
The Intent of *Intent*

CAPTAIN JOHN R. SUTHERLAND, III

If you ask for a definition of commander's intent, you will get a wide range of answers. The only thing that is clear is that this critical concept is not well understood and is often misused. Sometimes it is a condensed version of

the entire mission, which is of little help to subordinate leaders.

The whole idea of *intent* can be traced to the evolution of two distinct ways of waging engagements and battles in World War I. All armies wres-

tled with the problem, but the Germans more fully documented the two contested approaches.

The first approach and the most common at the outbreak of the Great War was known as *Befehlstaktik*, in

which the commander literally selected where he was going to attack; he focused his reconnaissance forces there and shoved them through the chosen area. Maneuver forces followed.

The newer technique was called *Auftragstaktik*, which allowed the reconnaissance forces to find the best point for the attack. They searched for

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gaps; the maneuver forces focused on the discovered weak point as the *Schwerpunkt* or decisive point. Then all efforts were made to exploit the weakness. The attack would be made on a narrow axis. A penetration would be made near the *Schwerpunkt*, and the shoulders would be enveloped and expanded in a process known as *Aufrollen*.

Befehlstaktik was built on the conventional wisdom of the day and was widely used throughout the war. *Auftragstaktik* did not develop fully until the German Army was forced to seek new ways of breaking the trenchline stalemate. Reconnaissance-influenced tactics became very successful, but also dictated major changes in the way war was to be fought. Lead elements, called *Stosstruppen*, preceded the attack. These were squad to platoon size, often led by noncommissioned officers or junior officers, working alone and under a decentralized command and control. Their objective was not as well defined since they were seeking gaps instead of advancing on specific locations. To succeed, these troops needed to know exactly what the commander had in mind—that is, his intent. This gave rise to mission-type orders that were more general in nature and driven by purpose rather than task. It can be argued that this is where the importance of the commander's intent first became apparent. The soldiers needed to know what was to be done, not how they were to do it. The *how* was left up to them.

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tively use it. Instead of listening to the commander's intent, many subordinates put their pencils down and patiently wait for the commander to finish so they can get back to focusing on the specifics of the mission. One reason for this may be the sea of definitions found in the various manuals.

The first manual to look at is Field Manual (FM) 100-5, *Operations*, the Army's capstone doctrinal manual, which says that intent describes the desired end state of the mission. The intent is a concise expression of the *purpose* of the operation that is designed to focus subordinates on the desired end state. A well-written intent focuses subordinate leaders on what has to be accomplished to achieve success even when the plan and concept of the operation no longer apply. The intent is *not* a summary of the concept of the operation.

This seems to be clear. What FM 100-5 says is that the commander's intent should tell the subordinate leaders where he wants the battle to end up by clearly defining the purpose of the operation. It goes further to add the desired end state, what the battlefield should look like when the dust settles. The manual also defines the supreme utility of the intent as a guide to conducting operations when the current plan is no longer feasible. In other words, "I can't complete my mission as planned; the task cannot be done, so how can I achieve the purpose in another way?"

Some complain that FM 100-5 does not give a more precise definition of the commander's intent. They would have the manual show us exactly where to put the intent in the operations order, how long it should be, and so on. But the manual was not designed to be a series of dogmatic checklists.

FM 101-5, *Staff Organizations and Operations*, expands on the FM 100-5 definition of commander's intent, and the confusion begins. According to FM 101-5, the commander's intent is his stated vision. Unfortunately, it fails to define "vision" in very concrete terms, leaving the door open to speculation.

This manual goes on to state that the

commander's intent defines the purpose of the operation and the end state with respect to the relationship of the force, the enemy, and the terrain. While the allusion to vision is an addition to FM 100-5's definition, this portion of FM 101-5's definition is in concert with the Army's capstone manual in terms of both purpose and end state. Unfortunately, the definition of the end state tends to add detail and hence length to the commander's expression of his intent.

As if the issue of vision did not cloud the subject enough, FM 101-5 also adds to the definition of intent. It goes on to say that the commander's intent briefly states *how* the force as a whole will attain the desired end state. The commander is expected to choose a single word that best describes the operation: *envelopment, infiltration, mobile defense*, etc. This complicates the intent and extends it beyond the FM 100-5 definition. The statement of *how* leads the commander into the trap of writing and briefing a mini-concept of the operation. This may lead to a verbose narrative that makes intent even less clear to the subordinate leader.

