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EXPLORING THE OPERATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

by

CLAYTON R. NEWELL

Military historian Michael Howard once observed, "A soldier in peacetime is like a sailor navigating by dead reckoning. You have left the terra firma of the last war and are extrapolating from the experiences of that war."¹ Today the US Army is extrapolating not only from its last war, but from its collective wartime history. It is seeking to understand a part of war that has not been a part of its recent experience.

In World War II the Army effectively maneuvered field armies and army groups on the battlefield in vast joint and combined operations. In Korea the Army had a field army operating as a part of the combined United Nations force. Since our Korean experience, however, in consonance with national policy, the Army has not had occasion to conduct operations of comparable size.

The focus since shortly after World War II has been on limited wars where large conventional armed forces were not considered necessary because strategic nuclear forces could be used in place of them. Vietnam, our most recent large-scale combat experience, was almost exclusively a tactical war. Even though that may have been "irrelevant" to the outcome of the war, it has had a profound effect on the Army's doctrine.² As a result of the shift in focus between World War II and Vietnam, the Army lost sight of how to fight that level of war lying between tactics and strategy. Today's officer corps has had no opportunity to gain practical combat experience at a higher level than the tactical.

Since World War II nuclear weapons have dominated strategic planning, and until recently the Army concentrated its doctrine almost exclusively on tactical techniques. Consequently, the practical experience of the present officer corps has been limited to tactics, while its intellectual experience has been strategic. Moreover, the strategic nuclear theorizing has been the province of the nonmilitary intellectual rather than the serving Army officer.³

It should not be surprising, then, that the practical experience of the doctrine writers should have influenced their work. The resulting focus on tactics emerged in 1976 when the Army revised its keystone doctrinal manual, FM 100-5, *Operations*, which emphasized the active defense, an essentially tactical concept. That edition of FM 100-5 gave virtually no consideration to the activities that translate strategic goals into the military conditions necessary to exploit tactical success.

The 1982 edition of FM 100-5, however, did introduce these operational considerations to the Army. The 1982 doctrine recognized that the officer corps needed to understand how to translate strategic goals into military operations. It therefore introduced the idea of levels of war, each with its own perspective. The operational level of war, a new term to most of the Army, was applied to the level lying between strategy and tactics.⁴

Since 1982 the debate and discussion about the operational perspective has at least sensitized the Army to the idea that the

structure of war includes more than just tactics and strategy. With the 1986 version of FM 100-5 now upon the scene, the doctrine provides a more comprehensive approach to war and its various perspectives. Though debating about doctrine will surely continue, it is a healthy process; the Army continues to learn from the resultant discussion. The purpose of this article is to help further that discussion by exploring the operational perspective.

Although FM 100-5 contains the doctrine by which the Army fights, it is FM 100-1, *The Army*, which contains “the fundamental principles governing employment of United States Army forces in support of national objectives of the United States.”⁵ It further recognizes that clashes between military forces are only part of the broader framework of war, which includes “political, economic, psychological, technological, and diplomatic means” to achieve national policy objectives.⁶ This broader framework is important to understanding the operational perspective and how it differs from the strategic and tactical perspectives.

The 1986 edition of FM 100-5 introduces these perspectives by stating that “war is a national undertaking which must be coordinated from the highest levels of policy-making to the basic levels of execution. Military strategy, operational art, and tactics are the broad divisions of activity in preparing for and conducting war.”⁷ Although these perspectives on waging war differ, they share the common concerns of ends, ways, and means. Army officers operating from any of the three perspectives will be concerned with what they are to do (ends), how they are to do it (ways), and what they have to do it with (means). The perspectives differ in the scope of these concerns, not in command level or force size.

The nation conducts war with a strategic perspective. Use of military force is guided by national strategy which sets the conditions for military operations. For the United States, national strategy establishes global priorities for the political, economic, psychological, technological, and diplomatic means

it uses to attain its own purposes or to frustrate those of an adversary. National strategy also determines how and when to use the elements of power to secure national objectives. Military strategy is but one element of power in the national strategy.

FM 100-5 defines military strategy as “the art and science of employing the armed forces of a nation or alliance to secure policy objectives by the application or threat of force.”⁸ It is important that both the military and civilian leadership at the national level understand the nature of war and what they hope to accomplish when they elect to use it as an instrument of national policy. The strategic military objectives they establish will define the shape of the war. The ends they establish determine the ways and means required to achieve those ends. In this context it is useful to recall Clausewitz’s admonition that “no one starts a war—or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so—without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it.”⁹ A more recent authority with practical experience on how the United States conducts war, General Bruce Palmer, Jr., has written that “it is Washington’s responsibility to see that ends and means are kept in balance—that the strategic objectives under the strategic concept adopted are achievable with the forces and other resources expected to be available.”¹⁰

Tactics is at the opposite end of the structure of war. Turning again to FM 100-5, we read that “tactics is the art by which corps and smaller unit commanders translate

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potential combat power into victorious battles and engagements."¹¹ Tactics is the doctrinal application of fire and movement. Units continually practice tactical techniques in peacetime in order to execute them automatically in combat. The tactical perspective is purely, or as purely as one can get, military in nature. It is also relatively easy to learn because it is basically a series of fixed drills to be executed under specified circumstances. The Army's officer corps is well versed in tactics, so well versed that there is often the temptation to apply tactical techniques to the operational and even the strategic levels.

