

Marine Corps Planning Process

Ain't Broke?

by LtCol Mark W. Elfers

Maj Timothy J. Cook argues in the July 2014 *Marine Corps Gazette* "Flushing the MCPP [Marine Corps Planning Process]" that, "it is imperative that the Commandant assigns a dedicated general officer (henceforth referred to as the "Design Officer") the responsibility of overseeing" an effort to "institutionalize Design as the foundation of military planning and problem solving in the Marine Corps." He goes on to describe how "[the] Design Officer must employ a comprehensive approach that addresses leadership, doctrine, training and education, and Marine Corps officer outreach."¹ However, Maj Cook never explains why the Commandant must do these things—what institutional failing must be remedied? Has the MCPP failed Marines deploying to combat zones? Have the officers graduating from the USMC Expeditionary Warfare School, the Command and Staff College, or the School of Advanced Warfighting been unsuccessful because the MCPP is fundamentally flawed and needs to be discarded?

History might argue against that supposition. The Marine Corps' forward deployed commands have accomplished their assigned missions again and again with the help of that simple, reductionist, solution-centric six-step process. It is the MCPP or the U.S. Army's Military Decision Making Process that have provided the doctrinal planning foundation for countless thousands of successful military operations since their respective inception.

Design Versus Plan

Design has certainly generated an

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extraordinary amount of discussion, study, arguments, and zealots. Many design advocates who would have the Marine Corps discard the MCPP and adapt design have seemingly read neither Marine Corps planning doctrine nor John Schmitt's "A Systemic Concept for Operational Design." Both include design and planning as complementary concepts, one nested within the other. Design is described by both as the action taken to understand the basic tenets of a problem and to create some form of an initial solution. Mr. Schmitt writes metaphorically:

...design is the thematic sketches of an architect based on conversations with the client and an appreciation of the surrounding environment within which a building will exist. Planning is the blueprints of the engineer, based on the architect's design, from which the building will actually be constructed.²

One cannot discard the blueprint simply because he prefers the sketch.

Maj Cook references an experiment on systemic operational design (SOD) conducted by the U.S. Army's School of Advanced Military Studies and the Marine Corps' School of Advanced Warfighting (SAW) in 2005–06. He does not mention that SAW does not teach SOD, but rather uses the MCPP as the foundational problem-solving process. In fact, leading planning efforts with the MCPP becomes the SAW graduate's job upon graduation. Until Marine commanding generals become

dissatisfied with the school's graduates, energy used to revamp the curriculum completely will likely be better spent elsewhere.

Scorecard

Written arguments proselytizing design have universally failed to convince, largely because design has no observable track record that supports calls for implementation. In fact, SOD as a doctrinal concept upon which an organization decides how to solve problems is sitting at zero wins and one loss for the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) against Hezbollah in 2006.

While some have argued that the IDF had not completely adopted BG Shimon Naveh's theories regarding design and operational art prior to this loss,³ Naveh was the head of the Israeli Operational Theory Research Institute from 1995–2005. During this time, he taught and graduated scores of IDF officers, influenced his entire Service, and initiated a wave of discourse and thought that eventually found its way into our own Marine Corps University.⁴

However, it is not only track record that prevents SOD from universal adaptation—the main reason SOD was never widely adapted is that its description lacks the clarity, substance, and historical underpinnings required for universal and clear comprehension. For many, SOD suffers from the same foundational problems which eventually sank the effects-based approach to operations (EBO)⁵—SOD's basic intellectual foundations of systems theory, postmodern French philosophy, and postcolonial/poststructuralist theory hint at why; understanding and using

SOD has been more difficult than understanding and winning a war.

History's Vote

A chorus of SOD supporters argue that the world is currently too complex and that nonstate actors, the global youth bulge, and Twitter make planning obsolete. But contrast what our most recent commanders have known about the enemy and environment during the last 10 years with that known by GEN George Washington prior to or during any of his battles during 1776. Whose situations were more complex? Were Grant's or Slim's challenges simpler than what our commanders have faced since 9/11 or since Desert Storm? Of course not. More information is certainly available today, and sorting through that information is difficult, but not more difficult than planning the initial landings on North Africa in 1943.

Do we need to study and learn and discuss as much as we can about the situation, the environment, the enemy, and the overall problem before we try to develop a solution? Of course. Does our planning and warfighting doctrine need to be learnable by the average military officer to the point he can practice it when cold, wet, tired, hungry, and under fire, yet still responsible for making the plan? Absolutely—this is the most basic litmus test for any doctrine. If young company commanders and battalion operations officers cannot use our doctrine in any time and place, we are failing them.

Last Look

To this author, SOD zealots are more interested in demonstrating their own brilliance to each other and chuckling self-assuredly while explaining the concept, yet again, to those with the courage to say, "I don't understand what you are saying," than they are in developing and teaching doctrine that will be helpful to young officers and commanders faced with the most challenging parts of combat—planning, communicating, and leading their organizations to success in battle. Doctrine should not be written for the 45-year-old colonel, the 55-year-old general, or 65-year-old PhD or government contractor. Our doctrine



Doctrine must help the lieutenant and staff sergeant train their Marines. (Photo by SSGT Tanner M. Iskra.)

must help the lieutenant and his staff sergeant to better train and lead their platoon. It must help brand-new captains and majors. There is no place in our doctrine for complicated language, convoluted or unsupported logic, or impressive-sounding or intellectually-seeming rhetoric that is not usable.

Supporters of both EBO and SOD have forgotten or never learned the basic fundamental elements of war: a fight between two or more otherwise irreconcilable groups of people characterized by death, injury, destruction, damage, friction, uncertainty, danger, chaos, and unintended consequences. It is all spelled out in our current doctrine and in the scores of time-tested text that fill the Gen Alfred M. Gray Research Center. Although our officer corps must be dedicated to lifelong study and scholarship, we must return to celebrating complex concepts conveyed clearly and difficult subjects defined simply.

As our Corps enters this most recent postwar phase, returning to simple and time-tested leadership tenets will serve the Marine Corps as well as it always has. Planning at its most basic terms is one of those long-honored leadership "must haves." Our leaders must have the ability to study a problem or task until they understand it, create some potential options to solve the problem, improve those options by asking "what if," and by applying Murphy's Law, compare those options against how

well they may solve the problem, decide on an option, and then communicate the decision and supervise the implementation. We are Marines. We train, deploy, fight, and win. That is certainly not something that needs fixing.

Notes

1. Cook, Maj Timothy J., USAF, "Flushing the MCPP," *Marine Corps Gazette*, July 2014, pp. 38 and 39.
2. Schmitt, John F., *A Systemic Concept for Operational Design*, Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory, Quantico, undated, p. 6. Accessed at: <http://www.au.af.mil> on 26 June 2014.
3. Berman, Lazar, "Beyond the Basics: Looking Beyond the Conventional Wisdom Surrounding the IDF Campaigns against Hizbullah and Hamas," *Small Wars Journal* online publication, accessed at: <http://smallwarsjournal.com> on 24 June 2014, p. 7.
4. Interview with BG Shimon Naveh, IDF (Ret), Operational Leadership Experiences in the Global War on Terrorism, *Small Wars Journal* online publication, accessed at: <http://smallwarsjournal.com> on 24 June 2014; and Milan Vego, *A Case Against Systemic Operational Design* National Defense University Press, Washington, DC, 2d Quarter 2009, p. 73.
5. Vego and Gen James N. Mattis, Memorandum for U.S. Joint Forces Command, Subject: *Assessment of Effects Based Operations*, Suffolk, VA, 14 August 2008.