FM 101-5 correctly identifies the commander's intent as the cornerstone of mission tactics and states that it is mandatory for all orders. Intent unquestionably provides the required guidance

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for the employment of initiative, and it is a necessary part of all orders.

Now that we know where the manuals stand on intent, we need to look at the "schoolhouse" interpretation, focusing on the Fort Leavenworth and the Fort Benning solutions.

The Command and General Staff College's premier Special Text (ST 100-9, *Command Estimate*, explores the issues common to planning, preparation, and execution of Army operations. It defines the intent as the commander's

vision of the operation. It describes why the operation is being executed. Intent describes how the commander visualizes achieving the end state with respect to the missions of the force as a whole. The ST goes on to say that the intent also describes how the end state will facilitate future operations (this is in addition to FM 100-5). The ST states that the intent is not to summarize the concept of the operation or to describe sub-unit missions.

Just as FM 101-5 expanded on the FM 100-5 definition, ST 100-9 has likewise expanded on the FM 101-5 definition. As the commander wades through his references, he finds that the requirements for the intent statement steadily grow and become more demanding. It is no wonder confusion reigns as to what the intent is supposed to look like.

The Infantry School addresses intent during the Infantry Officer Advanced Course (IOAC) and the Infantry Pre-Command Course. The School defines *intent* as being equal to *purpose* and expands on this by stating that the commander's intent is the commander's stated vision, which defines the purpose of the operation and defines the end state with respect to the relationship of the force, the enemy, and the terrain. The operations student handout states that the intent may be the same as the purpose of the mission statement at battalion level and below and that if this is the case "it is not necessary to restate it in a separate paragraph."

The reason for the intent is to allow the subordinate to exercise initiative to achieve the purpose. The IOAC student is taught that the purpose of the intent is to allow subordinates to understand the *why* of the mission. When armed with the *why*, they are able to continue when the assigned task becomes untenable, when there is a loss of communications, when the situation changes, or when an opportunity arises in the course of the mission.

The Infantry School spends more time telling what the intent is to accomplish than what goes into it. When the School argues that commander's intent is not always required at battalion and

below, this does not mean the intent can be ignored. It means the intent is woven into the "concept of the operation" paragraph, as defined by the Infantry School.

The IOAC format for the concept of the operation encompasses the essential elements of *intent* as defined by FM 100-5, FM 101-5, and even ST 100-9. The expanded purpose links a unit's mission to that of the higher unit to create a nested concept. This goes a long way toward showing the end state in relation to other friendly forces. The concept describes the *how* of the essential action. It is not a complete restatement of paragraph 3 but a brief overview of the critical events. Finally, the decisive point illustrates the area, time, event, or combination of these, where the friendly force begins to win and the

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enemy begins to lose. Attached to this is the definition of the end state, which illustrates where the commander wants to be when the mission has been successfully accomplished.

The School position on intent can be summarized as follows: The intent of *intent* is to provide a means through which commanders can concisely communicate the overall purpose of the operation and the related desired end state to subordinate commanders. The subordinates can then apply disciplined initiative in issuing orders or taking action when the planned mission is no longer relevant. The commander's intent is most effective when the enemy situation is different from what was anticipated or when command and control has been significantly degraded. The IOAC spends more time discussing the effects of a well-written intent statement than on laying out a detailed format for the content of the statement.

Because of its role as the Army's

premier doctrinal manual, FM 100-5 has to be considered the foundation for the discussion of intent. This manual and the Infantry School see the intent as including both the purpose and the end state. Although FM 101-5 and ST 100-9 also preach purpose and end state, they add the commander's vision and *how* the unit will accomplish the purpose. Both additions create the potential for excessive intent paragraphs.

A closer look at examples of the two different approaches to the intent paragraph will help explain why confusion exists and what it can lead to.

First, the FM 101-5 version: vision, purpose, and end state, and how to accomplish the mission. The situation is a mechanized infantry task force non-illuminated night attack against a defending motorized rifle company (MRC) at the National Training Center (NTC):

