

# Let Boyd Speak!

Write maneuver warfare essentials into *MCDP 1*

by Maj Brian Kerg

**F**leet Marine Force Manual 1 (*FMFM 1*), *Warfighting*, was first published in 1989 at the direction of Commandant of the Marine Corps (CMC) Gen Al Gray. This document saw print at the culmination of a maneuver warfare movement that arose organically within the Corps in the preceding decade and provided a doctrinal foundation for the Marine Corps' warfighting philosophy. The establishment of a maneuver warfare philosophy was a seminal moment in the Corps' history and was monumentally influential as it informed all other aspects of doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership, personnel, and facilities. Leaders and planners at the highest levels, when considering key decisions, were compelled to ask, "Does this support maneuver warfare?"

In 1997, *FMFM 1* was updated and published as *Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1 (MCDP 1)*, *Warfighting*. CMC Gen Charles Krulak wrote in his foreword to *MCDP 1* that this document required improvement because, "Doctrine must continue to evolve based on growing experience, advancements in theory, and the changing face of war itself."<sup>1</sup>

*MCDP 1* requires another revision but not only for the justification provided by Gen Krulak. In addition to recent changes in theory and the character of war, *MCDP 1* fails to adequately discuss maneuver warfare as it was articulated by the very strategist who instigated the maneuver warfare movement: Col John Boyd, USAF(Ret). Despite a passing mention of certain maneuver warfare concepts, *MCDP 1* remains weighted toward discussions of defeating the enemy through physical destruction and conflates maneuver with movement—an error that fails to embrace the key characteristics and potential of

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**The influence of LtCol Boyd is still present today, even if his ideas on maneuver warfare are not completely understood in the Marine Corps.** (Photo by SSgt Jacob Osborne.)

maneuver warfare. The Marine Corps must let Boyd speak! *MCDP 1* must be revised to account for the future security environment and to appropriately convey the essential elements of maneuver warfare as understood by Boyd. Upon revision, the force must be re-indoctrinated through a deep education and application of maneuver warfare at its formal schools. In this way, the Corps will continue to outmatch adversaries in combat capability and capacity—regardless of enemy size or strength—and do its part to deter and defeat the enemies of our nation.

## Boyd's Maneuver Warfare

*MCDP 1* defines maneuver warfare as,

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.<sup>2</sup>

This concept was drawn largely from the work of Boyd, who researched, wrote, and lectured exhaustively on maneuver warfare and its implications for military strategy and operations after his retirement from active duty.<sup>3</sup> Boyd's lectures ultimately reached the attention

of Gen Al Gray. As the commanding general of 2d MarDiv, Gen Gray sponsored a maneuver warfare society and applied its tenets in force-on-force free-play exercises. Upon his appointment as the CMC, he ordered the writing and publication of *FMFM 1*.<sup>4</sup>

Though the definition of maneuver warfare that appears in *MCDP 1* is a sound one, how it is exemplified throughout the rest of the document falls short of maneuver warfare as conceptualized by Boyd. Before analyzing *MCDP 1* for its gaps, it is first necessary to identify Boyd's key components of maneuver warfare.

First, maneuver warfare prioritizes a defeat mechanism that is mental or moral in nature, vice one that is physical. Physical destruction can contribute to defeat; however, shattering the enemy in the cognitive domain is how one can best and most decisively win. To achieve this, a belligerent conducts actions that the enemy does not expect and presents him with sudden and unexpected challenges with which he must contend. As an enemy attempts to respond to surprising situations, discord and confusion are sowed, and his ability and willingness to deal with complex, confounding situations is broken.<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, maneuver warfare requires the exploitation of the element of time, such that the adversary's dilemma is escalated into a crisis; this manipulation of time contributes decisively to his inability to cope with the situation into which he is being forced. Boyd is most popularly known for the Observe, Orient, Decide, Act (OODA) loop, which is a cognitive model of human decision making. The aim of Boyd's model is to operate inside the enemy's time scale at a faster tempo than the enemy can.<sup>6</sup> Getting inside the adversary's time cycle inflicts disorder upon him. Simultaneously, we can further outpace an adversary by making ourselves appear ambiguous. This renders an enemy incapable of generating the mental framework needed to deal with the situation with which we are presenting him.<sup>7</sup>

