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It's Just Tactics: Why the Operational Level of War is an Unhelpful Fiction and Impedes the Operational Art

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From *Saving Private Ryan* – An example of operational art in the trenches.

Capt. Hamill: What've you heard? How's it all falling together?

Capt. Miller: Well, we've got the beachhead secure, problem is Monty's taking his time moving on Caen, we can't move out 'til he's ready.

Capt. Hamill: That guy's over-rated.

Capt. Miller: No argument here.

Capt. Hamill: We gotta take Caen to take St. Lo.

Capt. Miller: You gotta take St. Lo to take Valognes.

Capt. Hamill: Valognes, you got Cherbourg.

Capt. Miller: Cherbourg, you got Paris.

Capt. Hamill: Paris, you get Berlin.

Capt. Miller: And then that big boat home.

Dale Eikmeier, in his recent article in this journal, argued that the Army's concept of the operational art as it pertains to the operational level of war is disharmonious with Joint doctrine.^[1] Such a misunderstanding between doctrinal concepts is rightly dangerous and worthy of address. Carl von Clausewitz, in his discussion of theory, aptly noted that the weeds of misunderstanding always grow from ignorance.^[2] In this circumstance, the metaphor is most appropriate as it describes the danger inherent from misunderstandings of theory and suggests the way forward upon their discovery. Misunderstandings, like weeds, crowd out space for healthy, more desirable ideas to take root; moreover, their existence is mutually exclusive to the development of a deeper understanding of a topic. Thus, misunderstandings, like

weeds, demand attention and wholesale removal from the intellectual garden lest one ignore Clausewitz's further dictum to keep the important and unimportant separate.[3] Colonel Eikmeier's suggestion that the Army use the term 'tactical art' in lieu of 'operational art' may address the discrepancy in doctrine but it does little to address the underlying weed of misunderstanding. Rather than semantic changes adjusting Army doctrine, resolving this dilemma requires a good herbicide aimed at Joint doctrine and the removal of the very concept of an operational level of war.

Before the introduction of the operational level of war, US doctrine typically divided the study of warfare into either strategy or tactics. Changes in technology and society, embodied broadly by the industrial and French revolutions, expanded the scale and complexity of planning and conducting war. While the fundamental division of kind between tactical and strategic actions remained valid, the changes brought through industrialization and the nation in arms necessitated a division of scale. This broke these two broad categories into two further subsets, yielding a construct of grand strategy, strategy, grand tactics, and tactics. Grand strategy described the setting of national objectives and the surrounding statecraft while strategy concerned arranging the instruments of national power into supporting objectives, all aimed at the achievement of the national objectives. Tactics, on the other hand, concerns itself with employment of forces for immediate advantage on the field. Grand tactics expanded this concept to encompass the arrangement of larger forces, sometimes across multiple battlefields.[4] Baron de Jomini's explanation of the term foreshadows modern campaign design as he defined grand tactics as "...the art of well combining and well conducting battles." [5]

Beyond mere categorization, understanding warfare using this construct shows the necessity of communication between not only strategic and tactical concerns but also between higher echelons of power and lower. More importantly, these two kinds of exchanges are not always linked and simply moving from a higher echelon to a lower one does not always correspond to a parallel movement from the strategic to the tactical. The size or power of an echelon does not equate to its categorization as a strategic or tactical element. A corps level formation can act tactically, as in World War II, just as a battalion can act strategically, demonstrated by much of the past decade.

The creation of an intervening operational level of war between strategy and tactics in U.S. doctrine resulted from a misunderstanding of the operational art and its relationship to both strategy and tactics. Doctrine writers, when creating an operational level of war, conflated the art of command with the hierarchy of planning necessary for modern warfare. In its earliest days in U.S. doctrine, the operational *level* of war was born out of a need to develop the employment of large, fast moving formations on a rapidly changing battlefield, essentially tactics on a grand scale.[6] Linked to this perceived change in the character of modern war, operational *art* concurrently emerged in U.S. doctrine in the guise of campaign design.

Following the history of the development of these two terms, the comingling of the concepts becomes significant. As Colonel Eikmeier astutely pointed out, such conflation of the concepts is not helpful. Yet, the problem arises not from any change in the concept and definition of operational art, but in the increasingly assertive notion of an operational level of warfare. The birth of the operational level of war in US doctrine is the 1982 version of FM 100-5, *Operations*, defining it as the level concerned with larger unit operations and the conduct of campaigns. The manual further indicates that the dividing line between the operational and tactical levels exists somewhere between the corps and division level. This arbitrary dividing line echoes to current Joint doctrine. Significantly, the 1982 definition contains no explicit link within the operational level of war between tactical action and strategic outcomes. As the manual puts it, the operational level of war is simply "the theory of larger unit operations." [7] Had the development of an operational level of war stopped at this point it would have done no significant harm to US doctrine.

