question of command: should the commander place herself at the front of battle always, sometimes, or never (314)?

[2] According to Keegan “The successful leader... is the person (women can lead as well as, if not better than, men) who has perceived command’s imperatives and knows how to serve them”

(315) [parenthetical note on gender is Keegan's]. These imperatives are kinship, prescription, sanction, action, and example, and each imperative will be examined here in turn. Their purpose is to allow a leader to successfully commit others to battle and death, while insuring that those so commanded do not feel that they have been exposed to mortal danger needlessly, carelessly, or – most importantly – alone. Keegan writes, “The leader of men in warfare can show himself to his followers only through a mask, a mask that he must make for himself, but a mask made in such form as will mark him to men of his time and place as the leader they want and need” (11). As Buffy becomes the rallying point for the Potential Slayers, and later, the leader of the Slayer Army, she is confronted with these imperatives, and begins to fashion her own mask of command.

[3] The first imperative is that of kinship, meaning the manner in which a commander relates to her army and vice versa. Military leaders must maintain some degree of distance from those they command, or else, as Keegan points out “the commander who shows the love he feels when he gives orders must eventually cripple his will to expose his loved ones to danger” (316). This distance is a critical balancing act for a commander, for she must maintain enough of it to do what is necessary to accomplish her goals, yet not so much that those under her command lose confidence in her leadership. Successful commanders must therefore find a means to provide “access either inward, outward or both” (317). Inward access can be defined as the ability of followers to approach their leader, while outward access is provided by the commander going out amongst her followers.

[4] Buffy instinctively practices outward access. She moves among her followers almost constantly, both on the battlefield and off, even sharing her home with them through force of circumstance in Season Seven and by choice in Season Eight. Additionally, as we see in “Dirty Girls” (B7018) and “End of Days” (B7021) in Season Seven, she makes a point of visiting the wounded and assists in their care. In Season Seven Buffy’s natural style of heroic leadership places her directly beside the Potentials at the point of danger. In a very real, very physical way, the Potentials are assured that Buffy is one of them, and cares for them. This is outward access practiced in the most direct fashion. Buffy also creates a concurrent inward access through this style of leadership, as the Potentials have immediate access to Buffy in their turn.

[5] During the final story-arc of Season Seven, however, Buffy becomes increasingly aware that this closeness is a potential liability. As she tells Robin Wood in “Lies My Parents Told Me,” “...the mission is what matters” (B7017). In order to accomplish that mission, Buffy must be able to knowingly condemn some or all of her followers to death in battle. She cannot do that without some emotional distance, and here is where the balancing act between distance and access begins. Historical military commanders have often accomplished this balance through means of a group of intimates who, in Keegan’s words, “fulfilled the role on the one hand of remembrancers to their commander of his responsibility for the army’s welfare, and on the other of witnesses to the army of the commander’s concern for it” (318). Enter the “Scoobies”.

[6] Buffy’s friends provide this cadre of intimates, particularly Xander and – surprisingly – Andrew, in Season Eight. The Scoobies are easily approachable by the Potentials and Slayers, and share a deep love for and trust in Buffy. In Season Seven when Buffy sleeps she sleeps alone

in her room. Xander, Willow, Anya, Giles, and Dawn, however, share space with the Potentials, coming to know them on a far more intimate level than Buffy does. It is the Scoobies to whom the Potentials turn for direct examples of how they should carry themselves, and it is Xander who reassures them all of Buffy's love in "Dirty Girls" (B7018). As the Potentials become Slayers, and Buffy's forces begin to grow, it is the Scoobies and these first Potentials who assume the role of officers in the Slayer Army, formalizing their function as intermediaries between Buffy and her followers, and providing evidence of loyalty and affection when Buffy cannot be physically present.

[7] The Scoobies also function as a bridge in the opposite direction, for most often it is this core group who express the concerns of the Potentials and Slayers to Buffy. In "Dirty Girls" (B7018), it is the Scoobies who attempt to dissuade Buffy from rushing to attack Caleb and the Bringers in the winery, and it is the Scoobies who bring on the crisis of command by serving as the voice of the Potentials' badly shaken faith in Buffy in "Empty Places" (B7019). Finally, it is Xander who most often briefs Buffy on the activities of the Army, and who tells her in "A Beautiful Sunset" (B8011) in Season Eight that "Seriously Buf, you spend too much time alone," warning of an increasing distance between Buffy and the Slayers that, as Season Eight continues, is proving very costly.

