Communicating Intent and Imparting Presence

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"Intent = Purpose + Method + Endstate."
"Intent should have five elements."
"It should have two elements."
"It's *Aftragstaktik* made simple for the masses."
"It should be a structured process."
"It should be informal."

THESE STATEMENTS about commander's intent, some of them obviously contradictory, were collected a few years ago from Combined Arms and Services Staff School (CAS³) students and Army War College (AWC) students—all combat arms officers. Their understanding of commander's intent clearly demonstrates that although the concept of intent has been in our doctrine for quite a while, confusion still exists. Yet, there has been little empirical investigation into the process of communicating intent. After a brief review of what Army doctrine and other literature have to say about intent, this article will present the sobering findings of one study that investigated the communication of intent in four active-duty combat arms battalions. Next, the article will propose a method to help commanders improve their ability to communicate intent to their subordinates. Finally, the article will argue that the process of communicating intent is subordinate to another process known as *imparting presence*.

Commander's Intent in Doctrine and Practice

Although US Army commanders have long used intent to guide the actions of subordinates, it has only recently been formally included in doctrine. Commander's intent first appeared in US Army Field Manual (FM) 100-5, *Operations*, in 1982.[1] During the 1970s, the military tended to centralize decision making. Events such as the failed hostage rescue mission in Iran signaled the need to empower subordinate commanders on the scene. Army doc-

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trine writers used the German army's *Aftragstaktik*, first introduced in the early 19th century, as a model for today's concept of commander's intent.

Aftragstaktik, best translated as mission-oriented command, was developed in response to the French revolution and "Napoleon's method of waging war, which swept away the traditional armies and their linear tactics, iron discipline, blind obedience and intolerance of independent action."[2] According to J.L. Silva, *Aftragstaktik* was not a set of procedures but a philosophy, a social norm within the German army. At its foundation was the realization that "battle is marked by confusion and ambiguity." The German army leaders "consciously traded assurance of control for assurance of self-induced action." These leaders developed a military cultural norm that supported and expected decisive action by subordinates in the face of uncertainty or ambiguity. Fundamental to the success of *Aftragstaktik* in the German doctrine was trust. Silva writes:

"Trust between superior and subordinate is the cornerstone of mission-oriented command. The superior trusts his subordinate to exercise his judgment and creativity, to act as the situation dictates to reach the maximum goal articulated in his mission; the subordinate trusts that whatever action he takes in good faith to contribute to the good of the whole will be supported by his superior."[3]

Silva indicates that such confidence in subordinates stems from the superior's intimate personal knowledge of each one. German senior commanders knew that such knowledge was essential to implementing *Aftragstaktik.*

In formalizing *Aftragstaktik* into US Army doctrine, the fullness of the concept was diluted. The 1993 version of FM 100-5 defines commander's intent, but there is no discussion of social norms, expectations, trust or intimate personal knowledge of subordinates. Instead, FM 100-5 focuses on structure and content rather than process.

"The commander's intent describes the desired endstate. It is a concise statement of the purpose of the operation and must be understood two levels below the level of the issuing commander. It must clearly state the purpose of the mission. It is the single unifying focus for all subordinate elements. It is not a summary of the concept of the operation. Its purpose is to focus subordinates on what has to be accomplished in order to achieve success, even when the plan and concept no longer apply, and to discipline their efforts toward that end.

The intent statement is usually written but can be verbal when time is short. It should be concise and clear; long narrative descriptions of how the commander sees the fight tend to inhibit the initiative of the subordinates."[4]

Intent in practice. Gary Klein's study of intent statements and preliminary investigations indicated that intent statements often do not comply with doctrine's content and structural guidance. Klein collected 97 intent statements for analysis and found that their lengths ranged from 21 to 484 words, with most of them averaging between 76 and 200 words.[5] Here is an intent statement written by a brigade commander deployed to the National Training Center (NTC), Fort Irwin, California.

