

The Manoeuvre Warfare Fraud

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The concept of Manoeuvre Warfare (MW) in its modern form was first advocated in the early 1980s as part of the US military conventional response to perceived Warsaw Pact superiority. It has since become widely accepted as a style of warfare and generic concept of operation. This paper will argue that the community it was intended to serve based its wide acceptance largely on ignorance and a lack of intellectual rigor.

Manoeuvre versus Attrition

In all its various definitions a premise of MW is the acceptance of the idea that there is a separate and distinct alternative ‘style’ of warfare identified as Attrition Warfare. This presumption has been regularly and categorically stated in various publications including the US Marines 1989 FMFM-1.¹ In 1997 the re-written manual, issued as MCDP-1², stated that the two styles were part of a spectrum. This spectrum was never illustrated nor described.

The definitions and examples employed in making this distinction use the argument that ‘attrition’ seeks to defeat an enemy by killing and destruction, whereas ‘manoeuvre’ defeats by attacking those components without which the greater body of the enemy cannot fight such as command and logistics. MCDP-1 defined this focus as attack the enemy’s ‘system.’ One of the stated goals of the 1997 MCDP-1 publication was to ‘clarify and refine important manoeuvre warfare concepts’. Thus the USMC sought to portray themselves as adherents to MW placing themselves in contrast to an organisation that may have sought proficiency across a spectrum or styles, to be used as and when appropriate.

To quote the 1989 MCDP-1

Manoeuvre warfare is a warfighting philosophy that seeks to shatter the enemy’s cohesion through a variety of rapid, focused, and unexpected actions, which create a turbulent and rapidly deteriorating situation with which the enemy cannot cope.³

In other words, the USMC seeks to do things with which the enemy cannot cope with the result that it will yield. It is hard to think of an alternative articulation that would not appear crass. Why would you seek to do something else? Why not say,

The US Marine Corps seeks to shatter the enemy's cohesion through a variety of rapid, focused, and unexpected actions, which create a turbulent and rapidly deteriorating situation with which the enemy cannot cope.

However, the usefulness of this aspiration is in the precise nature of those unexpected actions. Identifying what these actions should be and how to perform them is a necessary step in defining the concept⁴.

The problem is that while many have written about 'Manoeuvre,' there is little writing about 'Attrition'. There are descriptions of 'attrition approaches,' but they are generally clumsy attempts to make 'Manoeuvre' more appealing. For example, the 1997 MCDP-1 it states attrition warfare relies on

Technical proficiency—especially in weapons employment—matters more than cunning or creativity⁵.

What is wrong with that? If your troops are well equipped, for example, with Javelin missiles, or any reasonably complex weapons system, and the enemy is an armoured formation, technical proficiency may well have more merit than cunning or creativity. The idea of technical proficiency was originally stated in FMFM-1 as

Warfare by attrition seeks victory through the cumulative destruction of the enemy's material assets by superior firepower and technology. An attritionist sees the enemy as targets to be engaged and destroyed systematically. Thus the focus is on efficiency lead to a methodical, almost scientific approach to war⁶

This definition makes attrition sound pretty good. Most battles have been won, or operations have been successful because a percentage of the enemy was killed and the rest gave up. By far the simplest and most easily understood methods of breaking an enemy's will to fight is to inflict great violence and death upon him. Attrition works. In terms of a theory of war, do we want clever and complex or do we want simple and effective?

The whole edifice of Manoeuvre Warfare rests on the idea that there are two competing forms of warfare, manoeuvre and attrition, one of which is skilled and the other which is clumsy. This construct is false; it makes no sense to favour one form over the other. To do so is to limit available options by slavish adherence to ways over ends. The idea that MW and Attrition are either separate styles or part of a spectrum does not stand analysis. While the selective use of examples by MW adherents has sought to prove them as opposing or differing styles, they are better explained as complimentary. They are in no way distinct or alternative forms of warfare. Success in battle is based on breaking the enemies will to resist. There are well-recognised fundamentals to this activity on which most military doctrine is based. These fundamentals were clearly articulated by Henri Jomini, Carl von Clausewitz, Ardant Du Picq and Ferdinand Foch, and great many others. Whether intentional or accidental, the advocacy of MW is based the selective use of examples, altered definitions, and some deliberate misrepresentation.

