

enemy—not action conducted *directly* by U.S. forces unilaterally. Counterterrorism doctrine, although limited, includes attacks against terrorist infrastructure, whether conducted by U.S. unilateral forces or with the assistance of other forces, be they regular or irregular. The methodology used or type of force conducting the operation does not change the type of operation.

The current USSOCOM- and USASOC-approved UW definition is significant for several reasons. First and foremost, it provides instant clarity to decisionmakers. With clarity come credibility, confidence, and trust, all of which are essential in the relationship between the special operations community and senior decisionmakers. Secondly, this definition brings a degree of accountability previously absent from this topic. Specifically, it ensures that individuals and organizations possess the associated professional knowledge and operational capabilities to claim proficiency in UW.

In 1983, Secretary of the Army John O. Marsh stated, “Doctrine is the cornerstone upon which a special operations capability can be erected. . . . Our failure . . . to develop doctrine has prevented special operations in the Army from gaining permanence and acceptability within the ranks of the military.” Ideally, this level of clarity will foster the development of the capabilities specifically required for UW in the 21st century. Perhaps more importantly it will lead to the integration of the topic into mainstream professional military education and training, thereby enabling the special operations community to better complement the conventional force capabilities as well as offer the geographic combatant commands a full spectrum of options for the challenges of today and tomorrow. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Joint Publication (JP) 3–05, *Doctrine for Joint Special Operations* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, October 28, 1992).

² JP 3–05, *Doctrine for Joint Special Operations* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, December 17, 2003).

³ Field Manual 3–05.202, *Foreign Internal Defense* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, 2007).

Operational Commander’s Intent

By MILAN VEGO

The commander’s intent is the key element in providing a framework for freedom to act and thereby enhance and foster initiative by subordinate commanders during the execution of their assigned missions. Yet despite its great importance, the commander’s intent is still not understood well in the U.S. military. All too often, its purpose, content, and execution are either misunderstood or misused. There is also little recognition that its importance varies for each Service and at each level of command. Another problem is that the commander’s intent is increasingly (and wrongly) used for purely administrative and other noncombat activities in peacetime. Perhaps the main reason for this is the lack of knowledge and understanding of the historical roots and the-oretical underpinnings of the entire concept and its purpose.

In general, the importance of the intent depends on the character of the military objective to be accomplished, levels of command, and the nature of the medium in which pending operations will be conducted. The advantages of applying the commander’s intent are generally higher in a decentralized command and control (C²) because it is there that a large degree of freedom of action is required so subordinate commanders can act independently and take the initiative in accomplishing their assigned missions. In general, the more nonmilitary aspects of the objective predominate, the greater the need for centralized C², and therefore the smaller the importance of the commander’s intent. In other words, the intent is much more critical in a high-intensity conventional war than in operations short of war. The higher the level of command, the greater the factors of space, time, and force, and thereby the greater the importance of the commander’s intent. It plays a relatively greater role in land warfare than in war at sea or in the air. This does not

mean that the intent is unimportant in naval and air warfare.

Term Defined

The *intent* can be defined as the description of a desired military endstate (or “landscape”) that a commander wants to see after the given mission is accomplished. In terms of space, the intent pertains to the scope of the commander’s estimate (in U.S. terms, the commander’s area of responsibility plus an undefined area of interest). Depending on the scale of the objective, tactical, operational, and strategic desired endstates can be differentiated. For example, in a major operation, the commander’s intent should refer to the situation beyond a given area of operations plus the area of interest, while in a campaign, it should encompass a given theater of operations plus the area of interest.

The Purpose

The main purpose of the intent is to provide a framework for freedom to act for subordinate commanders. In general, the broader the operational commander’s intent, the greater the latitude subordinate commanders have in accomplishing assigned missions. The intent should allow the subordinate commanders to exercise the highest degree of initiative in case the original order no longer applies or unexpected opportunities arise.¹ In issuing the intent, the higher commander informs subordinate commanders what needs to be done to achieve success even if the initially issued orders become obsolete due to unexpected changes in the situation.² The intent should provide an insight into why the higher commander is embarking on a particular course of action.³ The higher commander’s intent should define