"The purpose of X Brigade's operation is to protect the Corps, rear and build-up of follow-on friendly forces. *In support of Division and Corps, we must attack rapidly to the west in the Central Corridor, destroy the lead motorized rifle battalion (MRB) of the XXX Motorized Rifle Regiment (MRR) between Phase Line (PL) IMPERIAL and PL EXCALIBUR, and then seize defensible terrain along PL EXCALIBUR. To do this, X-X Infantry (Light) will infiltrate to secure Hill 780 (NK4411), deny the enemy its use, and block to the west to prevent the enemy's use of the mobility corridor between Hill 780 and the south wall of the Central Corridor (Avenue of Approach 3). Task Force X-XX, the brigade main effort, will move to contact in zone, fix the advance guard main body (AGMB) and destroy it with an enveloping attack in depth. Brigade deep artillery fires, close air support and scatterable mines will be designed to attrit its commitment into the Brigade zone, and force the AGMB into the southern avenue of approach, where TF X-XX can destroy it by direct fires. After destruction of the MRB in zone, TF X-XX will continue the attack to seize defensible terrain along PL EXCALIBUR.* End state visualized is lead MRB of XXX MRR destroyed; brigade with heavy forces in control of Brown and Debman passes; and brigade postured to conduct defensive operations to destroy follow-on enemy regiments."[6]

This brigade commander took pride in his clear, doctrinal intent statements. Unfortunately, in this

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case, he missed the mark. The italicized portion that dominates this long intent statement is *method*. It tells each subordinate unit what to do, and the detail limits the flexibility of subordinate commanders for if they fail to accomplish the tasks listed, they fail to achieve their commander's intent.

In an operation order briefing held later during this same brigade's NTC rotation, a battalion commander asked for clarification of his unit's mission. The brigade commander, somewhat frustrated, said, "OK, you want your brigade commander's priority? Take care of this. If you don't get this right then TF *X-XX* will not be able to get through." The brigade commander's response was, arguably, a much clearer intent statement than the written form that he had spent so much time crafting.

Flexibility versus synchronization. The difference between the brigade commander's written and verbal intent statements highlights the tension between the constructs of centralization and flexibility. The senior commander must make an inherent tradeoff which impacts the subordinate commander's ability to adapt to battlefield conditions. The battlefield is a highly complex, uncertain environment where a commander matches wits with his opponent while coping with such variables as terrain, weather, morale, fatigue and equipment. Providing subordinate commanders a large degree

of flexibility is critical to success. Consider the following illustration. If both the enemy and friendly commanders have only one course of action available to them, parity exists. If, however, the enemy commander has 10 possible courses of action, but the friendly commander, restricted by the senior commander, still has only one course of action available, the enemy clearly has the advantage. But, if the friendly force's senior commander, through a minimally constraining intent statement, empowers his subordinates, they can adapt to any battlefield situation they confront.

Senior commanders must not lose the ability to synchronize events as they provide flexibility to subordinate commanders. A commander who does not synchronize subordinate efforts invites disaster. During Israel's 1956 Sinai Campaign General Moshe Dayan stated:

"To the commander of an Israeli unit, I can point on a map to the Suez Canal and say: 'There's your target and this is your axis of advance. Don't signal me during the fighting for more men, arms, or vehicles. All that we could allocate you've already got, and there isn't anymore. Keep signaling your advances. You must reach the Suez in 48 hours.'"[7]

These orders all but eliminated Dayan's ability to influence the battle. On one occasion, an entire brigade watched while two other brigades were fighting to capture an objective. In retrospect, Dayan realized his mistake. He wrote that the heavy emphasis on improvisation and flexibility and the absence of a strong controlling hand meant that "our capacity for misadventure [was] limitless." And, granted "a huge measure of independence," the brigade commanders failed to coordinate their movements.[8] When senior commanders provide their subordinates with flexibility at the expense of synchronization, battlefield activities are coordinated only by coincidence.

An Empirical Study of Commander's Intent

Command and control processes are not unique to the Army, or even to the military. Many other organizations have practices to develop plans and procedures and then implement them at some other time and place as the senior member of the organization desires—despite complexity or uncertainty. But no other organization works as hard at explicitly formulating and communicating intent to its subordinates as the US Army. The concept of intent is written into our doctrine and taught in our schools. Yet, as a profession, we have some work to do before we effectively formulate, communicate, interpret and implement intent.