The Indirect Approach

Strategy: The Indirect Approach by Basil Liddell-Hart was published in various forms between 1929 and its final revised edition in 1967. In 1941 it was even published under the title 'The Way to Win Wars'. The book promoted the concept that the perfection of strategy would be to produce a decision without any serious fighting. The aim was to paralyse the enemy, not destroy him. The chief premise was the notion that one good blow against the key vulnerability of the enemy could render him helpless or so reduce his capability that he might be more easily overcome. Liddell Hart then went further in suggesting that all truly successful military campaigns had achieved this through a methodology he called the 'Indirect Approach'. The key element of the Indirect Approach was surprise. The most useful objective definition of surprise in a military context is that it is the result of an action for which the enemy is unprepared and is thus less able to respond effectively. Liddell-Hart euphemistically proposed the use of 'lines of least expectation' and 'dislocation' - the clever exploitation of mobility to render enemy strength irrelevant. In essence a frontal assault on a fortified enemy position is not the smartest course of action. Yet no sensible military commander in the entire history of warfare has ever spoken against using surprise or seeking to attack the enemy's flanks and rear.

Liddell-Hart work was very much affected by his personal traumatic experience of the First World War. He concluded that the generals of the day were oblivious to the finer points of strategy, and much of his work can be seen as a reaction to the carnage of that war. However, as we shall see later, the view that the majority of First World War generals were idiots is simplistic and inaccurate. Ferdinand Foch, for example had articulated the idea of Core Functions as early as 1903 in his *Des Principes de la Guerre* ('On the Principles of War'). The Core Functions are Find, Fix, Strike, and Exploit. They can first be traced to Foch's Staff College lectures on campaign planning. Finding an enemy means locating him in both time and space. Fixing him is reducing his freedom of action usually by immobilising or suppressing him. Striking is doing that action that does him harm, and breaks his will to continue. Exploitation is taking advantage of his withdrawal from combat. Three years after Foch's work was translated into English, in February 1921 Captain Liddell-Hart (as he was then) re-branded the Core Functions in his work, *The 'Man in the Dark' Theory* of infantry tactics. In the same period he spoke of the 'Expanding Torrent system of attack'. *The 'Man in the Dark' Theory* uses the example of one man, fighting another in total darkness, using his hands to find the enemy. When he does, he grabs him by the throat to fix him and then delivers the blow to strike him. This is an obvious but unacknowledged reference to Foch's core functions.

What is more, The 'Expanding Torrent system of the attack' is also explicitly mentioned in Foch's 1903 work in terms of water seeping through a crack in a dam and eventually overwhelming it. If all this was not enough, Foch actually describes a concept of 'Decisive battle' he terms 'Manoeuvre', which is in contrast to a form of battle he calls 'Parallel' or 'Linear'. Both forms are concentrated on doing a great deal of physical harm to the enemy, but the 'Battle of Manoeuvre' seeks to deliver decisive force at a critical

point, rather than seeking to beat the enemy “everywhere”. From this we can extrapolate one of two things. The first is that if what Foch is suggesting is close to or near identical to what the MW Theorists advocate, then a man, much maligned by the MW camp is in fact one of the primary the authors of their ideas. The second is that if the MW theorists are not in agreement with Foch then it seems necessary to ask why. Importantly, while it is entirely possible that modern MW theorists have never read Foch⁷, Liddell-Hart almost certainly did.

It bears mention that Liddell-Hart published a very critical biography of Foch in 1929, entitled *Foch. Man of Orleans*. Whatever his pronouncement to the contrary, Liddell-Hart had good reason to undermine Foch, because Foch’s work warned against the idea of ‘victory without fighting’⁸ and Foch effectively cited Clausewitz in support of his argument. Moreover, Foch had been associated with what Liddell-Hart saw as the woeful conduct of the War on the Western Front. Liddell-Hart was well aware of Foch’s ideas, including his admiration of Clausewitz. Modern scholars, such as Christopher Bassford⁹, have shown that Liddell-Hart had a less than comprehensive understanding of Clausewitz.