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mission success in a way that provides commonality of purpose and unity of effort.⁴ The intent should be used as a broader framework for the development of friendly courses of action (COAs), while the more narrowly focused restated mission should serve as a guide in formulating each COA. The main utility of the commander's intent is to "focus subordinates on what has to be accomplished in order to achieve success, even when the plan . . . no longer applies, and to discipline their efforts toward the end."⁵

Roots

In the aftermath of the disastrous defeats by Napoleon I in the dual battles of Jena and Auerstadt in 1806, the obsolete Prussian military establishment was drastically reorganized. Among other things, General Gerhard Johann David von Scharnhorst (1755–1813) decentralized the command structure of the Prussian army by introducing army corps and permanent brigades. Moreover, he fostered independent thinking on the part of subordinate commanders.⁶ These changes were formally codified in 1812 when the Prussian army's *Drill Regulations for the Infantry* was adopted. It was then that the term *intent* (*Absicht*) appeared for the first time in the German military vocabulary. The Prussian commanders were given short and broadly stated orders directing them where to assemble their forces. Afterward, they were free to exercise the initiative in accomplishing their assigned missions.⁷ However, for the lower levels of command in the army, column tactics with their massive bodies of troops continued to impose severe limits on the conduct of the battle.⁸

After the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, the Prussian army gradually reverted to its former overly rigid and formalistic methods of command and control.⁹ It was not until 1857 when General (later Field Marshal) Helmuth von Moltke, Sr. (1800–1891, hereafter Moltke—not to be confused with his nephew Helmuth von Moltke, Jr., chief of the German General Staff, 1905–1914), became the chief of the Prussian General Staff that the emphasis was again given to independent actions by the subordinate commanders. The intent became an integral part of what the Germans call "the assessment of the situation" (*Lagebeurteilung*) and planning process. Moltke observed that "it is an illusion if the commander thinks that his continuous per-

sonal intervention by a commander into the responsibilities would result in some advantage. By doing so, a commander assumes a task which really belongs to others, whose effectiveness he thus destroys. He also multiplies his own tasks to a point where he can no longer fill the whole of them."¹⁰ Moltke emphasized the need for critical thinking and independent actions by subordinate commanders. He wrote that "diverse are the situations under which an officer has to act on the basis of his own view of the situation. It would be wrong if he had to wait on orders at times when no orders can be given. Most productive are his actions when he acts within the framework of his senior commander's intent."¹¹

Moltke further believed that in unforeseen situations, the commander's intent should predominate even if this requires subordinates to act differently than envisioned in the original plan. Commanders of army corps and divisions must assess the situation for themselves and must know how to act independently in consonance with the general intent. Each subordinate command should be informed of as much of the intentions of the higher headquarters as necessary for the accomplishment of the object because unforeseen events can change the course of things. Moltke differentiated between the intent given to each subordinate tactical commander and general intent (*Gesamtabsicht*) applied to the force as a whole.¹²

In the aftermath of the Wars for German Unification (1864–1871), many militaries in Europe, the United States, Japan, and elsewhere organized their general staffs on the German model. They also tried to copy with more or less success the German-style mission command (*Auftragstaktik*). In 1895, Captain Eben Swift, USA, was the first to discuss the importance of commander's intent in the U.S. military. He is also credited with introducing the five-paragraph order format (still in use in the U.S. military).¹³ The commander's intent did not become part of the doctrine until 1982 when the Army's new Field Manual 100–5, *Operations*, was adopted.¹⁴ In practice, however, this term was often poorly understood. In the 1990s, intent statements did not often comply with doctrine's content and structural guidance. They also often stipulated the method and thereby limited the flexibility of subordinate commanders if they failed to accomplish the task listed or achieve their commander's

intent.¹⁵ Since then, the commander's intent was included in the Army's and Marine Corps' doctrinal documents. It is also part of U.S. joint doctrine.