In an empirical study, four active duty battalions (two armor, one mechanized infantry and one ground cavalry squadron) participated in the research. Figure 1 describes the simulation that was used to collect data. The battalion commanders and their operations officers knew the research was investigating the intent process within their organizations, but the company commanders were only told that the process was a garrison-based exercise to provide the battalion with practice in developing operation orders.

The battalion commanders were issued a brigade operation order (OPORD) with maps and overlays that tasked the battalion to defend in sector and to be prepared to counterattack. The OPORD was based on an actual NTC scenario. The battalion commanders and their staffs had one week to develop a battalion OPORD with all appendixes and overlays. They then disseminated the orders, which included statements of intent, to subordinate company commanders. These company commanders (four per battalion) were given a
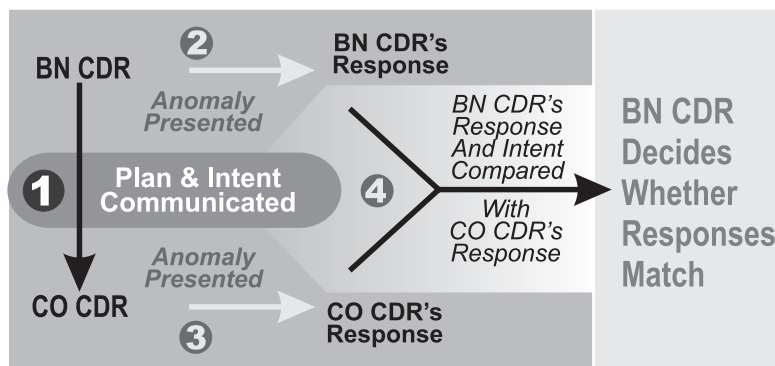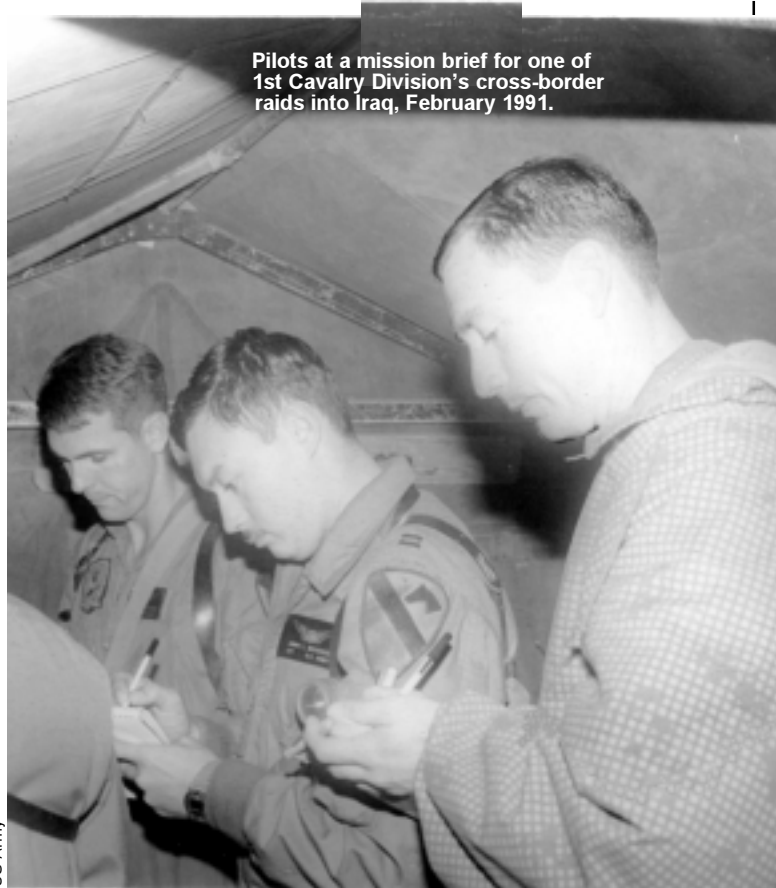

Figure 1. Data Collection from battalion and company commanders.

week to develop their own OPORDs and then briefed them back to the battalion commanders.

