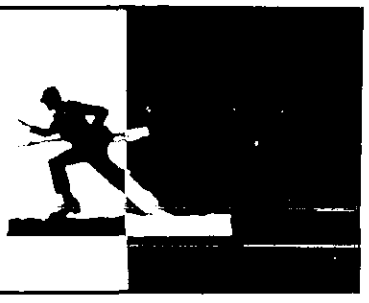
PROFESSIONAL FORUM



The Commander's Intent

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The commander's intent is a concept that is not easy to grasp. When I was a tactics instructor at the Infantry School, I had the not so enviable task of explaining it to Infantry Officer Advanced Course (IOAC) students. Debates on the subject were frequent and fierce among the instructors.

Many of us believed that commander's intent was something we understood, but the doctrine was cloudy enough that we often had difficulty substantiating a clear position. All too often, the manuals lacked consistency both in definition and in concept. Field Manual 100-5-1, Operational Terms and Graphics, said one thing; other sources said another.

Now, however, I believe that we can interpret the present doctrine and establish a defendable position. One way to approach this is to define and discuss the concept of intent and to relate it to the estimate process and to those mission-oriented command and control training requirements that are intrinsic to the execution of our current doctrine.

FM 100-5 states:

A commander must know the intention of the commander two levels above him, understand the concept of his immediate commander, and know the responsibilities of the units on his flanks. . . if an unanticipated situation arises, committed maneuver unit commanders should understand the purpose of the operation well enough to act decisively, confident that they are doing what their superior commander would order done were he present.

Essentially, FM 100-5 relates the principal idea of intent to the purpose, or the "why," of an operation. Previously, many argued that intent and the concept, or the "how" of an operation, were synonymous. It is apparent now that this argument is no longer valid.

CONTROL

Let me explain why this is so important. If we accept the premise that war is chaotic, then we must learn how to cope with chaos and ambiguity. Commanders at all levels must achieve control. One such method that our doctrine suggests is decentralizing decision-making to the lowest possible level. Therefore, if the soldiers we send out to do battle are to make the right decisions, they must understand the effect that we are trying to achieve in relation to the enemy, friendly forces, and terrain and why we want this. More important, they must also be trained to use their own initiative and judgment. How else can any decision be made by the man on the spot when his commander is wounded or otherwise unable to influence the situation?

The 1987 DoD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms (JCS Pub. 1) defines intention as "an aim or design (as distinct from a capability) to execute a specific course of action." Here again, we can deduce that the commander's intent is clearly related to the purpose behind an operation.

Conceptually, I believe these two sources capture the meaning of intent. It seems obvious that the essence of the commander's intent is the purpose of an operation. In a 1986 article, Major General (then Brigadier General) Wayne A. Downing defined it this way: "Commander's intent is not the mission—the specific immediate task of the unit. . . it is not the concept of the operation. . . Commander's intent is a well thought out, one- or two-sentence statement of what the commander wants to accomplish in the long term—the results he wants." (See "Training to Fight," *Military Review*, May 1986, pages 18-27.)

The commander can communicate this information by assigning the task and clearly explaining why it is necessary. For example, "Seize control of the bridges east of the Cherry River within zone by 0200 in order to destroy enemy forces attempting to conduct a withdrawal. The intent is to destroy

enemy forces that are attempting to flee." By using the phrase "in order to," he focuses on the purpose of the operation, and this will stay with his subordinate even if he is out of communication.

The idea of intent also relates to the estimate process. A higher headquarters achieves control by assigning tasks that are executed within a concept of operations, designating main and supporting efforts and clearly communicating intent. The "how" of the mission is left to the subordinate. The main effort is assigned at each level. The critical thing is that each main effort must support the achievement of the overall goal; every main effort must contribute to success. The supporting effort must relate to and support the achievement of a main effort.

As a commander begins the estimate, he must have a clear understanding of his higher commander's intent. This comes about through mission analysis and, hopefully, after a face-to-face discussion with the higher commander. His own intent, therefore, is a product of his analysis; it must support the higher commander's intent and clearly lead to the intended goal. All of this occurs once he has determined whether the situation has changed fundamentally since the higher commander issued his orders. If it has, he must be capable of making appropriate decisions, particularly if he cannot talk to his boss.

Before courses of action are developed, a commander should announce his intent, because in order to be feasible and worthy of consideration the various courses of action must be capable of accomplishing the stated intention. Current doctrine places the higher intent in paragraph 1.b. and the commander's intent in paragraph 3.a.(1). But if the mission statement addresses the purpose of the operation adequately in paragraph 2, it would appear redundant to state the intent again in paragraph 3.a.(1). Regardless, the commander, not the staff, should write the intent.

Field Marshal Sir William Slim once said that he never wrote the operation orders that went out in his name but that he always drafted "the intention" himself. He called it "the one overriding expression of will by which everything in the order and every action by every commander and soldier in the Army must be dominated." He said that "it should therefore be worded by the commander himself."

We must not be so myopic in regard to the assigned tasks that we forget about the overall purpose of the operation. A task is assigned to achieve a certain result, but we must realize at times that we are pursuing a previously assigned task that will not fulfill the intended purpose.

We are obligated to do everything in our power to make possible the achievement of the purpose of an operation. Those who would do only what is specified despite the circumstances cannot execute our present doctrine. Such behavior will certainly lead to disaster in the next war.

It is important to note that according to the primary German field manual of World War II, *Truppenfuhrung*, a subordinate commander could change or abandon his task within the framework of the higher commander's overall intent. This is not to say that soldiers should arbitrarily ignore orders; we are obligated, though, to do what is necessary to accomplish the commander's intent. If we must pursue another direction to do so, we must notify the commander of our actions as soon as possible.

I found that many IOAC students would fail to exploit opportunities, particularly when it meant going beyond their specified orders. Although this is an indication of personality, it is also a result of their training and experience in garrison operations. If we expect soldiers to make decisions and improvise within a chaotic environment, their training must reinforce the desired behavior. This is particularly so for junior leaders, because it is on them that the brunt of the fighting will fall. To achieve this end, therefore, we must let young officers make decisions.

We must train our junior leaders to function two levels above their own. If a squad leader lacks the capacity to lead a platoon or company, how can we expect him to function in the absence of instructions? What good does it do to be aware of the intent and mission two levels above if leaders are able to function only at their own respective levels?

FM 100-5 says that "to be useful, doctrine must be uniformly known and understood." All too often, though, our junior leaders have demonstrated a complete lack of familiarity with our current doctrinal literature. How, then, can we expect that junior officers will understand the meaning of certain doctrinal terms? How can we assign a mission and describe the purpose of a given operation if our subordinates do not fully comprehend the meaning and spirit of the language? Obviously, it is imperative that we demand from our subordinates total familiarity with our doctrinal concepts and strict adherence to and use of precise tactical language.

To be sure, junior leaders must be trained to make decisions and to improvise in the face of adversity and chaos. All too often, unfortunately, too many senior leaders micro-manage their subordinates, either because they think things will get messed up if they don't, or because they have little faith in their subordinates' ability to get the job done. The danger of this practice is that these subordinates will inevitably wait for instructions, despite the demands of the situation or the opportunities presented, and that is not the behavior we need in order to win!

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