Prerequisites

The main prerequisites for the proper formulation of the operational commander's intent and its successful execution are solid knowledge and understanding of the true nature of war, mission command, and operational vision. The Clausewitzian view on the true nature of war was the foundation on which the Germans developed their highly successful mission command. The Germans firmly believed that war is full of ambiguity, confusion, and chaos. In war, the absolute cannot be achieved. Moltke observed that in war:

*everything was uncertain; nothing was without danger, and only with difficulty could one accomplish great results by another route. No calculation of space and time can ensure victory in this realm of chance, mistakes, and disappointments. Uncertainty and the danger of failure accompany every step toward the accomplishment of the objective.*¹⁶

The mission command tenets were incorporated for the first time into the German army's infantry drill regulations in 1888.¹⁷ The higher commanders were directed to give their subordinates general directions of what must be done, but leave to them the decision of how.¹⁸ No other military was as successful as Germany's in combining precision drill and unquestioning obedience with the initiative and independence at all levels of command.¹⁹ In German theory and practice, the mission command was not only a set of procedures for combat but also a habit of thought—a mental approach to warfare at large.²⁰ Moreover, it was a *warfighting philosophy*. The mission command provided a framework where competency, decisiveness, and initiative of both junior and senior leaders were combined, resulting in the sum total of much greater effectiveness than if their qualities were used alone.²¹ The principal elements of the mission command are the mission, situation, commander's intent, freedom to act, and initiative. For the Germans, the mission and situation are the most important factors in making a decision. Moltke asserted that the correct way to arrive at a decision is, in every case, to find out which of all the enemy's

actions would be most disadvantageous to one's forces. Then simple action, consistently executed, would accomplish the objective. Moltke repeatedly emphasized the critical role the assessment of the situation had in making a sound decision. He insisted that any prearranged scheme would collapse, and only a proper assessment of the situation could point the commander to the correct way.²²

In the German military, the intent provided a framework within which a subordinate commander could act in the spirit of the mission issued by the higher commander.²³ The knowledge of the higher commander's intent was the absolute prerequisite for independent actions by a subordinate commander. Only then would a subordinate commander be able to act in accordance of the overarching framework when the existing orders became obsolete due to unforeseen events or if new orders were not issued.²⁴

The commander's intent was aimed to both circumscribe and encourage subordinate commanders' exercise of the initiative.²⁵ In the Wehrmacht, the commander's intent was not a simple reiteration of the operational idea (*concept of operations* in U.S. terms); rather, it provided the flexibility necessary to out-think and act faster than the enemy. The commander issued his intent two command echelons *down*, and each commander was required to understand the intent two echelons *above* his level of command.²⁶

The most critical element of the German-style mission command was the freedom of action (*Freiheit des Handelns*) that the higher commander gave to his subordinate commanders.²⁷ In the execution of the assigned mission, each subordinate commander would have sufficient freedom to act within the boundaries of a given (commander's) intent. Subordinate commanders were required to evaluate all planned actions in accordance with the higher commander's intent.²⁸ For the Germans, intent was virtually sacrosanct.²⁹ The execution of the mission in accordance with the higher commander's intent required not only independent action but also what the Germans called "thinking obedience" (*Denkende Gehorsam*).³⁰

Freedom of action also included the commander's ability to divert from the assigned missions in case of a drastic change in the situation when quick action was necessary and the higher commander was not in a position to make a decision.³¹ The Germans firmly believed that subordinate commanders

are better able than the higher commander to handle situations in which split-second decisions were often decisive. A subordinate commander would also feel more ownership for his own actions, which would stimulate greater determination in executing them.³² Yet at the same time, subordinate commanders' freedom to make independent decisions was combined with the responsibility for the consequences of those decisions. The Germans insisted that the highest commander and lowest soldier must always be conscious of the fact that "omission and inactivity were worse than resorting to the wrong expedient."³³ Inactivity was simply considered criminal.³⁴

In practice, freedom of action for the operational commander is never absolute; it is invariably subject to certain political,

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unity of effort*

diplomatic, military, economic, social, legal, and, today, even environmental limitations. These limitations dictate whether the operational commander has a larger or smaller area within which he can operate of his own independent will. In general, the more the limitations on the operational commander's freedom of action, the fewer the means and ways the political leadership will have for accomplishing its stated political strategic objectives.³⁵

As a rule, the larger the scale of the military objective to be accomplished, the broader the intent and the further into the future the commander must look. At the tactical level, the commander's intent should envisage the flow of events in the course of executing a tactical action such as battle, strike, or attack. In contrast, the operational commander's intent should contemplate the chain of unfolding events in the course of execution of a major operation or campaign. The operational commander must visualize how tactical actions relate to one another and how they fit into a large operational framework. The commander's intent at the tactical level should encompass the situation for several hours to several days ahead of the current events. In contrast, the intent issued by the operational commander can encompass the development

of the situation over several weeks or even months. Field Marshal Erich von Manstein (1887–1973) observed that an army group commander should think 4 to 8 weeks ahead of current operations.³⁶