An investigator reviewed copies of the battalion and company OPORDs. Then, two situation reports (SITREPs) were created for each battalion. In the first SITREP, the companies were blocked from completing their specific mission but could still achieve the higher-order objectives of the battalion commander. In the second SITREP, the companies had completed their missions with relative ease and had to decide what to do next. In both cases, the intent statement of the battalion commanders provided sufficient information to help the company commanders respond to the SITREPs.

The battalion commanders were presented with the SITREPs and asked how they expected the subordinate company commanders to respond to each SITREP. Their answers became the basis for evaluating the responses of their subordinate company commanders. The SITREPs were then presented to the company commanders. The responses of the company commanders were recorded. The battalion commanders were shown the responses of their subordinates and asked to judge those responses relative to their own.

Four battalions, each with four company commanders that were given two SITREPs, generated 32 episodes. The battalion commanders judged that the company commander's responses matched their intent in only 17 of the 32 episodes (53 percent). In three episodes, however, the responses matched only by coincidence—the company commanders made their decision based not on their understanding of the battalion commander's intent but because they misinterpreted the information available to them. In three other episodes, although the battalion commanders judged the decision of the company commanders to match their own, they were, in fact, substantially different. Battalion commanders considered them a match because the company commanders were "thinking along the right lines." If these six episodes are considered mismatches, then the responses matched in only 11 of 32 episodes, or 34 percent.

The amount of time the company commanders had worked for their battalion commanders varied from as little as one week to as long as 21 months. Figure 2 summarizes the responses of the company commanders to the SITREPs based on the length of time they had worked

Pilots at a mission brief for one of 1st Cavalry Division's cross-border raids into Iraq, February 1991.

US Army

Successful company commanders that matched their battalion commander's intent initially determined the disposition of friendly and enemy forces. They specifically referenced procedures and the intent statement in the battalion OPORD. They also acknowledged that they had to coordinate their activities with commanders of adjacent units prior to taking any action.

for their battalion commanders. The data do not suggest that the ability of the company commanders to match their battalion commander's intent was linked to the length of time the company commanders had been in command. However, the research did reveal several interesting patterns in the performance of subordinate commanders.

Time In Cmd	Number of Co Cdrs	Possible Correct Responses	Responses Judged Correct	Actual Number of Correct Responses
1 Week	1	2	0	0
3 Months	2	4	3	2
8 Months	3	6	3	3
9 Months	4	8	2	0
13 Months	2	4	4	2
20 Months	2	4	2	1
21 Months	2	4	2	1
Total	**16**	**32**	**17**	**11**

Figure 2. Summary of company commander responses based on their time in command.

Discussion of empirical findings. Successful company commanders that matched their battalion commander's intent initially determined the disposition of friendly and enemy forces. They specifically referenced procedures and the intent statement in the battalion OPORD. They also acknowledged

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that they had to coordinate their activities with commanders of adjacent units prior to taking any action.

Unsuccessful company commanders generally did not refer to the battalion commander's statement of intent. In addition, unsuccessful commanders exhibited several other behaviors. Some commanders exhibited flawed tactical knowledge. For example, one commander's response to a SITREP was to reposition his unit on the battlefield. In the scenario, however, there was insufficient time to accomplish this maneuver. The enemy would have attacked the company on its flank as it moved. A few commanders had a low tolerance for situational uncertainty. They decided not to act without more information to reduce their uncertainty. In some instances, commanders misassessed available information. Even though they were given information on the status of enemy units, for example, they did not incorporate it into their mental model of the battlefield. Some commanders also exhibited a rigid adherence to procedures despite new information that indicated they were facing a novel, unanticipated situation. When a major, unanticipated event occurred on an adjacent part of the battlefield, these commanders would not deviate from their assigned mission, even though the event jeopardized the higher-order goals of the system. Finally, the study indicated that, in some instances, battalion and company commanders disagreed concerning doctrinal terms. If a battalion commander and a company commander do not have the same definition of "delay," the subordinate commander may make an erroneous decision.