The third essential element is a fundamental orientation on the enemy, focusing on inflicting effects on him, and

ideally making the enemy complicit in his own defeat. We seek to understand the enemy on his own terms, which best positions us to understand how to defeat him. Boyd, pre-eminently influenced by Sun Tzu on this subject, insists on probing an enemy organization to unmask his strengths, weaknesses, and intentions.<sup>8</sup> This becomes leverage as we can then mentally imagine what an adversary is most likely to do and take action in anticipation of his intention—as “an army varies its method of gaining victory according to the enemy.”<sup>9</sup> Such actions enable a bold commander to defeat a numerically superior opponent.

Finally, maneuver warfare is characterized by the employment of asymmetry. Though commonly understood as the avoidance of pitting force directly against force, the meaning is far more subtle and complex. Here, Boyd applies Sun Tzu's terms of *cheng* and *ch'i*. *Cheng* is directive, expected, and obvious, while *ch'i* is indirective, unexpected, and hidden. Boyd makes the analogy with Patton's colloquialism to “hold him by the nose and kick him in the rear,” calling for the use of *cheng* and *ch'i* as a kind of mental combined arms. One is not necessarily superior in isolation; rather, *cheng* and *ch'i* are used together to off-balance the enemy, then rapidly strike him.<sup>10</sup> Asymmetry exists in more domains than the physical and is particularly potent in the cognitive, time, and human domains. Attacking the mind asymmetrically is the means by which one can win without fighting, Sun Tzu's (and Boyd's) acme of skill.<sup>11</sup>

These are the four principal elements of maneuver warfare, as this philosophy was espoused by Boyd: A moral/mental defeat mechanism, an exploitation of time that creates a crisis for the enemy, a fundamental orientation on the enemy, and the employment of asymmetry. With Boyd's understanding of maneuver warfare, an analysis of *MCDP 1* reveals many shortcomings.

### A Lack of Maneuver

*MCDP 1* adequately captures the idea that the defeat mechanism is not purely physical but also moral/mental. However, it espouses an application of maneuver that revolves around the

use of physical strength.<sup>12</sup> *MCDP 1* couches maneuver in attrition, noting, “Firepower and attrition are essential elements of warfare by maneuver.”<sup>13</sup> Finally, when *MCDP 1* discusses applications of maneuver warfare, it weights the conversation in language highlighting how maneuver is used as a tool for destruction: “Even if an outmaneuvered enemy continues to fight as individuals or small units, we can destroy the remnants with relative ease.”<sup>14</sup>

The inclusion of an element of time contributing to this moral/mental crisis is also present throughout the text, advocating that we should maneuver at a faster tempo than our adversary. However, *MCDP 1* fails to speak to the criticality of degrading your adversary's tempo by inflicting disorder. Mission tactics, commander's intent, and decentralized C2 are means of reducing our own friction, but *MCDP 1* does not inform readers how they might increase friction for the adversary.

Further, though *MCDP 1* does briefly mention the importance of being oriented on the enemy, it fails to fundamentally orient the reader on the enemy, nor does it expound on making the adversary complicit in his own demise. It also does not directly connect the centrality of the human dimension to this enemy orientation; that connection exists, and it is a logical connection to make, but it is one the reader must make because the two ideas are separated by chapters.

Finally, asymmetry is perhaps the tenet of maneuver warfare that has the weakest representation in *MCDP 1*. The concept with which readers are probably most familiar is that of surfaces and gaps; avoid the former, attack the latter.<sup>15</sup> Though *MCDP 1* has one line noting that asymmetry is more than spatial, examples occur only in spatial terms: attacking an enemy's flank, using combined arms to place him in the horns of a dilemma, and penetrating his lines.<sup>16</sup>

### Getting Boyd's Maneuver into MCDP 1

In short, the most fundamental concepts that characterize maneuver warfare as espoused by Boyd—whose

articulation led to the writing and publication of *Warfighting*—are neither adequately nor comprehensively expressed. Though these concepts are mentioned, the discussion remains fixated on the physical and spatial and is weighted toward defeating the enemy by physical destruction and attrition. The risk is that Marine leaders will pursue the allure of winning by attrition, leading to disaster should they face an enemy who is physically stronger, mentally more agile, or (ironically) one who employs maneuver warfare against them.