Operational thinking is both the foundation and framework for the commander's ability to properly anticipate action-reaction-counterreaction in the pending operation leading to the desired military endstate—or what is traditionally called "operational vision."³⁷ The key elements of a sound operational vision are a broad outlook, imagination, anticipation, intuition, *coup d'oeil*, inner perspective, historical perspective, and determination (see figure 1).³⁸

Broad outlook means that the operational commander should envisage a major operation or campaign in its entirety instead of focusing just on the major combat phase. The fruits of one's victory can easily be wasted or completely lost if strategic or operational success is not consolidated and then exploited. *Imagination* helps the commander make decisions and act in a situation full of uncertainty, where information is ambiguous or incomplete or both.³⁹ *Anticipation* is one's ability to predict or to have foreknowledge. *Intuition* is one's knowing or sensing without using a rational process. It is an immediate cognition of the situation in the future, a sense of something to happen, which is not apparent or deducible. Intuition consists of three core elements: calm, comprehensiveness, and inquisitiveness.⁴⁰

Coup d'oeil (French for "glance") is closely related to intuition, but it is not the same thing. It is an intuition based on real knowledge and experience, brought together in a flash of insight to suit a specific situation. It results in an action based on nothing firmer than instinct or a sensing of the truth. The commander with *coup d'oeil* has the innate ability to evaluate a situation accurately and set the stage for a rapid decision.⁴¹ *Inner perspective* is related to *coup d'oeil*. It entails the ability to see clearly through the fog of war. It is the sense that allows a commander to see the true nature of the situation despite its inherent ambiguity. The operational commander also must have *historical perspective*. This requires a high degree of general intellectual development.⁴² In referring to the value of the study of history, Napoleon I aptly observed that "what one believed to be a happy inspiration proved to be merely a recollection."⁴³ Clausewitz defined *determina-*

tion as the interaction among three qualities: ambition, motivation, and commitment.⁴⁴ It takes determination to see through all the false information and fog of war. This determination enables the commander to take certain actions despite all the indicators that tell him to make a different decision.⁴⁵

Process

The entire process of developing the commander’s intent consists of four distinctive but seamlessly related phases: formulation, articulation, communication, and execution. Formulation of the intent is the sole personal responsibility of the commander. No one *but* the commander should write the intent. In formulating the intent, the commander must first visualize the desired operational endstate after the assigned mission is accomplished. In a high-intensity conventional conflict, the military aspects of the desired operational endstate predominate. In contrast, in operations short of war, such as counterinsurgency or counterterrorism, the commander must envision both purely military and also many nonmilitary aspects of the situation upon completion of the mission.

In formulating the intent, the operational commander must first have a clear understanding of the current operational situation with relation to the enemy and physical environment. He must have the ability to properly visualize the sequence of actions by friendly forces in terms of actions, the enemy reaction, and counterreaction until the desired operational endstate is achieved.⁴⁶

In the U.S. military, the format and content of the commander’s intent can vary greatly. Sometimes the intent is considered not much different than the mission’s purpose or even as an integral part of the mission together with the purpose and tasks.⁴⁷ In other cases, the intent is too detailed and in all but name resembles a concept of operations. The commander’s intent also often improperly includes not only tasks for subordinate commanders but also the method of their accomplishment. Sometimes, commanders repeat almost verbatim the purpose of the restated mission and then explain in great detail tasks and the sequence of their accomplishment by subordinate commanders. The commander’s intent often includes acceptable risks in the course of the mission’s execution. However, the risks of the pending operation should be stated in the commander’s planning guidance.