The feedback from all four battalion commanders participating in the study indicated that it was worthwhile and they leaned a great deal. The re-

sults gave them a clear picture of how successfully they communicated intent to their subordinate commanders. In addition, the results identified areas that each unit needed to improve in formulating, communicating, interpreting and implementing intent.

Responsibilities of senior and subordinate commanders. There are four equally important components: formulation, communication, interpretation and implementation. The first two components—formulation and communication—are the senior commander's responsibility. Subordinate commanders interpret and implement intent. Subordinate commanders at a given echelon will also be senior commanders and must formulate and communicate their intent to the next lower echelon. Our officer education system emphasizes formulation. Students at combat arms advanced courses, CAS^3, Command and General Staff College (CGSC) and even Army War College students, practice writing intent statements based on information provided by their instructors (including higher commander's intent, mission statement, information concerning friendly and enemy forces and task organization). The final product in these schools is usually an OPORD that is briefed to an instructor. However, students have virtually no opportunity to practice the other three components.

Training officers in the classroom to communicate, interpret and implement intent is extremely difficult because these components are context-based—personality- and situation-dependent. Interpreting and implementing intent is especially problematic. Senior commanders formulate intent prior to hostilities, based on their vision of the battlefield. They also communicate their intent to subordinate commanders, who interpret it prior to hostilities. If the battle goes according to the vision, there is no need for subordinate commanders to refer to the intent statement. It is only when the battle deviates from the plan that the intent statement becomes significant. However, the context in which the intent was developed (the senior commanders' vision) has now changed. Subordinate commanders now must interpret and implement the intent based on a new, probably unanticipated context. As stated earlier, our military schools do not teach subordinate commanders to interpret and implement intent. The results of the research reported earlier indicate that subordinate commanders may not be learning these skills in the field either.

A Method for Conducting Unit Intent Training

The context-based simulation used in the empirical research described above provides a low-cost, high-return method for conducting unit intent train-

ing at the battalion or brigade level. The training can be conducted as an event by itself or in conjunction with any training exercise or actual deployment. The equipment required is minimal: a video camera, a video cassette recorder and a television. The executive officer (XO) can serve as the administrator. The only input required to initiate the training is an OPORD (with annexes and overlays) from higher headquarters. The training should be conducted in the following manner:

● Based on the OPORD issued by the higher headquarters, the commander and his staff develop an OPORD and brief it to the subordinate commanders.

● The subordinate commanders and their staffs develop OPORDs and brief them back to the commander.

● The XO develops 3 to 5 SITREPs based on the unit and subordinate OPORDs. It is critical that the SITREPs portray scenarios in which the ability to complete the mission has been blocked (or unexpected success has been achieved) but the commander's intent is still valid and able to guide the decision making of the subordinate commanders.

● The XO presents the SITREPs to the senior commander, one at a time. Using his OPORD, maps and overlays, the commander reasons aloud about what action he would expect from each of his subordinate commanders based on each SITREP. This session is videotaped.

● The XO presents the SITREPs to each subordinate commander. Using their OPORD, maps and overlays, they reason aloud about what actions they would take and why. This session is also videotaped.

● The XO serves as a moderator as the commander and each subordinate commander come together to review the videotape of their responses to the SITREPs.

The XO helps identify differences in the reasoning of the commander and his subordinate commanders. He must go deeper than determining whether the actions recommended by the commander and a subordinate match. The XO must identify discrepancies in understanding and implementation of doctrine, tactics, techniques and procedures; predispositions with respect to uncertainty; excessive reliance on written orders; and evidence of imbalance with respect to flexibility and synchronization.