However, over the years that followed, the gradual conflation of operational art and an operational level of war would both hinder the development of sound operational art while allowing the unhelpful concept of an operational level of war to insert itself between the creation of strategy and that strategy's supporting tactics.

The 1986 version of FM 100-5 firmly entrenched the operational level of war into the Army's doctrine and its further inclusion into the emerging joint doctrine following the Goldwater-Nichols act. The 1986 version of the operational level of war further expanded upon the importance of coordinating large unit actions and the value of synchronizing close and deep operations. The 1986 FM 100-5 also defined the operational level as the realm of the corps and higher echelon with divisions "almost never direct(ing) actions at the operational level."^[8] In further definition of what echelons inhabited the operational level, FM 100-5 also placed the theater commanders in chief, the progenitors of the modern geographic combatant commander, squarely in an operational level of war concerned with the synchronization of large formations to achieve missions under the strategic guidance of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.^[9]

The 1986 FM 100-5 defined the operational art as the arranging of campaigns and military objectives to achieve a strategic end. While not explicitly naming operational art as the military skill linking tactical actions with strategic ends, the 1986 definition begins the process of developing the US military's doctrinal understanding of the operational art and its practice. Unfortunately, it also marks the beginning of the stratification of warfare into distinct, separate levels beyond strategy and tactics. In the manual's summary of the structure of modern warfare, it divides all military activity into three areas: military strategy, operational art, and tactics. Military strategy achieves political aims, operational art creates campaigns to support those political aims, and tactics win the battles that make up the campaign.^[10] Much like earlier definitions of the operational level of war, this definition of operational art, while simplistic, is not damaging to US doctrine on its own; however, over time, these definitions combined with the continued merging of operational art and an operational level of war formed a doctrinal wedge between the formation of strategy and its accomplishment on the battlefield.

The 1995 publication of JP 3-0, *Doctrine for Joint Operations*, pushed this merging of the operational art and the operational level of war towards its current unsatisfactory position. JP 3-0 defined the operational *level* as the link between strategic objectives and tactical employment of forces. Furthermore, the publication states that the focus of the operational level is operational art, which it defined as the design of campaigns and major operations. Although the manual briefly mentions the possibility of subordinate commanders using operational art, further descriptions of operational art within the manual explicitly keep the JFC at the center of its execution.^[11] This constraint, explicit or not, of operational art to the upper echelons of command is the principal flaw of the operational level of war. Current Joint doctrine reinforces this in its depiction of the operational level of war where it names JFCs or even Geographic Combatant Commanders as the commander focused on operational art.^[12]

In the early 1980s, military theorists proposed the operational level of war to cope with the demands of modern, armored warfare and emerging concepts of close and deep battle. Because of these demands, doctrine writers necessarily defined the operational level of war by the size of the units it governed since, to accomplish the tasks assigned at the operational level, such as deep strike, units of sufficient size and reach were necessary. In an earlier time, the Baron Antoine de Jomini effectively described these matters as "Grand Tactics."^[13] This description is more helpful than the creation of an operational level of war as it sees the maneuver of these large units as different from smaller unit tactics as a difference of scale, rather than kind. While difficult in execution and requiring skill and experience far greater than a small unit commander, the basic theory behind division and corps level maneuver is not fundamentally different from that of smaller units. Good tactics, grand or not, enable commanders to find positional or temporal

advantage on their adversaries to defeat or destroy an enemy force.

In contrast, operational art emerged from a growing interest in campaign planning in the wake of the events of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. Definitions of operational art, such as in the 1995 JP 3-0, highlight the operational art a means to avoid disconnected battles and the use of relative attrition as the measure of success or failure.^[14] At its core, operational art is what enables a military to adopt maneuver warfare, rather than simple attrition. Understanding the operational art as the key to successful campaign planning in this light implies that it is not simply the sequencing of successful battles that yields victory, but the synergistic, psychological effects of the campaign as a whole. If this is the true role of operational art, it appears to have far more to do with achieving broader strategic ends rather than the simple arrangement of battles. The strongest definitions of operational art underscore this facet through emphasizing the broad vision and overall understanding of the strategic situation required for its practice.