They should also be assessed in the course of the development of each friendly COA.⁴⁸

The U.S. Army’s format for formulating commander’s intent consisted in the past of three parts: purpose, method, and endstate. In the *purpose*, the commander explained the reason for the military action with respect to the mission of the next higher echelon. This was to help the force to pursue the mission without further orders, even when the action did not unfold as planned. However, the purpose of combat employment of one’s forces should be part of the restated mission. In the part misleadingly labeled *method*, the commander described in doctrinally concise terms the form of maneuver or other action to be used by the force as a whole. Details as to specific subordinate missions were not discussed.⁴⁹

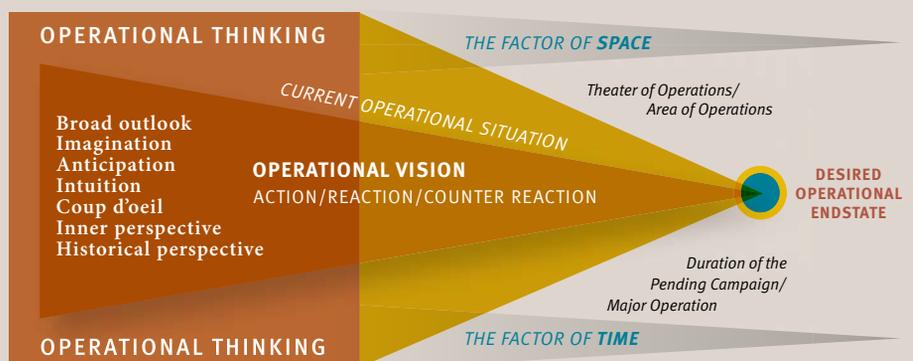
the German army’s higher commanders were to give their subordinates general directions of what must be done, but leave to them the decision of how

Recently, the U.S. Army dropped *method* from the format for the commander’s intent. It stipulates that if the purpose is addressed in the commander’s intent, then it should be expressed more broadly as an “operational” context of the mission. The method in the intent’s format was replaced with “key tasks”—those that the force as a whole must perform or conditions the force must meet to achieve the *endstate* and the stated purpose of the operation. Supposedly, the tasks are not tied to a specific COA; rather, they identify what the force must do to achieve the endstate.

The U.S. Army prescribes that all acceptable COAs should accomplish all key tasks. Subordinate commanders would use key tasks to keep their efforts focused on accomplishing the higher commander’s intent.

Examples of key tasks include terrain that must be controlled, operation tempo and duration, and operation effect on the enemy. It is explained that the key tasks are not specified tasks for any subordinate unit but may be sources for implied tasks.⁵⁰ However, there are several major problems with using so-called key tasks as part of the commander’s intent. Normally, a properly written mission issued by the higher commander includes the purpose (or the objective) and several essential tasks. These tasks as considered by the subordinate commander are the specified tasks. Other specified tasks issued by the higher commander are found in subparagraph 3.c. of paragraph 3, “Execution.” During the mission analysis step of the estimate of the situation, the subordinate commander would use each of the specified tasks to derive so-called implied tasks—those considered to be the prerequisites for accomplishing a given specified task. Hence, the key tasks in the intent cannot possibly be used as a source for deriving implied tasks. Also, the term *key task* is confusing because the word *key* can be easily understood as essential. Moreover, key tasks are either similar or identical to specified/ implied tasks or can be completely different. In either case, they can only further complicate planning and execution of the operation. The U.S. Army also apparently confuses the “tasks” and “conditions” as if they are the same thing; *they are not*. To avoid any confusion and simplify the matter, no tasks should be included in the commander’s intent. The proper place for listing tasks is in the restated mission and paragraph 3 of the operation

Figure 1. Operational Vision



plan/order. For example, in Iraq many U.S. commanders listed up to a dozen key tasks in formulating their intent. This, in turn, made it next to impossible for subordinate commanders to differentiate the most important key tasks from the others.

In generic terms, the operational commander should formulate two intents: *general intent* for the force as a whole, and the *intent* for each Service/functional component commander. In contrast, his subordinate tactical commanders should formulate only intent for their respective forces. The general intent should encompass two parts: the desired operational endstate and methods of accomplishing it. *Operational endstate* should describe broadly not only the military but also the nonmilitary aspects of the situation the commander wants to see for the enemy and friendly sides and neutrals. Envisioning non-military aspects of the situation after a given mission is accomplished is especially critical in post-hostilities, counterinsurgency, and peace operations.

The operational commander should explain the methods of combat employment of his forces as a whole in achieving the desired operational endstate. This might include the use of surprise, deception, and broadly stated approach (for example, symmetric/asymmetric; direct/indirect) in defeating the enemy. He should also describe in broad terms the relationship between the friendly forces and enemy force with respect to capabilities and terrain. Obviously, the operational commander should not be limiting the freedom of action for subordinate tactical commanders by including methods. The intent for Service/functional component commanders should explain in concise terms the desired tactical endstate for their force after its assigned mission is accomplished.