[8] This distance is exemplified by the disturbing gap between Buffy's intimate relationship with the Slayers at her headquarters in Scotland, and the apparent lack of any personal relationship at all with the nameless Slayer in "The Chain" (B8005), who dies alone and underground in Buffy's place. This remarkable character knows Buffy only through her

intermediaries, and it is unclear if Buffy is even aware of the sacrifice she has been asked to make. Here, the avenues of access between follower and commander have become blocked, and the imperative of kinship is threatened.

[9] Prescription is another imperative with which Buffy struggles. Defined by John Keegan as “the need of every commander to convey an impression of himself to his troops through words, to explain what he wants of them, to allay their fears, to arouse their hopes, and to bind their ambitions to his own,” prescription can perhaps be understood as the theater of command, and Buffy at times demonstrates a thorough understanding of this art (319). The stirring speech at the end of “Bring on the Night” (B7010) in Season Seven is just one example, but marks the first time that Buffy describes her forces in terms of an “army.” Stirring speeches actually seem to be a habit with Buffy, sometimes to the point of lecturing, which becomes counterproductive. As Andrew puts it in “Storyteller” (B7016) as he turns his camera away from Buffy in search of a more interesting subject, “Honestly, gentle viewers, these motivating speeches of hers tend to get a little long.”

[10] The most captivating bit of command theater performed by Buffy, however, is her carefully staged final battle with the first Turok-Han, or Übevamp, in “Showtime” (B7011). With the aid of Xander and Willow, Buffy has carefully selected an arena for her final confrontation with the creature where she can be clearly seen by the Potentials. By this act, she demonstrates that she is willing to share the dangers she is asking her followers to face, and can be trusted to overcome even the most impossible-seeming odds. Though seeming to taunt the Übevamp, Buffy is actually speaking to both the Scoobies and the Potentials, addressing their fears as she describes

them as “meat for the beast... having nightmares about monsters that can’t be killed.” She dismisses these fears by reinforcing her own abilities: “I always find a way. I am the thing that monsters have nightmares about.” After slaying the Übevamp, Buffy confidently assures them all that, working together under her leadership, they will win through despite any and all difficulties and that, in the end, even the Übevamp is “Dust. Just like the rest of them.” This masterful bit of drama legitimizes Buffy’s right to command. Whatever doubts she may have are carefully hidden away, and she enters battle with seemingly absolute confidence, turning deadly combat into a training session that demonstrates her abilities, reduces her followers’ fears, and gives the Potentials and Scoobies a renewed belief in victory.

[11] Unfortunately, as the Slayer Army grows and spreads out geographically, Buffy becomes less able to use such immediate methods of rousing her troops. She is forced instead to utilize sophisticated telecommunications in order to stay in contact with the Slayers, but technology is no substitute for personal presence, and indeed seems to increase her distance from her troops, rather than eliminate it. Therefore in Season Eight, she seems to be known to the Slayers more and more through reputation and myth rather than personal interaction. In “Time of Your Life, Part 1” (B8016), it is revealed that Buffy has never been to New York, despite the fact that one of the Slayer squads is based out of that city. In “Wolves at the Gate, Part 2” (B8013) the Tokyo-based Slayer Aiko has never seen or spoken to Buffy before reporting on the vampires who have stolen the Scythe, and Buffy has never visited the Slayers in Japan until driven there by a crisis.

[12] Buffy's greatest weakness as a military leader lies in her inadequate use of the imperative of sanction. Keegan points out that prescription, no matter how skillfully done, will only go so far. "Words supply an uncertain antidote to fear. Fear must be opposed by fear itself or by a material factor as strong or stronger, and the commander who shrinks from threatening his troops with punishment or who will not deign to bribe or reward them will make easy meat" (321-322). It is this imperative of sanction that lies behind the strict codes of justice and elaborate systems of promotion and decoration of all modern militaries.