The lead author of the 1982 edition of FM 100-5, the manual which introduced the operational level of war to the current generation of Army officers, wanted to "stimulate fresh discussions of . . . operational thinking in the field, in the service schools, and outside the Army."¹² The debate over Army doctrine which continues today both within and outside the Army is evidence of his success. The 1986 edition of FM 100-5, a logical evolution of the 1982 edition, describes the operational art as "the employment of available military forces to attain strategic goals within a theater of war or theater of operations through the design, organization, and conduct of campaigns and major operations."¹³ This description is essentially unchanged from 1982, although the phrase "theory of large unit operations" has been properly eliminated.¹⁴ The 1986 edition is a course correction applied to Army doctrine by the sailor in Michael Howard's analogy. The 1986 course correction considers experience with the doctrine since 1982, but it makes no radical changes in direction.

Even though the terms "operational level" and "operational art" may have been new to many readers in 1982, they are not new now. The Army's officer corps continues to develop its operational perspective through analysis and study even though it has not had the opportunity to experience it on the battlefield.

To understand the operational perspective, war is best viewed from the top down, even though our tactical instinct may

be to look from the battlefield up because that is where our wartime experience has been. The requirement to fight on the battlefield, however, ultimately originates with the National Command Authority, which, through the Joint Chiefs of Staff, provides direction to the theater commander, usually a unified commander in chief (CINC). This direction is in the form of strategic military objectives. It will also include the bounds within which the CINC will be allowed to conduct military operations. It may also include information about other elements of national power which will be employed in conjunction with military power to attain the desired national policy objectives. The CINC, an operational commander, must consider all relevant parts of the national strategy as he pursues the designated strategic objectives. Although he is the military commander, he does not have the relative luxury of a tactical commander, who works in a nearly pure military environment.

The CINC provides direction to the air, land, and sea components of his command. As FM 100-1 and FM 100-5 both stipulate, the Army expects to fight as part of both joint and combined forces. The operational perspective is not intrinsically a function of type, size, or organization of forces; it is, rather, a function of the strategic objectives in a theater of war or theater of operations. The operational perspective transcends single-service operations. It is both joint and combined. Although the Army concentrates on continental or land operations, its officer corps must have an operational perspective which includes any air, sea, or allied forces participating in the campaign. Here is how FM 100-5 correlates the three levels of war with particular echelons of command:

Operational art is the employment of military forces to attain strategic goals in a theater of war or theater of operations through the design, organization, and conduct of campaigns and major operations No particular echelon of command is solely or uniquely concerned with the operational art, but theater commanders and their chief subordinates usually

plan and direct campaigns. Army groups and armies normally design the major ground operations of a campaign. And corps and divisions normally execute those major ground operations While operational art sets the objectives and pattern of military activities, tactics is the art by which corps and smaller unit commanders translate potential combat power into victorious battles and engagements.¹⁵

The operational perspective involves both planning and executing campaigns. Campaigns aim to defeat the enemy or destroy his will to wage war. They take place in a specified time and space and may include both simultaneous and sequential battles. Results of the battles fought with a tactical perspective influence the campaigns designed with an operational perspective, and the results of those campaigns influence the war conducted with a strategic perspective. Conversely, strategic decisions in the form of strategic objectives guide operational actions, which in turn establish objectives for tactical actions.

The theater of war commander looks at both the strategic and operational perspectives and must also have an appreciation for the tactical. In a large theater of war with subordinate theaters of operations, the theater of operations commander will focus primarily on the operational perspective. Commands immediately subordinate to the theater commander work with both operational and tactical perspectives, but their primary focus is tactical. Although the strategic, operational, and tactical perspectives each have different characteristics, there are no clear-cut lines between them. Of the three, the operational perspective is perhaps the most ambiguous because it merges into tactics on the one hand and strategy on the other.

The operational commander orchestrates his forces with the aid of a campaign plan to gain an advantage over the enemy. He anticipates opportunities to disrupt the enemy's decision-making process

and to force him into making mistakes. The commander with an operational perspective incorporates land, sea, and air forces into his campaign plan. His operational concept endeavors to create the conditions and establish the time and place for his tactical forces to fight a decisive action.