Articulation

The operational commander's intent should be written in the first-person singular using compelling language. It should fully reflect the personality of the commander. The intent should be complete, telling subordinates what they must do and why. In addition, it should define success in executable terms.⁵¹ The operational commander must bear in mind that he may not have the opportunity to meet his subordinate commanders face to face. Hence, subordinate tactical commanders should be able to read the higher commander's intent quickly and fully understand

it. Optimally, the intent should be concise so the subordinate commander can remember it.⁵² However, it can be longer in case the commander must address both the military and nonmilitary aspects of the desired operational endstate. The operational commander's intent must be so clear that subordinates can act in accordance of the intent even in a changed situation.⁵³ Hence, there is no place for language that might cause ambiguity and possible misinterpretation; otherwise, the intent would be useless. It is a sign of poor style to have the titles of the subsections in the final version of the written commander's intent. The operational commander should also use precise and commonly understood doctrinal terms.⁵⁴

The operational commander's intent can be written in the form of sentence/paragraph or in bullet style. However, the former is preferable because it allows the commander

the intent issued by the operational commander can encompass the development of the situation over several weeks or even months

to express his thoughts in free-form and in broad terms. Perhaps more important, sentence/paragraph style allows the commander to impart his own voice. Often, bullet style is used to explain each section of the intent in short sentences. It is inherently more rigid and does not allow the commander to express thoughts broadly. Supposedly, bullet style allows the commander to describe his thoughts more clearly. Yet it also results in incomplete thoughts and dilutes the impact of the commander's personality.

Communication

The operational commander should have his intent for the pending operation clear in his own mind before he conveys it to his subordinate tactical commanders. He should discuss his thoughts on the intent with his chief of staff, selected members of the staff, and subordinate commanders.⁵⁵ This would allow him to get feedback on whether the intent is too long or too short, poorly formatted, ambiguously worded, too detailed, and so forth.⁵⁶

In general, the intent statement can be written or issued verbally. The higher the command echelon, the more likely that

the commander's intent will be provided in writing or in message format. In analyzing a plan or operation order, the subordinate commander should not have to search for what the higher commander really wants him to do.

Higher and subordinate commander's intent must be properly aligned. Nesting of the commander's intents is aimed to allow sufficient freedom of action and exercise of initiative on the part of subordinate commanders while at the same time ensuring that the desired operational endstate of a force is attained. The higher commander's intent must be promulgated and clearly understood *two levels down* so that the intent and the resulting concepts of operations are nested to ensure unity of effort.⁵⁷

The Germans considered the intent as much more important than the mission (*Auftrag*). The format of the German operation orders prior to 1945 centered on the intent of the commander. An operation order (*Operationbefehl*) was issued when the higher commander assumed that there would be changes in the situation before the order was executed. The Germans also often issued a preliminary (or warning) order (*Vorbefehl*), which also contained the commander's intent. They listed the intent immediately following the first paragraph pertaining to the information on the enemy and on friendly adjacent troops.

In the traditional U.S. military decisionmaking and planning process (MDMP), the commander evaluates the intent from the higher commander during the mission analysis step of the situation estimate. The operational commander has to analyze the mission and the intent received from the combatant commander (theater-strategic level). Afterward, he drafts the initial or tentative intent as part of the mission analysis step of the estimate of the situation.⁵⁸ The final version of the operational commander's intent is part of the decision statement.

In the traditional MDMP, the initial commander's intent is used to develop and refine courses of action that contribute to establishing conditions that define the endstate.⁵⁹ However, this contradicts the logic of the commander's estimate. It is the restated mission, not the intent, that most directly influences the development of friendly COAs. Restated mission is also reviewed at the beginning of each step of the commander's estimate of the situation. In contrast, the commander's initial intent should provide a broader and

more overarching framework for all the steps of the estimate. Its main purpose is to allow greater flexibility in developing both the enemy and friendly COAs.