Although Liddell-Hart wrote persuasively, he did not want historical fact, argument or complexity to get in the way of promoting what he saw as his good idea. He, therefore, set about ransacking the historical and operational record for selected examples to prove his point. His place in history as a military thinker is greatly open to debate, as Brian Bond, John Mearsheimer, and James Harrison have observed.¹⁰ Despite his flawed analysis and these challenges to his credentials, Liddell-Hart still occupies pride of place amongst many MW adherents.

The First World War (WW1)

MW proponents portray WW1 as the poorly conducted slaughter of armies through the ineptitude of the general officers involved. To this end the MW adherent has to play fast and loose with the historical record, and to ignore the reality of several vast national armies thrown at each other in a limited area of terrain, with little by way of tactical mobility other than horses and foot. These constraints, combined with the varying effects of telegraph, railways, and tinned rations, created the deadlock of the Western Front. Attempts to break the deadlock were of necessity ‘attritional’, and technical. The Western Front was created by a unique confluence of historical and technological circumstances. It was not a matter of military strategic or operational choice. The generals all understood wars of manoeuvre and mobility because they had studied and trained for these, as the field regulations and military writing of the time indicate. They were wrong-footed by the extremely rapid development of military technology, and also confounded by the sheer size of the endeavour in which they found themselves. Mobile warfare (albeit slow and un-mechanised) was the predominant form of warfare before WW1. The static attrition of the Western Front was an unexpected aberration.

MW advocates regularly cite the German use of ‘storm detachments’ as a good example of a MW approach to breaking the deadlock of the trenches. The Germans saw it as the

only way to exploit the shocking and suppressing effects created by massed artillery. Operation Michael, the failed March 1918 German offensive, despite initial success, soon outran its logistics, and artillery cover and withered away to nothing without supporting fires. The often touted 'initial success' of the storm detachments is not, when studied carefully, a textbook case of effective infiltration by light infantry as the MW advocates suggest. The German infantry were far from light. They were heavily armed (including with manhandled light field guns) and were supported by massive amounts of artillery (over 10,000 guns and mortars on a 53 kilometre front) and gas. Their success can be largely attributed to a very poor British defence and the advantage of fog. When on 28 March the German Army attempted its 'final offensive' to roll up the British Army from south to north, the outcome was complete failure.

Indeed one fine example of operational military success in WW1 was Allenby's Palestine campaign, the importance of which Liddell-Hart denigrated. It rather suited him to promote the efforts of the 'unconventional' and publicly lionised T.E. Lawrence, with whom he corresponded. It did not sit well with Liddell-Hart to promote Allenby as a practitioner of the 'indirect approach,' because he was a thoroughly conventional, albeit gifted, cavalry officer. In fact Lawrence's guerrilla campaign, under cover of an Arab rebellion against the Turks, was much more limited than many suppose. His primary objective was to make best use of the ways the Arab tribes involved liked to fight. Banditry and raiding came naturally to them and they saw no use in other methods. Lawrence successfully applied these traits within the framework of the Palestine Campaign. It is worthy of note that the decision to ferment rebellion amongst the Arabs through incentives was almost certainly a political rather than a military decision. The inability of the 'Indirect Approach' to differentiate between military thought and politics and diplomacy is a recurring one.

Sun-Tzu

Sun Tzu's *The Art of Strategy*¹¹ is often cited as an exponent of MW. The use of the word 'strategy' is significant because it encompasses the political as well as military dimension. Thus when Sun-Tzu famously says

*Hence to fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence;
supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting.*

This quotation is about coercion, not 'manoeuvre.' Sun-Tzu is referring to diplomacy and politics not military action. An enemy will capitulate or comply because it fears harm from overwhelming and decisive military action or, more simply, attrition. Sun-Tzu maintains that the ambassador can get what he wants because his Emperor has the military power to present any enemy with a very real threat of destruction. He was foreshadowing Clausewitz's maxim that 'War is the continuation of politics with the admixture of other means.' Those 'other means' included bribery, corruption, assassination, fermenting rebellions and hostage taking.