Given a healthy command climate, this training method will dramatically improve the ability of a commander and his subordinates to formulate, communicate, interpret and implement intent. But our concept of intent is only part of what the Germans had in mind when they developed *Auftragstaktik*. As stated earlier, US doctrine on intent does not in-

It is not enough to tell subordinates what to do and why. When situations permit, commanders should explain how they arrived at the decision. Explaining the rationale helps subordinates understand and develop similar patterns of thought. Frequent interaction— formal and informal, professional and social— will provide subordinates additional opportunities to learn how their commanders think.

clude concepts of social norms, expectations, trust or intimate personal knowledge of subordinates. To incorporate these elements a commander must impart his presence to his subordinate commanders.

Imparting Presence to Subordinate Commanders

Recent technological advances have made presence a popular concept. The term normally suggests using technology to display and interact with a remote (or constructed) environment. The concept of imparting presence, however, has a different connotation. Multiple environments cannot be brought to commanders—they cannot be everywhere all the time. Instead, what they can do is to impart to their subordinates a sense of themselves. Imparting presence is the process of developing subordinates' decision-

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making framework so that they respond the same way the senior commanders would if they were able to view the situation through their eyes. Several factors contribute to the ability of commanders to impart their presence to subordinate commanders.

Start early. Commanders should begin to impart their presence from the day they assume command. They need to establish a healthy command climate and explicitly state what they value and why—both in garrison and in tactical situations. Reward structures must reflect this value system.

Establish acceptable operating limits. In most cases, commanders should tell subordinates what to do, not how to do it. At the same time, however, subordinates usually are not free to accomplish the task in any manner they choose. Certain constraints and restrictions limit the possible ways subordinates can accomplish a task. By establishing the operational boundaries, commanders provide subordinates the freedom to act and the knowledge of what is acceptable and what is not.

Explain your rationale. It is not enough to tell subordinates what to do and why. When situations permit, commanders should explain how they arrived at the decision. Explaining the rationale helps subordinates understand and develop similar patterns of thought. Frequent interaction—formal and informal, professional and social—will provide subordinates additional opportunities to learn how their commanders think.

Get feedback often. Commanders must ensure that subordinates clearly understand their orders. The potential for misunderstanding is great when the commanders and subordinates do not agree—and are not aware that they do not agree—on the meaning of doctrinal terms. When appropriate, commanders should use doctrinal terms and ensure that subordinates agree on their meanings.

Recognize individual differences. Silva wrote, "A superior's confidence in his subordinates will be high or low as a result of his intimate personal knowledge of each gained through his personal responsibility to train and develop them. The superior knows whom he can trust with more latitude and who needs more detailed instructions."[9] Commanders must recognize individual differences among their subordinates and interact with them accordingly.

How do commanders and their subordinates formulate, communicate, interpret and implement intent effectively on the battlefield? They start by imparting their presence to subordinates. They establish healthy command climates and make themselves and their decision-making framework accessible to subordinates. By all accounts, 21st-century battlefields may be volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous and lethal. Although technology will provide unprecedented ability to communicate and visualize the battlefield, the pace of events will, as in the past, drive subordinates to make decisions without checking with their commanders. Even though the concept of intent has been in our doctrine for many years, empirical evidence suggests that we do not successfully use it to guide tactical decisions. The unit intent training described here will help commanders and subordinates coordinate their responses to tactical situations. But like all effective training, it must be embedded in a larger, systematic program to impart commanders' presence to their subordinates. **MR**

NOTES

1. US Army Field Manual (FM) 100-5, *Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, [GPO] 1982).
2. J.L. Silva, "Auftragstaktik," *Infantry*, September–October 1989, 6-9.
3. Ibid.
4. FM 100-5, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1993), 6-6.
5. "Characteristics of Commanders' Intent Statements," *Proceedings of Command and Control Conference*, National Defense University, Fort McNair, Washington, DC, 28-29 June 1993 (McLean, VA: Information Systems Division, Science Applications International Corporation).
6. LTC Lawrence G. Shattuck, "Communication of Intent in Distributed Supervisory Control Systems," (Unpublished Dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1995), 41.
7. Martin Van Creveld, *Command in War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 196
8. Ibid., 197.
9. Silva, 6-9.

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