

2022 MajGen Harold W. Chase Prize Essay Contest: Second Place

Achieving Decision on the Battlefield

Redefining maneuver warfare as method, not philosophy

by Maj Christopher A. Denzel

Since the publication of *FMFM 1, Warfighting*, maneuver warfare (MW) has hardened into an article of faith. Unproductive debates, stubbornly persistent after thirty years, demonstrate that MW has become resistant to professional discourse. MW has become a *warfare philosophy* rather than one of a few broad *methods* to defeat an enemy, crowding out discussions critical to future competition. This singular allegiance to MW has set the Service on a fool’s errand, arguing the for the best way to fight, independent of strategic objectives, operational context, or tactical conditions.

I argue that MW suffers from definitional problems that mask its unreliability as a warfare method. This article redefines MW, attrition warfare (AW), and positional warfare (PW) as co-equal tools to MW, evaluating each method’s reliability to explain why Marines use AW or PW methods despite sincere desire to employ MW. Reconceptualizing MW reveals that AW and PW are preferable methods to defeat the enemy, with authors like LtCol Thaddeus Drake, Jr. asking why, after 30 years, we cannot “point to at least *one* obvious example where systemic collapse won the day?”¹

Definition of Terms

Some historians convincingly describe World War I trench warfare as positional. Others join *MCDP 1* in denouncing it as attritional.² Meanwhile, doctrinal MW definitions mix concepts, speaking about shattering the enemy’s

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will to fight by gaining *positions* of advantage and *attritting* the enemy’s key capabilities and forces. Clearly, clarification is needed.

In 2017, Army Major Amos Fox described warfare as a “three-part construct that oscillates among positional, attrition, and maneuver warfare as battlefield conditions dictate.”³ Army doctrine supports Fox’s concept, outlining three types of effects that defeat enemy forces: physical, temporal, and cognitive.⁴ The following explanations show that these track closely to AW, PW, and MW definitions.

Attritional Warfare

Fox writes that AW “[erodes] or [destroys] a belligerent’s equipment, personnel and resources at a pace greater than they can replenish their losses.”⁵ We can simplify this definition to “methods to reduce enemy *capacity* to fight.” Removal of capacity does not require a direct approach or frontal attacks. Center of gravity analysis provides an indirect but essentially attritional approach.

Positional Warfare

PW is “the use of force—through tactics, firepower or movement—to

move an opponent from one position to another for further exploitation or to deny them access to an area for further exploitation.”⁶ We can simplify this definition as “methods to reduce enemy *capability* to fight.” This definition requires elaboration as PW is infrequently discussed.

As argued by a trio of School of Advanced Military Studies graduates (including Fox) describing the return of PW:

when America initiated the atomic age, the dominant character of land war between great powers transitioned from operational maneuver to positional defense. . . . The modern context of positional warfare, as argued by British theorist J.F.C Fuller, thus renders ‘physical’ land invasion between nuclear powers an ‘obsolete thing.’ Regional powers like Russia and China are protecting sovereign and adjacent territories with unprecedented reconnaissance-strike defenses that cannot be degraded without attacking systems in home territory and incurring instant strategic escalation.⁷

In essence, peer competition may not lend itself to AW’s escalatory techniques. Because peer adversaries can resort to “the bomb” if we successfully threaten will-to-fight (an existential threat to regime survival), MW may similarly be escalatory. What remains are PW techniques that deny competitors the *ability* to employ their forces to military advantage, as in strategies of denial.

Within this framing, Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO)

and Stand-In Forces (SIF) rely predominantly on PW. If the Corps is to realize the effectiveness of these operating concepts, then Marines must then be capable of conversations about PW without feeling like they must be *Semper Fidelis* to MW. Similarly, Marines must understand that by adopting PW, they need not jettison essential principles of modern war (e.g., mission tactics or combined arms) that many conflate with MW. No less than CAPT (ret.) Wayne Hughes, Jr. recognized this conflation a quarter-century ago: “If maneuver warfare is nothing more than fighting intelligently, then its antithesis is ‘stupid’ warfare,” not AW.⁸

Maneuver Warfare

Fox defines MW more narrowly than doctrine as “[seeking] *above all else* to strike at the psychological will of an opponent—to put them in a position so disadvantageous they give up the will to resist” (emphasis added).⁹ In contrast, doctrine mixes MW and PW’s purposes by suggesting MW seeks to maneuver to attack the enemy from a position of advantage.