Most of Sun Tzu's writings were widely accepted and incorporated into military doctrine in advance of the arrival of MW. They are not particularly insightful as the MW lobby has suggested in progressing its particular agenda by associating it with ancient and proven wisdom. For example, FMFM-1 quotes Sun-Tzu as saying '*Speed is the essence of war: take advantage of the enemy's unreadiness, make your way by unexpected routes, and attack unguarded spots*'¹². This quotation is from Section XI, 'The Nine Situations' and based on the standard US translation by Samuel Griffiths. However another translation of the same passage is '*Speed presides over the conditions of Strategy*'.¹³ 'Presides' is not synonymous with 'essence', nor is 'strategy' with 'war'. One translation continues, '*Seize opportunities so that others do not gain*'. Again, this is subtly but crucially different from an alternative '*take advantage of the enemy's unreadiness*' because it could apply to political or diplomatic action as well as military. To assume that Sun-Tzu was only concerned with military conduct vastly degrades the relevance and usefulness of his writing. What is more, there is nothing in his writing to suggest that he did not advocate the rational and effective use of overwhelming violence as and when required. The aspiration of victory without fighting is for politicians, intelligence agencies and diplomats rather than soldiers.

Boyd and Lind

Two significant advocates of MW are John Boyd and William Lind. Thanks to the work of Franz Osinga, we know that Boyd was strongly influenced by his reading of Liddell-Hart, T.E. Lawrence and Sun-Tzu, and therefore by their inaccurate translations and interpretations.

Lind made Boyd's OODA loop central to his own writing on MW. Lind describes the OODA loop as:

*Conflict can be seen as a time competitive observation-orientation-decision-action cycles. Each party to a conflict begins by observing. He observes himself, his physical surroundings and his enemy. On the basis of his observation, he orients, that is to say, he makes a mental image or 'snapshot' of his situation. On the basis of this orientation he makes a decision. He puts the decision into effect, ie. he acts. Then because the action has changed the situation, he observes again, and starts the process anew. His actions follow this cycle...*¹⁴

Essentially Lind's explanation of the OODA loop is 'If you understand the situation better and more quickly than your enemy, you can employ surprise to defeat him'. This notion is not in doubt but how does the OODA loop actually add to our understanding? Furthermore, the OODA loop is only valid in the context of certain activities, most of which are far removed from conflict. Chess grand masters can make extraordinarily quick, yet highly complex decisions, which may conform to a simplistic description of the OODA loop. The OODA loop is an idealised representation of one possible decision-making process. People may use the OODA loop to play chess but does it actually help them to play chess more effectively?. This process requires one to observe and orientate, that is, 'look and understand'. If this is to be done more quickly than the enemy, how is

effectiveness to be measured? In particular, how does one know when one has sufficient understanding of a situation which the enemy is trying to conceal from one? How can one observe and understand when outcomes are ambiguous or concealed? The word 'risk' never appears even in Boyd's earlier more complex version of the OODA loop. It is neither the accurate description of the process it claims to be nor is it an inherent part specifically of MW. It could equally well be applied to prosecuting attrition.

'Recon Pull' was also a concept unique to Lind's peculiar understanding of MW. Reconnaissance is primarily aimed at finding where the enemy is located. It serves the Core Function of 'find'. In reality, 'Recon pull' is merely reconnaissance using 'mission command'¹. A commander tells his reconnaissance forces to go find something, but does not tell them how. The implication of the idea of recon pull is that there is an antithesis called 'recon-push'. 'Recon push' or 'command push' would be a matter of telling reconnaissance where to go and how to get there, and is thus the practice of detailed command. Are reconnaissance and mission command useful and effective? Of course – but both can be practised in the absence of a conceptual framework of MW. So-called Attrition Theory, emphasising the physical destruction of the enemy, could be enhanced and assisted by both mission command and good reconnaissance.

MW was in fact valid, operations could be practised using detailed orders as opposed to mission command if there is an adequate common operating picture and good command and control links as Network Centric Warfare² is intended to provide. Intriguingly one might argue that a fully networked coherent common operating picture could make mission command unnecessary.