In U.S. terms, the commander’s final intent is expressed in the context of an oral order or written warning order, operation plan/order, and fragmentary orders.⁶⁰ Normally, all orders should be written by using the five-paragraph format. The problem is that complicated warning orders are all too often written by using a free-form format with a dozen or even more paragraphs. This, in turn, makes it unnecessarily more difficult to identify the key paragraphs, including the commander’s intent. In an operation plan/order, the commander’s intent is usually inserted as the first subparagraph of paragraph 3, “Execution,” followed by subparagraphs for concept of operations, tasks, and coordinating instructions.⁶¹ However, sometimes parts of the commander’s intent are scattered among other parts of an operation plan or order. Such a practice should be avoided because the recipients of an operation plan/order should not be forced to divine the higher commander’s intent.

The paramount importance of the commander’s intent is not shown in the format of the U.S. operation plans/orders. Hence, the U.S. military should rethink its views on the relative significance of the mission and the commander’s intent. The commander’s intent is much more important than the mission because it determines a much broader framework within which each subordinate commander must operate and also exercise the initiative. The mission is clearly narrower

in scope than the intent. Hence, the five-paragraph plan/order format should be changed by elevating the commander’s intent above the mission. In contrast to a tactical commander, the operational commander should issue general intent for the joint force as a whole and then provide intent to each Service/functional component commander (see figure 2).

Execution

The main prerequisite for the successful execution of the intent is that subordinate commanders have sufficient freedom to act. Traditionally, the Germans accepted the Clausewitzian dictum that uncertainty is an element of war and can best be mastered

subordinate tactical commanders should be able to read the higher commander’s intent quickly and fully understand it

through the free *initiative* of commanders and subordinates at all levels.⁶² The lowest tactical commanders were expected to take decisive action, even if that action meant changing the original plan, as long as the decision was guided by the higher commander’s intent.⁶³ Moltke emphasized that the advantage of a situation would never be fully utilized if subordinate commanders waited for orders. Only if commanders at all levels were competent for and accustomed to independent action would the possibility exist of moving large masses with ease.⁶⁴ He wrote that in time of peace, the

habit of acting according to correct principles can be learned only if every officer is allowed the greatest possible independence. In doubtful cases and in unclear situations, which occur often in war, it will generally be more advisable to proceed actively and keep the initiative than to await the law of the opponent.⁶⁵

The operational commander should not normally tell subordinate tactical commanders how to implement his intent.⁶⁶ However, he must ensure that they clearly *understand* his intent. The potential for misunderstanding is rather great when the operational commander and his subordinate commanders do not agree or are unaware that they disagree on the pending course of action. Ideally, back-briefing and rehearsals would enhance understanding of the higher commander’s intent.⁶⁷

The commander’s intent is an old and well-proven concept. In its essence, it is nothing more than the *desired effect* (advocates of effects-based operations should take note) that the commander wants to see upon the accomplishment of a given mission. The intent applies only to situations involving employment of one’s forces in combat and not in routine actions in peacetime. The intent is an integral part and one of the key elements of the mission command. Hence, its success cannot be ensured without full observance of the tenets of the mission command. The intent cannot be used effectively in a highly centralized command and control, or if the higher commander either bypasses or constantly interferes with the decisions of subordinate commanders. Its importance is also relatively the greatest in land warfare. Yet its importance can be disregarded only at one’s peril in naval or air warfare. The commander’s intent is much more important at the operational level of command than at the tactical level. Although the U.S. military pays great attention to the commander’s intent, at least in theory, this is not reflected in the format of the operation plans/orders. The traditional five-paragraph format should be revised by elevating the commander’s intent above the mission. **JFQ**

Figure 2. Commander’s Intent and Plan/Order Format

German format (<i>Reichswehr/Wehrmacht</i>)	U.S. 5-paragraph format	Proposed 7-paragraph format
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Information on the enemy ■ Information on adjacent (friendly) forces ■ Intent (<i>Absicht</i>) ■ Intelligence ■ Missions to subordinate units ■ Location (combat post) of the commander 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Situation 2. Mission 3. Execution <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3a. Intent 3b. Concept of operations 3c. Tasks 3d. Coordinating instructions 4. Administration and logistics 5. Command and control 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Situation 2. Intent <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2a. General intent 2b. Intent for Service/functional component commanders 3. Mission 4. Execution <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4a. Concept of operations 4b. Tasks 4c. Coordinating instructions 5. Logistics 6. Command and control 7. Administration