



TACTICAL

CONCEPTS

By Sid Heal

NINE PRINCIPLES OF WAR

Among the best known of all tactical precepts are nine tenets called the “Principles of War.” In attempts to assuage the feelings of those who object to the term “war,” these principles have sometimes been identified as the “Nine Governing Principles of Tactical Operations” and similar terms. The United States Army first published its discussion of these principles in 1921, but they were taken from the works of British Major General J.F.C. Fuller, who originally published them in 1912.

Fuller’s work sets forth in concise terms, nine interacting and related factors that have stood the test of analysis, experimentation and practice. Each principle is present, to a greater or lesser degree, in every tactical operation. The fact that a commander may neglect or even ignore them, makes them no less important — it merely affects the outcome. These nine principles play a key role in the development of tactical plans throughout the world and have revolutionized the ways in which personnel and equipment are utilized and deployed.

The principle of **maneuver** is so well known that persons with no knowledge of tactics sometimes confuse it with the entire body of tactical principles. Indeed, the impact this principle has on any tactical plan can hardly be exaggerated. Maneuver can be defined as the movement of troops and equipment to gain an advantage. This principle has at least two interrelated dimensions, flexibility and mobility. Flexibility describes the need for versatility and pliancy in thought and plans. It provides the ability to rapidly react to unforeseen circumstances. Mobility is then necessary to enable prompt actions and reactions. This principle is a key contributor to sustaining the initiative, exploiting success,

preserving freedom of action and reducing vulnerability.

The principle of **objective** is called the master or controlling principle. This is because it is the basis for which all planning must necessarily follow. The objective is the end to be attained through the employment of forces. Every operation must be directed toward a clearly defined, decisive and attainable objective. Although it often appears that tactical objectives are readily apparent, they are frequently obscured by emotions, uncertainty and vague commands. A commander *must* decide upon an acceptable resolution and direct the efforts of his forces to that end (“Mission Tasking,” *The Tactical Edge*, Summer 1999, pp. 93-94).

Since the most effective and decisive way to pursue and attain an objective is through the seizure, retention and exploitation of the initiative (“Tempo and Initiative,” *The Tactical Edge*, Summer 1996, p. 75), offensive action is required in all tactical operations. This is because whatever form offensive action takes, it is the only means by which a commander holds the initiative, maintains freedom of action and imposes his will on the circumstances. Since **offense** is required to reach a conclusion, a commander who neglects this principle surrenders the initiative. Notwithstanding the importance of this tenet, it is one of the most misunderstood and neglected of all the other principles.

Simplicity is essential in crisis situations. A plan that cannot be understood cannot be implemented. “Direct, simple plans, and clear, concise orders are essential to reduce the chances for misunderstanding and confusion,” according to the U.S. Army. Since friction (“Fog and Friction,” *The Tactical Edge*, Winter 1996, p. 76) is inherent in all tactical

operations, even the simplest plan can become difficult to execute. Consequently, plans which are readily understood and unencumbered with complications are more likely to succeed.

Economy of force suggests that, in the absence of unlimited resources, a commander must accept some risks in nonvital areas to enable him to achieve superiority at a decisive place and time. Since no commander has unlimited resources, the principle of economy of force is inherent in every tactical operation. Even when a commander has all the personnel and equipment he can use, time will require a change of shifts and conservation of resources to allow sustaining the operation. An astute commander will determine what assets are available, and when and where they will be needed. He then distributes his forces accordingly.

Mass is the reciprocal of economy of force. This principle requires that sufficient power be concentrated at a decisive time and place. Without economy of force it will not be possible to mass. This usually happens when a lack of understanding obscures the ultimate objective, since prioritization becomes impossible. Proper application of mass may achieve decisive results even for a numerically inferior force. For instance, a law enforcement commander who encounters a large group of suspects may deploy his forces in such a manner that the suspects must consider multiple threats from multiple directions. By massing his own forces at a time and place of his choosing, the law enforcement commander gains a substantial advantage when the suspects are slow or unable to effectively react. A series of such maneuvers can deplete the forces of adversaries to the point where continued resistance is futile.

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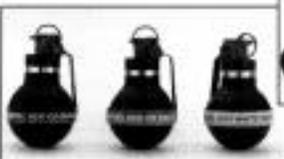
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In any tactical situation, there is a point at which a final decision must be made. That decision must be made by a *single* authority. This assures that coordination and control are focused toward attaining the objective. The principle of **unity of command** ensures that all efforts are focused on a common goal. Unity of command is achieved by vesting a single commander with the requisite authority to direct, coordinate and control the actions of *all* forces employed in reaching the objective.

Surprise results from striking an adversary at an unexpected time or place, or in an unanticipated manner. It is not necessary that a suspect be taken completely unawares, only that he becomes aware too late to effectively react. Surprise can decisively affect the outcome of tactical operations. In fact, it is the *key* factor in the success of many drug raids and high risk warrant services. Surprise is so powerful that it may allow success to be attained out of all proportion to the effort expended.

The principle of **security** is, to a large degree, the reciprocal of surprise. Without security it is impossible to achieve surprise. Security denies an adversary the ability to acquire an unexpected advantage. It encompasses everything a tactical force engages in. Plans must be kept secret, movements guarded, and equipment, command posts and communications protected. "Security enhances freedom of action by reducing friendly vulnerability to hostile acts, influence, or surprise," according to the Army.

A useful tool for remembering these principles is a mnemonic used by the U.S. military called MOOSEMUSS. Each of the letters identifies a principle and keeps them mentally available for review. Because these nine principles have withstood the test of time and trial, a commander who appreciates their significance is much better able to understand some of the latent factors inherent in all tactical operations. ■

Editor's Note: Most of this article has been excerpted from the book, "*Sound Doctrine: A Tactical Primer*," available from the NTOA Bookstore.