[13] Buffy seems to avoid this imperative as much as she possibly can. Of necessity, there are opportunities for Slayers and Scoobies to receive promotion in terms of increasingly greater command responsibilities, with members of the first group of Potentials leading Slayer Squads in Chicago and New York City, Satsu promoted to command the Tokyo cell after Akio's death, Kennedy performing as a kind of roving inspector-general, Andrew as "Watcher" for Italy Squad, and Xander as Buffy's effective second-in-command. Beyond these promotions, the only other honor seen to be received by a Slayer is posthumous, as Buffy personally carries Aiko's body back to the Japan Squad's headquarters and lays it out in state. For the majority of Slayers, the positive reinforcement of rewards is notably lacking.

[14] This issue of rewards may seem small, but it should be remembered that in Season Eight, the nature of being a Slayer has fundamentally changed. For millennia, there has been only one Slayer at a time, chosen and compelled to serve. As "The Long Way Home, Part 1" (B8001) opens, however, we are told that the number has grown to eighteen hundred, with some five hundred in the Slayer Army, which is now divided into ten squads. In other words, just because a

girl became a full-fledged Slayer after Willow's world spanning spell in "Chosen" (B7022) does not mean that she is automatically inducted into the Slayer Army. Unlike Buffy and her predecessors, the new Slayers have a choice, and Buffy's force is all-volunteer. In Season Seven, sanction is imposed on the Potentials by the common threat of the First. Their choices are simple: fight together or die alone. In Season Eight this sanction has been removed, and the Slayer Army must find a new one. What Buffy tries to offer is something far more positive: family. As described in "The Chain" (B8005) it is a deep link between Slayers present and past, a complex blend of shared experience deepened by the peculiar emotional and psychological bonds of shared danger and combat. This is promising as far as it goes, but seems to be less effective than Buffy hoped. In Season Eight the Slayer Army seems to be fragmenting rather than coalescing into a unified force, until once again faced with a threat capable of destroying it utterly.

[15] It is with Simone Doffler and her squad of Rogue Slayers that we see Buffy's most egregious failure in the use of sanction. The Rogue Slayers have been trained by the Slayer Army, and, as will be examined later, take their criminal example from Buffy herself. Simone has committed multiple criminal acts, including murder, and has terrorized an entire town and displaced its population, while flaunting her powers and thereby damning the Slayer Army in the eyes of the public and global authorities. Simone and the Rogue Slayers are mutinous troops of the Slayer Army and therefore it is Buffy's responsibility to bring them to justice and to impose punishment for their crimes. However, Buffy has utterly failed to do so. The conclusion that must inevitably be drawn by outside observers is that Buffy cannot or will not control her troops, and her failure to impose sanctions on Simone and the Rogue Slayers is one of the primary

factors in the shift in public and political opinion that results in the perception of the Slayer Army as a dangerous international terrorist organization. Buffy also seems unable to impose sanctions when dealing with Giles' semi-black operations, mounted without Buffy's knowledge or consent. While Giles may believe that he is doing what is necessary for Buffy's own good, the fact remains that he continues to disobey her orders, making him as much of a rogue as Simone. By failing to meet the imperative of sanction, Buffy is not merely making herself "easy meat" in Keegan's words, but is offering Slayer Army up on a platter to the various forces that might wish to destroy it.

[16] From sanction we come to the imperative of action. In the final analysis, a military commander must act, and Keegan places great stress on the importance of this imperative: "Action without forethought or foreknowledge is foolhardy. Commanders must know a great deal before they act and see what they are about when they do. These prerequisites are defined in the military vocabulary as intelligence and control..." (325). The fundamentals of this imperative were laid out over 2500 years ago by Sun Tzu in his classic work of military theory *The Art of War*: "Therefore I say: 'Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril... If ignorant of both your enemy and of yourself, you are certain in every battle to be in peril'" (84). In her brief career as general, Buffy demonstrates the truth of this imperative, though with an unfortunate tendency towards the latter part of Sun Tzu's aphorism.

