

First to Fight, First to Compete

The Corps needs the courage to evolve
by Col Jordan Walzer

“The lion cannot protect himself from traps, and the fox cannot defend himself from wolves. One must therefore be a fox to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten wolves.”

—Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

The famed mountaineer W. H. Murray once wrote, “Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative and creation, there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too.”

I stumbled on this passage years ago, and it has stuck with me ever since. But as new and old existential threats darken America’s door like never before, the need for renewed commitment takes on profound new meaning. We can no longer afford to suspend disbelief that we will prevail over our adversaries at a time and place of our choosing. Today, America’s rivals are achieving their strategic goals well below the brink of conflict. Do we, as a Marine Corps, still need to prepare for high-end war? Absolu-

tely, we do—both to deter and defend. But what if outside our envisioned octagon there is another fight going on, a “day-on, stay-on” slow-simmering street scuffle—should we not be first in line for this fight? The Marine Corps is our Nation’s premier fighting force for great power competition—in potential. So, why do we hesitate?

By definition, hesitation is a “delay due to uncertainty of mind or fear.”¹ We

can conquer both uncertainty and fear with insight, courage, and love—the true insight of our adversaries, the courage to evolve, and the love of those we are entrusted with safeguarding. But to act, we must first recognize and embrace the overwhelming task before us.

When I say “we” hesitate, I do not mean we the institution. The Marine Corps recently published *MCDP 1-4, Competing*, where our Commandant states in no uncertain terms, “We must understand the importance of strategic competition and the essential role Marines play in it for our Nation.” The “we” I am referring to are those key stakeholders, at all levels, who have the power to make or break this chance to evolve. In my view, we lack consensus and a sense of urgency. Marines either embrace competition, or they do not.

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The Corps has great potential to be the Nations’ force of choice in great power competition.
(Photo by Cpl Savannah Mesimer.)

The obstacle standing in our way is a cultural predisposition, a bias for conflict, and it holds us back. As an expeditionary naval Service, we are purpose-built for competition. Yet, we have not created an “elevator pitch” definition for why we should compete that resonates across our ranks.

If you Google “great power competition,” you will get a dozen mirror-imaged abstract definitions from think tanks and war colleges (many with colorful images of chess pieces dressed up in American and Chinese flags). This debate is essential. But for those who will actually venture into the belly of our enemies’ weapons engagement zone, we need to view competition through our adversaries’ lens. I offer the following passage from Samuel B. Griffith’s 1963 translation of Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*:

In Sun Tzu’s view, the army was the instrument which delivered the coup de grace to an enemy previously made vulnerable. Prior to hostilities, secret agents separated the enemy’s allies from him and conducted a variety of clandestine subversive activities. Among their missions were to spread false rumours and misleading information, to corrupt and subvert officials, to create and exacerbate internal discord, and to nurture Fifth Columns. Meanwhile spies active at all levels ascertained the enemy situation. On their reports, ‘victorious’ plans were based. Marshal Shaposhnikov was not the first to comprehend that the prerequisite to victory is ‘to make proper preparations in the enemy’s camp so that the result is decided beforehand’. Thus, the former Chief of the General Staff of the Red Army continues in a remarkable paraphrase of Sun Tzu, ‘the victorious army attacks a demoralized and defeated enemy.’

Has any part of that not stood the test of time? Every sentence could be ripped right from today’s headlines. Griffith’s translation is especially insightful because of his deep understanding of Mao Zedong and Soviet worldview. Neither Sun Tzu nor our current adversaries suffer any cognitive dissonance when it comes to competition versus conflict. More than that, our adversaries do not merely want to



Marines demonstrating capabilities in all environments sends a clear message to the Nation’s competitors. (Photo by LCpl Alexis Moradian.)

set their conditions for war—they are playing for all the marbles well left of war. Is that not the very definition of Sun Tzu’s “supreme art of war?”

The second point I offer is that competition is an operations in the information environment (OIE) fight that involves all five of our combat elements: command, ground, aviation, logistics,

to force Japan’s expedited surrender in World War II—that is OIE.