Planning for the campaign begins when the operational commander, generally the theater CINC, receives his strategic guidance. After a mission analysis to determine what he must do and an examination of available resources, the commander develops his concept of the operation. He visualizes the campaign unfolding to achieve the assigned strategic objectives. The operational commander does not fight battles. Rather, he maneuvers the forces under his control to have them in position so the tactical commanders can fight the battles which will contribute to the success of the campaign.

If adequate forces or resources are not immediately available to the operational commander to carry out his entire campaign, he may establish intermediate objectives short of the final strategic goals, incorporating his awareness of the resource shortfall in a phased campaign plan. This will allow him to make progress toward the strategic objectives while he marshals sufficient capability to eventually achieve his objectives. The operational commander also uses his campaign plan to identify future requirements to the strategic planners who are able to coordinate national capabilities to acquire the needed forces and resources.

In developing his campaign plan, the operational commander must remember that he will have to contend with the ever-present fog of war, with imperfect intelligence on the enemy, and with incomplete information on friendly forces once the campaign starts. Although planning is important, the operational commander must be prepared to change his plan in the midst of the campaign if the enemy provides him an opportunity to strike an unanticipated decisive blow. He must use his professional judgment, intuition, and instincts to anticipate and disrupt the intentions of his opponent and avoid being tied to an inflexible plan.

One of the greatest challenges to the operational commander is planning for the best use of time. Generally, an expeditiously conducted campaign is better. The advantageous use of time, however, is generally contingent on the use of available space. The idea of trading space for time applies at the operational level when space is available, although retention of space may well be part of the guidance the National Command Authority sets for the operational commander.

Although there are certainly differences in the tactical and operational perspectives, tactical experience in combat prepares the operational commander to deal with what Clausewitz called "the friction of war"—the force on the battlefield that makes the simplest things difficult.¹⁶ Not only must the operational commander be able to deviate from his plan when opportunity knocks, he must remember Robert Burns' lament that "the best laid schemes of mice and men gang aft agley."¹⁷

When considering time and space problems from an operational perspective, overcoming friction and simply bringing forces to bear faster than an opponent are not necessarily sufficient conditions for success. The forces must have adequate weight, and they must be directed toward disruption of the enemy's center of gravity, one of three theoretical concepts included in the 1986 edition of FM 100-5. These three concepts, center of gravity, line of operation, and culminating point, provide a link with the classical military thought which provides the foundation for our current doctrine.

FM 100-5 describes center of gravity as the "characteristic, capability, or locality from which the force derives its freedom of action, physical strength, or will to fight."¹⁸ Although this idea applies to the strategic and tactical perspectives as well as the operational, it is most useful at the operational level, where the size and scale of forces involved make it difficult to ascertain how best to attack an enemy. An operational commander, by seeking the enemy's center of gravity, increases his chance of success at a relatively low cost to friendly forces. Rather

than continually hammering force against force, the commander can apply the concept to concentrate his strength against an enemy vulnerability. According to FM 100-5, this is the essence of the operational art.¹⁹

A line of operation is "the directional orientation of a force in relation to the enemy."²⁰ Its purpose is to connect a base of operations with the objective of a campaign. During the planning phase a line of operation provides a prospective roadway for both combat and logistical operations during the campaign, although during the execution phase the commander must not allow himself to become so attached to this line that he will not deviate from it to take advantage of unforeseen opportunities. A danger with this concept is that unimaginative commanders may employ it mechanistically in their campaigning, an approach that is neither realistic nor particularly helpful.

The third concept in FM 100-5 is the culminating point, a point in time "where the strength of the attacker no longer significantly exceeds that of the defender, and beyond which continued offensive operations therefore risk overextension, counterattack, and defeat."²¹ Attackers who attempt to continue beyond their culminating point court disaster; defenders who launch their counterattack after the attacker has made that error enjoy the potential for great success. The operational commander considers available resources in planning an attack, so that the concept of the culminating point includes consideration of logistics. Inadequate logistics can easily cause an attack to reach its culminating point too soon. In the defense, it is the operational commander who must maintain adequate resources to react when he senses the enemy attack has reached its culminating point. Although far from being precisely predictable, the culminating point is nonetheless real.