Race to the Swift

Published in 1985, (the same year as Lind's *Manoeuvre Warfare Handbook*) Richard Simpkin's *Race to the Swift*, subtitled 'Thoughts on 21st Century Warfare' was one of the most widely read works of military thought of its day. Indeed US Army General Don Starry, and TRADOC Commander, wrote its foreword so the book was promoted to the US military readership as well as in UK. Simpkin was a former Royal Armoured Corps Brigadier, and a recognised authority on Soviet Deep Operations Theory. Although it is a somewhat confusing, overly complex and rambling work, it contains an intriguing insight into the dynamic between what Simpkin called manoeuvre and attrition theory. Simpkin saw the basis of manoeuvre theory as pre-emption and surprise. Manoeuvre theory drew its success from the seizure of opportunity. Attrition, on the other hand, had great utility in being able to deter an opponent, or force him to comply by making him fear harm and therefore, perhaps, for the user to win without fighting. However once fighting commenced he saw the two theories as being complimentary. This view is in sharp contrast to the one that suggests Manoeuvre and Attrition are competing 'styles' of

¹ 'Mission command' is a tenet of doctrine held to be fundamental to MW theory whereby subordinate commanders to the lowest level are given freedom of action to achieve their specified objectives within a broad but clearly expressed 'commander's intention' given to them by the superior commander.

² And indeed the UK's Network Enabled Capability.

warfare. However Simpkin failed to articulate why differentiating two complimentary 'styles' was actually necessary or useful.

Conclusions

The case that there is some definable 'style' of operation of MW is not well made by its adherents partly because of the very poor quality of evidence presented. The entire subject has lacked a rational analysis of land warfare derived from fundamental concepts. How useful is it to focus on proving or even needing to promote the idea that there are two competing forms of operation, when basic elements such as surprise seem to be poorly understood. A discussion on the merits of creating surprise can be usefully and effectively conducted without reference to Sun-Tzu, Liddell-Hart or Clausewitz. If one accepts that the breaking of will effects the defeat of an enemy, one first needs to understand what breaks will. Moreover, if breaking the enemy's will to resist is not what creates success, one must ask what should be done, and how one is do it.

The wide acceptance of MW indicates a lack of understanding of the works and examples cited to promote it and ignorance of the purpose and limits of the military instrument. Success in conflict can be achieved in many circumstances without fighting or with minimal violence but this is achieved primarily through other means and typically with a subordinate military contribution. Military concepts and doctrine cannot provide these solutions. They can at best articulate the military contribution particularly for liberal democracies where the military serve the elected leaders. If the word 'manoeuvre' is to be sensibly applied to military doctrine, it is best used in its traditional meaning. The purpose of manoeuvre is to gain a position of advantage relative to an opponent. This advantage may be used to deliver overwhelming violent attrition.

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¹FMFM-1 'War fighting' Page 28

² MCDP-1 'War fighting' Page 36

³ MCDP-1 'War fighting' page 73

⁴ [The author wishes to acknowledge work of Major Craig A. Tucker, and his School of Advanced Military Studies paper "False Prophets: The Myths of Manoeuvre Warfare and the Inadequacies of FMFM-1 Warfighting."](#)

⁵ *ibid* page 36

⁶ FMFM-1 'War fighting' page 28

⁷ [If one accepts the work of Frans Osinga, in relation to the work of John Boyd, then Boyd almost certainly never read Foch. TE Lawrence was also provably ignorant of Foch' work, despite famously criticising him.](#)

⁸ Foch, Principles of War, 1918 Edition, page 34

⁹ <http://www.clausewitz.com/CWZHOME/Bassford/Chapter15.htm>

¹⁰ Liddell-Hart, A study of his military thought, Brian Bond. Liddell-Hart and the weight of History, John Mearshiemer, and Men Ideas and Tanks, JP Harris 1995.

¹¹ Sun-Tzu wrote about the Art of Strategy, not War. The character often translated as War, is in fact 'Bing' – meaning Strategy.

¹² FMFM-1 War fighting Page 57

¹³ RL Wing translation, The Art of Strategy, page 141

¹⁴ William Lind. The Manoeuvre Warfare Handbook, Westview Press 1985

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