Does Fox misunderstand doctrine? Is using PW to *threaten* AW and shatter the adversary’s will to fight what defines MW? Defining MW by this *sequence* and *outcome* is the fantasy about which Drake writes. History provides little support to this theory of victory. Worse yet, for AW to be a credible threat, it must be planned and resourced, making MW a branch plan the enemy compels, reducing the friendly method a choice for the enemy.

Thus, we have three choices that represent the crux of MW’s definitional problems. First, we may define MW as doctrine does: PW (or AW) *methods* to achieve cognitive *effects*. Second, we can explain MW’s cognitive effects as setting conditions for subsequent exploitation. Third, we can more narrowly define it as the attempt to achieve cognitive effects without significant physical or temporal costs.

The first definition makes MW an outcome rather than a method. A doctrine extolling the benefit of simply *winning* would be better re-written, giving readers more than one way to win.

IDEAS & ISSUES (CHASE AWARD WINNERS)

2020 MajGen Harold W. Chase Prize Essay Contest: 1st Place

The Fantasy of MCDP 1

Is maneuver warfare still useful?
by LtCol Thaddeus Drake, Jr.

MCDP 1 is convincing and, on the surface, makes complete sense, but is it the right doctrine for the Marine Corps in the 21st century? Our doctrine, Warfighting, has transcended the generally recognized purpose of standard military doctrine and no longer provides a useful guide to Marine Corps operations in the 21st century. Since its original publication in 1981, MCDP 1, then known as *First Marine Force Manual (FMFM 1)*, has been elevated beyond the bounds of even an organizational philosophy and has instead become more akin to a service orthodoxy. MCDP 1 has become an unquestionable dogma that Marines reference in a way similar to that of holy writ such as the Bible or *On War*—generally quoted out of context and only used when it provides ammunition to support one’s argument. There is nonetheless much to be learned about MCDP 1. Indeed, it is probably the most effective military doctrinal publication since the *Wissenschaftslehre*. The proof is in the pudding—it has survived (largely) unscathed for nearly 39 years and counting, the vast majority of which the Marine Corps has been engaged in combat operations. This brings up a fundamental and crucial question, however: *What evidence is there—since the 1989 publication of FMFM 1, Warfighting—that demonstrates the efficacy of the Fundamental Doctrine?* This article does not purport to argue that all of MCDP 1 is flawed; however, it does suggest that some of the fundamental parts of the doctrine have yet to be proven effective and, indeed, may actually have been detrimental to the overall operational and strategic objectives of the wars of the past 30 years. The Marine Corps must revise key elements of MCDP 1 to better posture the Service for operations in the 21st century.

—Jennilo L. Johnson,
The Marines, Counterinsurgency,
and Strategic Culture*

“Maneuverists say they derived their thoughts from history, but the lack of any such body of thought in the human record prior to the stylings of mid-1970s America indicates that the thesis probably predated the search for evidence.”
—Daniel P. Bolger,
“Maneuver Warfare Reconsidered”

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Marine Corps Gazette • October 2020 www.mca-marines.org/gazette 33

Multiple military theorists and authors, including frequent contributor LtCol Thaddeus Drake, have pointed out the lack of practical examples where “systemic collapse” led to victory. (Photo: Marine Corps Gazette, Oct 2020.)

The second definition poses the opposite problem: MW becomes a condition, not a method. Too often, arguments for MW focus on shattering the enemy’s coherence, leaving unasked and unanswered the question of *to do what?* Unless the goal is an endless turning movement, the answer is to exploit with AW or PW. An enemy in disarray will reconstitute unless destroyed or displaced. This makes MW a tactic of mental suppression, not a method to achieve victory.

The third definition is more consistent with the logic of AW and PW and is used by this article. This definition relegates MW to the realm of fantasy, answering Drake’s question of why, after more than thirty years, we cannot point to MW’s successful use.¹⁰

If this is true, why? As we will see below, Marines’ refusal to employ MW methods is not negligence but recognition that attacking the enemy’s will is *unreliable*.

Reliability of Method

Plans are hypotheses validated only after succeeding or failing in a specific situation. Because context is ever-changing, commanders can only conduct such experiments once, leading them to prefer reliable methods. Reli-

ability is in part constituted by the commander’s ability first to *verify* execution and then exploit any gains (an outcome dependent on *reversibility*). These two terms, verifiability and reversibility, are the basis for investigating *reliability*.