I see this mission as a three-phase operation: recon, attack, and consolidation on the enemy position. All must take place in limited visibility. We must move quickly while maintaining security and command and control. We will use our superior night optics to dominate the enemy. We will seek a weakness on the enemy's eastern flank. The scouts will find it and direct us toward it. At that point, we will create a penetration using our superior firepower and maneuver in concert with punishing artillery. Once we have gained a foothold, we will pour through the breach and envelop the enemy from the east. Our purpose is to gain control of Siberia Ridge and thereby control the approaches from the south and facilitate the passage of the rest of the brigade to continue the attack north. Our desired end state is to find the task force in control of the ridge with sufficient combat power to fend off an MRC-sized counterattack. We will create lanes for the follow-on forces to pass through. They will be guarded and clearly marked. We will accomplish this by conducting an aggressive and stealthy reconnaissance with the scout platoon. Recon in the west will be oriented on assessing the strength of the defense while recon in the east will orient on

finding a penetration point. We will then move out in a diamond formation with Team Delta in the lead, Bravo and Alpha on the wings, and Charlie in trail as the reserve. We will move deliberately, using artillery to destroy selected targets and to draw attention away from our movement. Delta will lead into the breach, followed by Bravo and Alpha. Charlie will secure the breach site. The three assault companies will roll up the enemy flank. This attack relies on speed, firepower, and our superior night vision.

This kind of intent statement is not at all uncommon. Although it sounds pretty good, it is not really very useful to a platoon leader. Since intent is to be understood two levels up and briefed two levels down, the ultimate target of the task force commander's intent is the platoon leader, and this statement is of marginal value to him. It is a synopsis of the scheme of maneuver, wrapped in heroic language, and steeped in doctrinal buzz words. The problem is that it does not indicate what is to be done if the mission, as planned, should become unworkable. It does more to push the subordinates down the path of mission execution than to embolden them to use initiative based on a full understanding of what the commander wants to achieve. The commander in this instance is clear in what he wants to accomplish, but his intent is lost in a sea of words that covers his vision and the way he sees the mission being accomplished. For the intent to have true and lasting impact, it should be short and sweet.

Another example is in order:

The purpose of this operation is to gain control of Siberia Ridge and to dominate the approaches from the south and to the enemy-held north. This will allow the brigade to continue the attack to the north, into the enemy second belt. We will seek a gap on the enemy's eastern flank. We will penetrate there and peel the enemy defense like an orange. Ultimately, I want us to gain and retain control of Siberia ridgeline. We will be able to pass the rest of the brigade through and will be able to suppress the enemy to the north.



Even this intent paragraph is a bit long-winded, but it is considerably more useful. It was actually used at the NTC in 1988 by a unit conducting a night attack. The task force hit the line of departure before the scouts had pinpointed a gap on the MRC flank. Most of the scouts either had been destroyed or had been denied access to their named areas of interest. One lone scout, on foot, found himself in the ideal location—the decisive point. The young sergeant, with his AN/PVS-5 goggles, could see the task force advancing through the darkness. He could also see the entire enemy defense off to his west, perpendicular to his position. No one was covering his location, and no one was east of it. It was the ideal launch point for an envelopment from the east to the west. The scout sergeant knew he was in the right location, but his communications were weak. He switched to the lead company team frequency and called the commander directly, told him about the situation, and guided him with a strobe light. As the vehicles approached, he directed them to the west and toward the enemy flank. The MRC was crushed, and the task force was at almost full strength.

Later, the scout sergeant was called to the after-action review and asked how he identified the critical point. He said that the single most important part of the operations order was the commander's reference to winning by "peeling the orange." Through this vivid and clear analogy, the commander had effectively communicated what he wanted to accomplish.

This example illustrates the power of a simple intent paragraph. Even though

the plan was falling apart, the sergeant knew what to do. Amid the confusion and uncertainty, he seized upon a simple but dominant concept. The company commanders knew how to modify the plan on the basis of the commander's intent, and all were driven by it.

In summary, the inclusion of vision and the way the unit will accomplish the mission adds too much to the intent. The concept of vision is too vague, and the addition of "how to" is too broad. For it to be effective, it must define success in a manner that allows the mission to continue in the face of uncertainty and the fog of war.

Give the purpose—the why. Give the desired end state—what must be accomplished to be successful. Don't be afraid of wandering away from the bland verbiage of FM 101-5-1. Whenever possible, illustrate the problem with a memorable phrase or analogy.

FM 100-5 is on the money with its definition of intent as purpose and end state. In FM 101-5 and ST 100-9, the definition of purpose, *method*, and end state forces the commander into a long-winded dissertation in which the key points of purpose and end state are lost. In the end, a long intent is a wasted intent, if for no other reason than that no one will remember it. Purpose and end state are all that is required for a meaningful and *useful* intent statement.

Captain John R. Sutherland, III, commanded a company in the 24th Infantry Division during Operation *Desert Storm* and served as an observer-controller at the NTC and as an IOAC small-group instructor at the Infantry School. He is a 1983 ROTC graduate of Northern Arizona University.