[17] The final arc of Season Seven is a near perfect exhibition of both Buffy's difficulties and true ability when confronted with the imperative of action. Through her experience as the Slayer, Buffy has come to rely on boldness of action as a battle-winning tactic, and this works well

enough in the usual combat situations she faces, where she must make rapid decisions and immediately put them into action while in the midst of engaging her enemy. However, as Michael J. Handel points out in his analysis of classical strategic thought *Masters of War*, “ironically, a military commander’s previous experience on the battlefield – where he was accustomed to making quick, clear decisions based upon his experience and intuition – is often a further impediment to effective decision-making on the higher strategic level” (258). Put simply, Buffy’s instinctive reaction to go directly for the throat of whatever evil faces her, which has been a broadly successful tactic as a semi-lone warrior, can have disastrous consequences when applied to the action of a larger force. In “Dirty Girls” (B7018), Buffy knows neither her enemy, nor herself expressed as the combination of herself, the Scoobies, and the Potentials as a unified force. Her reaction upon indentifying Caleb and the Bringers’ location is to “get the cavalry” and charge into battle.³

[18] Here Buffy’s boldness blinds her to the need for more thorough intelligence before committing her forces to action, so much so that she dismisses the unanimous council of her most trusted intimates, as the Scoobies and Giles all argue against immediate action, not to mention the opinions of her troops, who are far more afraid of fighting than not, despite Xander’s rallying efforts. In the end, Buffy leads her followers to a crushing defeat, with two Potentials dead, more wounded, Xander permanently disfigured, and her own leadership abilities called into serious question. This crisis of command does have an upside; Buffy may have to learn the hard way, but she does learn. In a remarkably brief period of time, Buffy fundamentally revises her command style. Having used her undoubted genius as a single warrior to procure a decisive advantage in the Scythe, she then carefully plans her final attack on the forces of the First. Buffy

deploys herself, the Potentials, and the expanded Scoobies as tactical support for Willow and the strategic goal of empowering all potential Slayers world-wide, thus ensuring that, even if Buffy and her forces should lose, the First will not have won. This is a brilliant bit of generalship, looking as it does beyond the needs of the current battle, and even beyond the current campaign against the First, to the grand strategy of the continuing world-war against the forces of evil⁴. It is the pinnacle of Buffy's command, where she has carefully acquired accurate intelligence about her enemy, and then used that intelligence to direct her actions to tremendous effect, meeting Keegan's imperative of action brilliantly.

[19] Unfortunately, in Season Eight, Buffy is seemingly betraying her early promise as a general. To be fair, the rules have changed yet again. Her forces are widely dispersed and acting on an increasingly public global stage, making a truly centralized command structure impossible, although the mix of high-tech equipment and magic at Buffy's headquarters should allow her broad command, control, communication, and intelligence capabilities. Buffy, however, seems removed from the day to day operations of the Slayer Army, effectively leaving them in the hands of Xander, while she indulges in training new Slayers and leading small missions. As discussed earlier, Buffy seems to have little or no direct knowledge of the activities and areas of operation of the Slayers in New York, Tokyo, or Chicago, never having visited most of these cities. She has isolated herself in remote Scotland behind magical and technological defenses and thus lost the knowledge of her troops and her enemies. She also seems to show a staggering naivety when it comes to her new circumstances. The existence of a group of super-powered young women armed with ray-guns and organized militarily on a global scale is unlikely to be met with approbation in a world dominated by nation states largely run by gerontocratic

patriarchies. The fact that the Slayer Army left a rather sizable crater in southern California, and is funded at least partially by grand larceny of one of the world's most secure banking centers is not likely to mitigate this situation. Keegan reminds us that “the essentials of action are *knowing* and *seeing*” [emphasis Keegan's], but in Season Eight Buffy has ceased to practice either when it comes to her troops and the world in which they operate (325).

[20] Indeed, the robbery of the Swiss bank vault is the first of many disastrous command decisions, and it is Buffy's own actions which place the Slayer Army in a poor position in relation to world governments, militaries, and public opinion. Her signal failure to put an end to the depredations of Simone and the Rogue Slayers can be interpreted as tacit approval of their criminal activities, while the battle with Japanese vampires in the “Wolves at the Gate” (B8012 – 8015) arc takes place in downtown Tokyo and causes massive, and very public, property damage. Despite her bravado, Buffy has made the mistake of ignoring the Twilight General's warning that she is now “at war with the human race.” The fact that an American military expedition is operating within the borders of the People's Republic of China in Season Eight's “Retreat” (B8026 - 8030) may well indicate that the two powers consider the Slayer Army such a dangerous common enemy that they are willing to set aside their historical differences and work together to stop it. Buffy is losing this war through simple attrition, compounded by incomprehensible command decisions including the abrogation of the Slayer powers she brought to Potential Slayers around the world in “Chosen” (B7022).⁵