With this clearer understanding of the tactical nature of an operational level of war in contrast to the more strategically oriented operational art, the conflation of the two terms becomes more evidently detrimental. Yet, it is not the Army that has an “operational art” problem, but rather, that Joint doctrine has an “operational level” problem. If the wars of the past decade and a half have demonstrated anything, it is that achieving strategic ends can and do happen at any echelon. The bridge metaphor Eikmeier references to explain the role of the operational level of war as the link between strategic goals and tactical action is particularly unhelpful in this case. An intervening layer, bridge, or what-have-you is not necessary to link tactics to strategy and vice versa. As many definitions, to include Joint doctrine, have pointed out, all this link needs is a commander well versed in operational art.

The Army appears to be convinced of the lack of utility of the operational level of war. A review of both ADP 3-0 and ADRP 3-0 find only a single mention of the term, and that is to only point out that operational art is not constrained to an operational level. Indeed, Army doctrine seems to be intent on replacing the function of the operational level of war with the operational art, an action long overdue. This action does not create a “confusing mishmash,” as Eikmeier asserts, since there is no need to distinguish between operational art’s cognitive processes and the function of the operational level. Good operational art performs the function of the operational level, rendering the concept and its constraint to a particular echelon obsolete.

Fundamentally, doctrine must continue to underscore that the operational art is the commander’s art as it is a unit commander, regardless of echelon, that will be ultimately responsible for the translation of strategic objectives into a tactical plan for their achievement. This translation of strategic objectives into military action occurs wherever strategy and tactics meet and does not occur at a separate level of warfare. This ability to understand and communicate the exchange between the strategic and tactical realms is at the core of the military profession and, arguably, the key specialized skill the nation has come to expect from its military. The echelon that this translation point exists at will vary depending on the circumstances and character of the particular conflict in question. The commander of that echelon must be a master of the operational art if they are to be of use to the nation. This central function of the commander cannot be wholly delegated to a staff of “operational level staff planners” regardless of their education level.

Clausewitz saw the danger of divorcing the executor of an operation from its intellectual creator. His dictums on the relational nature of war and politics aside, Clausewitz also contemplated the role military genius played in the accomplishment of strategic objectives. He noted, “When all is said and done, it is really the commander’s *coup d’oeil*, his ability to see things simply, to identify the whole business of war completely with himself that is the essence of good generalship.”^[15] Essentially, Clausewitz is describing operational art. The ability to hold an entire conflict in one’s own mind is a prerequisite for understanding

how a series of tactical actions might yield a desired strategic end. Development of this ability requires a command of the operational art. Staff officers specially trained in the operational art can assist a commander, but they are an inadequate substitute for the commander's *coup d'oeil*.

Operational art must exist at the border between strategy and tactics, facilitate the exchange between the two, and, ultimately, provide an operational approach that achieves strategic objectives within the constraints of the tactical situation. This ability is at the heart of the art of command. Operational art is not simply campaign planning or the maneuver of large units. It is the fundamental military art behind winning wars. Elimination of the operational level of war would create a clearer, more concise American concept of war. Military problems consist of strategy and tactics, regardless of scale, and the principal contribution of the military professional is the operational art linking the two. The creation of an intervening operational level is simply a distraction. The Army should stick to its guns here and, instead of changing its doctrine, continue to chip away at Joint doctrine's insistence on an operational level of war.

End Notes

[1] Dale C. Eikmeir, "Operational Art and the Operational Level of War, are they Synonymous? Well It Depends.", *Small Wars Journal*, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/operational-art-and-the-operational-level-of-war-are-they-synonymous-well-it-depends>

[2] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds. and trans., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976, p. 578.

[3] Clausewitz, 578.

[4] These divisions begin to arise during the Napoleonic era. The most notable work on the subject at the time is Jacques-Antoin-Hippolyte Guibert's *Essai General de Tactique*, published 1772.

[5] Antoine Baron de Jomini, *The Art of War*, translated by CPT G.H. Mendell, USA and LT W.P. Craighill, USA, trans. (Kingston, Ontario: Legacy Press, 2008), 47.

[6] FM 100-5, Operations, 1982. 2-3.

[7] Ibid. 2-3.

[8] FM 100-5, Operations, 1986, 185.

[9] Ibid. 163,

[10] Ibid. 9.

[11] JP 3-0, 1995 II-3.

[12] JP 3-0, I-13,14

[13] Jomini, 47.

[14] JP 3-0, 1993, II-3.

[15] Clausewitz, 698.

About the Author



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