Verifiability

AW is inherently verifiable. Enemy deception or attempts to hide losses make verifiability imperfect—but destroyed resources can be observed and interpreted.

PW requires positional advantage, which is subjective, and further exploitation or access denial, which adds additional uncertainty. This makes PW less verifiable.

MW is the least verifiable method because will-to-fight is a decision that, despite having indicators, is itself invisible. When is withdrawal a delaying tactic, an attempt to reset for a counterattack or a rout stemming from shattered coherence? How do commanders know when will-to-fight has been lost *here* but not *there*? And where does *here* stop and *there* begin? On tactical timelines, commanders can only surmise an enemy’s will. Verification sometimes comes days or months later. Even a surrender is only proved sincere after the fact. At the least, attacking the enemy’s will presents an immense intelligence challenge.

Reversibility

AW destroy assets faster than the enemy can replenish them, making AW irreversible on tactical timelines.¹¹ A destroyed tank remains destroyed no matter how lucky or clever the enemy is and not only do dead combatants have no will, but they never change their minds.

PW seeks to move an adversary or deny them access to an area. The mechanisms to do this are reversible, and so is PW. Gain the high ground, and the enemy may slip away in the night, or another unit may flank your position—turning you and removing your advantage. Positional advantage is time-bound.

MW’s reversibility should now be apparent. Will-to-fight can be quickly reversed. Reinforcements may appear, restoring an encircled enemy’s will. A

routed force may rally. And, if enveloping units conduct onward movement, encircled forces become rear-area threats instead of collapsing.

Can something inherently reversible be reliable? Military conservatism suggests not—in the ultimate contest of combat, commanders prefer definitiveness. A negotiator can talk down a hostage-taker (will to fight) or place themselves between the shooter and hostages (positional advantage). Still, the police must literally take away the hostage-taker’s arms (capacity) with handcuffs for the crisis to end.

Intuitive Validation

A quick thought experiment demonstrates AW’s reliability advantages. What pilot is willing to fly towards a working surface-to-air missile system, taking it on faith that the missileer has lost the will to shoot? Any pilot would want to gain some “position of advantage (jam the radar) and then definitively remove the threat from the battlefield through attrition. Even then, a strict nodal analysis prefers the radar’s destruction (fewer targets, same effect), but the pilot (conservative with their life) prefers missile destruction even if the missiles cannot operate without the radar. This is for the same reason that we do not point unloaded weapons at anything we do not intend to shoot.

Attacking a belligerent’s will is challenging to execute in practice because it is inherently reversible and exceptionally challenging to verify. It is harder to train because in exercises real will is not actually affected. While the mythos of MW feels right, it is AW that prevails in the historical record. Warfare theorists moved on from this fantastic view of MW a quarter-century ago. Marine “maneuverists,” however, remain thoroughly *entrenched*.

Where to Go from Here?

This analysis intends not to devalue MW but to elevate understanding of what it is (and is not) to help Marines identify the appropriate method to win on the battlefield. The intent is not to convince Marines suddenly to adopt PW and AW techniques but to convince them that they already use them.

Doctrine must discard the pretense that MW is “what Marines do” and embrace ideas that support the operating concepts we intend to use. What is more, the reliability of method is also constituted by a force’s understanding of and familiarity with the method it is to employ, making it *essential* to reconcile doctrine and practice. If Marines *believe* they are executing MW methods, they are bound to botch the PW and AW techniques they actually employ.¹²

Our foundational doctrine should provide a range of options for theories of victory applicable across the competition continuum at the tactical and operational levels. It might borrow from Army doctrine’s defeat mechanisms.

We might also use the method portion of the commander’s intent to describe the actual method intended to defeat the enemy instead of cliché (“place the enemy on the horns of a dilemma”) or best practice (“use combined arms”).

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Furthermore, the conflation of best practices, like mission tactics, with MW discourages serious discourse on method. The strawman exercises of the “Attritionist Letters” and “Maneuverist Papers” are prime examples of how this suppresses professional discourse by turning MW into a Marine Corps *shibboleth* that is supposed to distinguish wise tacticians but instead outs its users as ignorant of battle’s essence. No other Service harbors this obsession.

It remains difficult to imagine a commander writing, “Method: I will use attrition to remove the enemy’s capacity to resist.” But this aversion is irrational (and the opposite, “I will remove the enemy’s will to fight,” sounds even more absurd). Many methods commanders already employ are attritional. Consider: “I will mass my long-range artillery and dedicate offensive air support sorties against X in order to degrade the adversary’s ability to Y.”