These three concepts apply to the strategic, operational, and tactical perspectives, and to both enemy and friendly forces. Just as the operational commander must consider them in the execution of his campaign plan, he must not forget that the

skillful enemy will consider them too in opposing the operational commander's campaign. Such an enemy will seek the opportunity to unbalance the hostile center of gravity, disrupt a threatening line of operation, or exploit an attack pushed beyond its culminating point. These three concepts, included for the first time in the 1986 edition of FM 100-5, represent a significant evolution of Army doctrine since 1976, when the emphasis was on tactical mechanisms portrayed in terms of relative firepower ratios.²² Inclusion of these new ideas, which pertain especially to the operational perspective, illustrate progress toward "less need for cookbook formulas," a premise espoused by the authors of the 1982 edition of FM 100-5.²³

The trend away from narrow cookbook formulas to more general principles and concepts introduces a struggle between structure and creativity. As one progresses from the tactical to the operational perspectives, the tension between the security of structure and the risk of creativity increases. Tactical commanders can take refuge in well-rehearsed techniques in closing with the enemy. Operational commanders, on the other hand, must be prepared to take risks as they attempt to create the military conditions for a successful campaign. Even though risk is inherent in war, operational commanders can reduce it with a clearly communicated concept of operation and with simple plans.

In our search for simplicity, however, there is a temptation to succumb to the lure of checklists to insure that commanders do all that is necessary to assure success. Lists somehow seem to make war more scientific. The issue becomes one of distinguishing between art and science. In this age of high-tech weaponry, it is especially difficult to accept the idea that war can have an artistic side. After all, art creates; war destroys. But from what we know about creativity, it is apparent that many outstanding military leaders have been successful because they had an imaginative approach to war. They possessed a dynamic creativity founded on

their intuition about what was happening on the battlefield.²⁴

The creative military mind must overcome the linear and sequential thinking which exists in the Army today. Army culture inhibits creative thinking because the military is historically slow to make the transition to new technology, has a low tolerance for conflicting opinions, discourages taking risks, insists on traditions of conformity, and demands strict obedience.²⁵ Although there are sound arguments for the existence of these tendencies, they nonetheless discourage creativity, an essential element of the operational perspective. Such a perspective contains what Napoleon referred to as a "spark of inspiration."²⁶ This spark is what allows successful operational commanders to jump ahead of their opponents to take advantage of events only dimly seen in the fog of war. The latest edition of FM 100-5 is moving the Army toward a better understanding of the intangible dynamics of the battlefield. As "the Army's principal tool of professional self-education in the science and art of war," it opens the door to studying the art of war wider than our fascination with technology has recently allowed.²⁷

NOTES

1. Michael Howard, "Military Science in an Age of Peace," *RUSI Quarterly*, 119 (March 1974), 4.

2. Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: US Army War College, 1983), p. 1. Colonel Summers quotes the following conversation that took place in Hanoi in April 1975 between himself and Colonel Tu, Chief of the North Vietnamese Delegation to the Four Party Military Teams: "You know you never defeated us on the battlefield," said the American Colonel. The North Vietnamese colonel pondered this remark a moment. "That may be so," he replied, "but it is also irrelevant." "The American Army in Vietnam knew its tactics, and that contributed to the heavy tactical emphasis in the 1976 edition of FM 100-5.

3. Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 406-07.

4. US Department of the Army, *Operations*, Field Manual 100-5 (Washington: GPO, 1982), p. 2-3.

5. US Department of the Army, *The Army*, Field Manual 100-1 (Washington: GPO, 1981), p. iv. A pre-publication edition (June 1986) of FM 100-1 became available as this issue of *Parameters* went to press.

6. Field Manual 100-1, p. 7.

7. Field Manual 100-5, 1986 edition, p. 9.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), p. 579.

10. Bruce Palmer, Jr., *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1984), p. 45.

11. Field Manual 100-5, 1986 edition, p. 10.

12. Huba Wass de Czege, "Toward a New American Approach to Warfare," *Art of War Quarterly*, 2 (September 1983), 52. Colonel Wass de Czege is identified as the lead author of FM 100-5 by John L. Romjue, *From Active Defense to AirLand Battle: The Development of Army Doctrine 1973-1982* (Fort Monroe, Va.: US Army Training and Doctrine Command, 1984), p. 43.

13. Field Manual 100-5, 1986 edition, p. 10.

14. Field Manual 100-5, 1982 edition, p. 2-3.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

16. Clausewitz, p. 121.

17. Robert Burns, "To a Mouse," 1785. "Gang aft agley" means to go off the planned line.

18. Field Manual 100-5, 1986 edition, p. 179.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 180.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

22. Field Manual 100-5, 1976 edition, chap. 2, "Modern Weapons on the Modern Battlefield," especially emphasizes the tactical technological lethality and sets the tactical tone for the entire manual.

23. Wass de Czege, p. 56.

24. James Mrazek, *The Art of Winning Wars* (New York: Walker, 1968), pp. 34-35.

25. Robert L. Maginnis, "Harnessing Creativity," *Military Review*, 66 (March 1986), 14-15.

26. Quoted in Mrazek, p. 31.

27. Field Manual 100-5, 1986 edition, p. i.