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Notably, a comparative analysis of *FMFM 1* and *MCDP 1* shows that the older document, *FMFM 1*, is more thoroughly maneuverist in nature than *MCDP 1*, perhaps the reason that the *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance* refers only to *FMFM 1*.<sup>17</sup> But the Corps must go back further in time than to *FMFM 1*—it must go back to Boyd, whose full command and appreciation of maneuver warfare is yet to be surpassed. *MCDP 1* must be revised such that the four defining characteristics of maneuver warfare—a moral/mental defeat mechanism, an exploitation of time that creates a crisis for the enemy, a fundamental orientation on the enemy, and the employment of asymmetry—are centrally discussed.

The expertise and capability to cheaply, quickly, and effectively rewrite *MCDP 1* exists. While formal doctrinal writing processes are long and tedious, requiring inputs, staffing, and buy-in from senior stakeholders across the force, this would inevitably water the text down and take years to produce—an ironic inversion of the very doctrine it would seek to espouse. Conversely, *FMFM 1* was written by one trusted agent, Capt John Schmitt, who had the expertise and analytical skill to synthesize Boyd's concepts into a widely acces-

sible form.<sup>18</sup> Schmitt's manuscript was reviewed and approved by Gen Gray, who directed its publication and dissemination. The Marine Corps can do the same by leaning on its own known experts on Boyd and maneuver warfare. Notably, Maj Ian T. Brown wrote the inimitable text, *A New Conception of War: John Boyd, the U.S. Marines, and Maneuver Warfare*, which takes the reader through the full story of its subtitle and explains Boyd's intellectual journey. Maj Scott Helminski authored his master's thesis, "No Room to Ma-

neuver," which further explains how the Corps missed the deeper points of maneuver warfare. Capt Dan Grazier's "A Maneuver Renaissance" identifies shortfalls in the manner in which maneuver warfare is espoused in *MCDP 1* and articulates how they could be mitigated. A dozen other organic, proven experts in this doctrine could be named, but the point is that the potential trusted agents who might rapidly author an updated version of *MCDP 1* are resident within the Marine Corps itself and could be tapped directly by the CMC to make this update a reality.

If executed, this would provide a fuller, more refined, and topical version of *MCDP 1* that would be published in time to inform the remaining implementation of the *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*, the execution of *Force Design 2030*, be used to immediately educate new Marines at entry level schools, and to re-indoctrinate Marine Corps leaders across the PME continuum. Only in this way will Marine Corps forces possess the lethality offered them by maneuver warfare and be best positioned to deter and, if necessary, defeat America's adversaries in the next war.

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: 1997).
2. Ibid.
3. Damian Fideleon, *The Road to FMFM 1: The United States Marine Corps and Maneuver Warfare Doctrine, 1979–1989*, (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University, 2001).
4. Ibid.
5. John Boyd, "Patterns of Conflict," Video Lecture, Marine Corps University Archives, Boyd Collection.
6. Frans Osinga, "Getting *A Discourse on Winning and Losing*: A Primer on Boyd's 'Theory of Intellectual Evolution,'" *Contemporary Security Policy*, (London, UK: Routledge, 2013).
7. "Patterns of Conflict."
8. John Boyd, "Creation and Destruction," Video Lecture, Marine Corps University Archives, Boyd Collection.
9. Sun Tzu, *The Art of Warfare*, trans., Roger Ames, (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1993).
10. "Creation and Destruction."
11. Ibid.
12. *MCDP 1*.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. *MCDP 1*.
16. Ibid.
17. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: 2019).
18. Maj Ian Brown, *A New Conception of War: John Boyd, the U.S. Marines, and Maneuver Warfare*, (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University Press, 2018).