The MAGTF Warfighting Exercise (MWX) at Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, Twentynine Palms, CA, focuses on training Marines in combined arms fire and maneuver. (Photo by Sgt Courtney G. White.)



The MWX also challenges Marines to fight against a free thinking enemy with similar capabilities in a force-on-force environment—a pathway to better understand maneuver, attrition and positional warfare. (Photo by LCpl Jacquilyn Davis.)

Professionals should neither be reluctant to use the right tool nor insist on calling it by its name simply because *MCDP 1* calls it evil. If we understand forms of warfare merely as *methods of defeating the enemy on the battlefield*, we can talk maturely about AW and PW and strip MW down to a meaningful and *employable* definition. Blind adherence to MW chains the Service to fixed ways, regardless of means and ends. This doctrinal straitjacket may explain why Marines ignore *MCDP 1*.

Current operational concepts and the security environment are self-evidently *not* about removing the enemy's *will* to fight. They are about countering anti-access strategies and denying competitors the *ability* to achieve their objectives despite an enduring will to do so. By the definitions above, such concepts rely heavily on PW. How strange then that we talk so little about it.

Notes

1. Thaddeus Drake Jr., "The Fantasy of MCDP-1," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: October 2020). Emphasis in original. Drake is neither alone nor first in this observation. Military historian Hans Delbrück similarly concludes "The possibility of forcing the enemy to such an extent, even without battle, that he accepts the conditions sought by our side leads in its ultimate

degree to a pure maneuver strategy that allows war to be conducted without bloodshed. Such a pure maneuver strategy, however, is only a dialectical game and not any real event in military history." (Hans Delbrück, *The Dawn of Modern Warfare*, trans. Walter J. Renfro, Jr. [Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1990]).

In political scientist Richard Bett's investigation of the "illusions" of strategy, one of the defenses of strategy he poses is the reliability of attrition in the face of more complex and sophisticated approaches that are, invariably "too clever" for the real world: "Complex strategizing is like active stock picking: It is risky, offers high potential return, but requires exceptional people—a Warren Buffet or a Bismarck—to work. Attrition is like indexing: It works slowly but surely if the underlying trend—a rising market, or a superior military power position—is favorable." (Richard Betts, "Is Strategy an Illusion?" *International Security*, [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, Fall 2000].)

Finally, Cathal Nolan's Opus, *The Allure of Battle*, concludes that attrition is practically the only victory mechanism evident in the history of warfare: "Exhaustion of morale and matériel rather than finality through battles marks the endgame of many wars. Even in most wars. Almost always in wars among the major powers in any era. ... In each case, strategic losses came after protracted attritional wars against enemies who refused to accept those earlier tactical outcomes as decisive in the greater conflict." (Cathal Nolan, *The Allure of Battle: A History of How Wars Have Been Won and Lost*, [New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019].)

Countless other examples abound if one is willing to stray outside the Marine Corps canon.

2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: 1997).

3. Amos Fox, "A Solution Looking for a Problem: Illuminating Misconceptions in Maneuver-Warfare Doctrine," *Armor*, (Fall 2017), available at <https://www.benning.army.mil>.

4. Department of the Army, *Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, Operations*, (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2019).

5. "A Solution Looking for a Problem: Illuminating Misconceptions in Maneuver-Warfare Doctrine."

6. *Ibid.*

7. Nathan Jennings, Amos Fox, and Adam Taliaferro, "The US Army is Wrong on Future War," *Modern Warfare Institute*, (December 2018), available at <https://mwi.usma.edu>.

8. Wayne Hughes Jr., "Naval Maneuver Warfare," *Naval War College Review*, (Newport, RI: Naval War College, Summer 1997).

9. "A Solution Looking for a Problem: Illuminating Misconceptions in Maneuver-Warfare Doctrine."

10. "The Fantasy of MCDP-1."

11. Even on longer timelines, the replacement of lost resources has an attritional drain on a nation's ability to sustain a conflict. Every new artillery tube represents money and metal not expended on another weapon system. And every dollar spent on military resources is one unavailable for investment in the economic well-being of a nation. Indeed, this is why attrition is so decisive throughout history.

12. This is to say nothing of forming appropriate measures of performance or effectiveness for attritional or positional methods that the commander believes to be MW. The double-speak that *MCDP 1* encourages results in commanders misunderstanding the battlespace because the questions they ask about it are not moored in reality.



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