[21] Finally, the imperative of example presents itself for consideration. Keegan stresses that “the first and greatest imperative of command is to be present in person. Those who impose risk

must be seen to share it...” (329). Here Buffy excels. For all of her mistakes and missteps, doubts and fears, there can be no doubt that she is willing to share the same or even greater risks as those she commands, up to and including death -- twice. Unfortunately, this penchant for personal risk sometimes gets in the way of effective command, for if Buffy is in the front lines fighting, she is in no position to direct or affect the course of battle as a whole. Still, no member of the Slayer Army can doubt her willingness to face mortal danger at their side. Buffy’s example extends further than the field of battle, however, and has unintended consequences. After all, it was she who led the Slayers in the robbery of the Swiss bank’s vaults, an action which provided a perfect example for Simone and the Rogue Slayers to follow, and earned her the active enmity of an already suspicious world power structure. She became, deliberately, a criminal, and led her followers to do the same.

[22] In the end, Buffy answers John Keegan’s fundamental question of command by being at the front whenever possible. It is not a bad answer, but it does not meet the realities of the world in which Buffy finds herself in Season Eight. A world where, in Keegan’s words:

Sometimes a commander’s proper place will be in his headquarters and at his map table, where calm and seclusion accord him the opportunity to reflect on the information intelligence brings him, to ponder possibilities and to order a range of responses in his mind. Other times, when crises presents itself, his place is at the front where he can see for himself, make direct and immediate judgments, watch them taking effect and reconsider his options as events change under his hand.

(328)

Buffy is no longer a solitary warrior, or commanding a small unit in localized combat. Instead, she commands a global force that is widely dispersed and facing multiple threats at one and the same time. She cannot be present at all points at all times, and so cannot always be at the front of battle. Buffy's difficulties in Season Eight are a direct result of her failure to effectively meet the imperatives of command in this new operational paradigm. Buffy is progressively isolated and isolating from her followers. She has become overly dependent on her circle of intimates to represent her to them, and has been unable thus far to find a means by which to effectively inspire her troops from a distance. Further, Buffy seems unable or unwilling to impose proper discipline on her troops, and seemingly incapable of gathering proper intelligence or effectively using the information she does have to act decisively. Only in the imperative of example does she continue to excel, and even this is marred by a major criminal act. The result is predictable: dead girls and resurgent evil. Buffy has shown in the past that she is capable of learning from her mistakes, and emerging victorious even after serious defeats. Only time -- and season nine -- will tell whether she will be able to do so again.

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¹ Examinations of Buffy's leadership have generally used either literary lenses, as in David Fritts' "Warrior Heroes: Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Beowulf" (*Slayage*, No. 17, June 2005), or that of gender studies as in Sarah Buttsworth's "'Bite Me': Buffy and the Penetration of the Gendered Warrior Hero" (*Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 2002), or Frances Early's "Staking her Claim: Buffy the Vampire Slayer as Transgressive Woman Warrior" (*Slayage*, No. 6, September 2002). Only Anthony H. Cordesman's "Biological Warfare and the 'Buffy Paradigm'" (*Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2002) takes up military studies, but in this case it is *BtVS* which is used as a lens to examine U.S. Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) policies and preparedness, rather than military science being used to examine Buffy.

² Whedon has a writing credit on the film *Captain America: the First Avenger*, slated to be released in 2011, and will be directing *The Avengers* movie, due to be released in 2012. As the character of Captain America is the result of a military "super-soldier" experiment, who saw combat service in the European Theater of World War Two, it is probable that Whedon will again be working with military themes in these films.

³ Indeed, with this remark and Faith's comment about the "Hornet's Nest," one wonders if Whedon is making a rather pointed reference to military disasters like the "Charge of the Light Brigade" at the Battle of Balaklava, and the deadly "Hornet's Nest" at the Battle of Shiloh, scenes of furious fighting and heavy loss of life.

⁴ For a differing analysis of Buffy's actions at the end of Season 7, see Dennis Showalter, "Buffy Goes to War: Military Themes and Images in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*" (The *Slayage* Conference on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* Paper Archive, http://www.slayageonline.com/SCBtVS_Archive/).

⁵ Expecting the now ex-Slayers to retrain with conventional weapons and effectively engage a professional military force is, frankly, ludicrous. As Season Eight continues, and a ninth is promised, it remains to be seen whether or not Buffy will be able to retrieve the situation as she did in Season Seven.