Now, consider the flag-raising on Mount Suribachi, a tactical event that took place in both the physical and cognitive dimensions and yielded tremendous strategic effects. Joe Rosenthal’s iconic photograph did not just capture the actions of six individual Marines; it

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and information. The Marine Corps and joint community abandoned the term information operations because it implied something distinct and separate from other operations. Information operations was an additive you sprinkled on and usually as an afterthought. Everything we do, kinetic or non-kinetic, takes place and creates effects in the information environment. When Genghis Khan’s Mongols each lit two torches at night and appeared to double in size—that is OIE. When the German High Command believed GEN Patton was the main effort at D-Day—that is OIE. When America dropped atomic bombs

encapsulated the hopes, dreams, blood, and sacrifice of countless Americans and allies who made that single event possible.

Let me offer a more recent example. It is not the thing of Hollywood movies, but it is significant as it gets at the heart of how every one of us plays a vital “OIE role” in competition. In 2018, II MEF deployed for TRIDENT JUNCTURE in Norway, the largest NATO exercise since the Cold War. II MEF had not attempted something of this scale in decades, and the world was watching. I remember standing at the pier, observing Marines from the II MEF Support



Whether operating, training or on liberty Marines should always view their actions though an adversary's eyes. (Photo by Cpl Savannah Mesimer.)

Battalion off-loading a container ship. Sub-zero temperatures and an exceptionally rough sea state ensured this task was anything but routine. Several times, the ship was forced to pull away from the pier for safety concerns. Our young Marines, alongside our Norwegian partners, accomplished their mission to deliver critical rolling stock and equipment through sheer professionalism and unwavering grit. Had we failed, our adversaries would have seized the narrative with the headline, “The Marines Have Not Landed—Stuck on Pier.” How would America project strength if it could not even get to the fight? It unlikely those young forklift operators realized they were creating strategic effects, and on that day, they were the MEF’s main effort.

Misunderstanding of OIE leads people to think it’s something unique to the MEF Information Groups (MIG). MIGs are the MAGTF’s de facto “Information Combat Element,” but OIE encompasses all “operations” in the IE. OIE is commander’s—and planner’s—business, period. Every element of the MAGTF brings tremendous OIE capability. MIGs continue to grow unique OIE capabilities, but Marines at all levels need to think and plan for cyber hygiene, operational security, deception, signature management (physical, elec-

tronic, and administrative), narrative warfare, and maneuver in the electromagnetic spectrum. Whether deployed for training, operating in theater, on liberty, or interacting on social media, we should always view ourselves through the enemy’s eyes. We should continu-

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ously ask ourselves: How do we make ourselves a harder target? How can we create effects that cause our adversaries to react and slow their decision cycle? How do we speed up our own decision cycle? How do we drive our narrative?

Finally, we must recognize the information age has changed the character of warfare so radically it may be time to revisit our doctrinal foundation, *MCDP-1, Warfighting*. In it, Gen Chuck Krulak stated upfront it is critical we “continue to evolve.” In *Warfighting*, there is a diagram showing the phenom-

enon of the compression of the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war. It states this can occur under two conditions: nuclear war or a military operation other than war. But today, the speed and scope by which OIE effects occur means we’re working across all three levels of war every day. In competition, we must now account for the realities of cyber operations, influence campaigns, foreign intelligence collection in cyberspace, and space operations.

Competition may seem daunting, but it’s far from an abstract concept. Every day, we’re operating under orders and campaign plans with explicit or implied “OIE” objectives and tasks. Something as simple as taking a theater security cooperation event and exploring every possible opportunity can yield tremendous effects. The more “reps and sets” we get competing, the more these objectives will be refined and, in turn, create new and more significant opportunities.

Victory or defeat in the next great conflict will be decided in competition. Or what if we are close to reaching the high-water mark? We cannot allow hesitation to restrain us from fulfilling our greater potential as a Marine Corps. While we may have a bias for conflict, we also have a long history of challenging the status quo and ourselves. We come from a long line of heretical thinkers and rule-breakers with names like Ellis, Cunningham, Krulak, Ortiz, Van Riper, and Armour. Now is not the time to hesitate; now is the time for action. We may be the Marine Corps that America wants, but we must now become the Marine Corps America needs.

Notes

1. Dictionary.com, s.v. “hesitation,” available at <http://www.dictionary.com>.

