2020 MajGen Harold W. Chase Prize Essay Contest: 1st Place

The Fantasy of *MCDP 1*

Is maneuver warfare still useful?

by LtCol Thaddeus Drake, Jr.

MCDP 1 is convincing and, on the surface, makes complete sense, but is it the right doctrine for the Marine Corps in the 21st century? Our doctrine, *Warfighting,* has transcended the generally recognized purpose of standard military doctrine and no longer provides a useful guide to Marine Corps operations in the 21st century. Since its original publication in 1989, *MCDP 1,* then known as *Fleet Marine Force Manual* (*FMFM 1*), has been elevated beyond the bounds of even an organizational philosophy and has instead become more akin to a ser-

> "*Maneuverists say they derived their thoughts from history, but the lack of any such body of thought in the human record prior to the stylings of mid 1970s America indicates that the thesis probably preceded the search for evidence.*"
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> **—Daniel P. Bolger, "Maneuver Warfare Reconsidered"**[1]

> "*It is difficult for senior commanders to resist using technological advancements in communications to micromanage those beneath them. In fact, a new irony in the Corps is that 'the push to enable the strategic corporal through technology [has] unintentionally resulted in the tactically focused colonel.'*"
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> **—Jeannie L. Johnson, The Marines, Counterinsurgency, and Strategic Culture**[2]

vice orthodoxy.[3] *MCDP 1* has become an unquestionable dogma that Marines reference in a way similar to that of holy writ such as the Bible or *On War*—generally quoted out of context and only used when it provides ammunition to support one's argument. There is nonetheless much to love about *MCDP 1*. Indeed, it is probably the most effective military doctrinal publication since the *Wehrmacht's Truppenfuhrung*. The proof is in the pudding—it has survived (largely) unrevised for nearly 35 years and counting, the vast majority of which the Marine Corps has been engaged in combat operations. This brings up a

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fundamental and crucial question, however. *What evidence is there—since the 1989 publication of* FMFM 1, Warfighting—*that demonstrates the efficacy of the fundamental doctrine?* This article does not purport to argue that all of *MCDP 1* is flawed; however, it does suggest that some of the fundamental parts of the doctrine have yet to be proven effective and, indeed, may actually have been detrimental to the overall operational and strategic objectives of the wars of the past 30 years. The Marine Corps must revise key elements of *MCDP 1* to better posture the Service for operations in the 21st century.

Doctrine

The most essential issue around our doctrine remains the tension between the overall purpose of military doctrine: the *aspirational* versus the *practical.* Despite nearly 35 years since its

introduction, *MCDP 1* remains mostly aspirational with little evidence to support some of the basic contentions in the publication. This is corrosive to discipline, creates an institutional say-do gap, and degrades trust throughout the Service. Although the literature on the purposes, development, and utility of military doctrine is voluminous and often contradictory, there is nonetheless utility in describing exactly what this article means when it refers to the Marine Corps' doctrine. The term doctrine is a generally problematic one. Because of the many possible definitions, the word often "means whatever its exponent likes."[4] In the Marine Corps, the commonly accepted understanding of doctrine is that it represents a collection of best practices and broad guidelines—that may or may not be followed, depending on the situation.[5] In contrast, the most generally accepted definition of military doctrine is Barry Posen's suggestion that doctrine describes "*what* means shall be employed and *how* shall they be employed … Military doctrine includes the preferred mode of a group of services, a single service, or subservice for fighting wars."[6] *MCDP 1,* our foundational doctrinal publication, fits in neither of these definitions. It is not clearly understood as a collection of best practices, nor does it clearly articulate a description of Posen's *what* and *how.* Gen Alfred M. Gray, the original proponent of *Warfighting,* refers to it as both a philosophy and a doctrine. Fundamentally, if *MCDP 1* is *doctrine,* then it codifies the aforementioned *what* means paired with a clear description of *how* the Service intends to actually employ them. Alternately, if *MCDP 1* is a *philosophy,* it merely describes "basic beliefs, concepts, and attitudes of an individual or group."[7] Which of these is *MCDP 1*? The Marine Corps is confused on this topic.

Although we name the publication as *Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1*, it is unclear as to whether it actually meets the basic definitional requirements to be a military doctrine at all. On its face, this is a semantic argument; however, in fact, this is a key distinction. As a philosophy—a broad, aspirational guide for behavior that we should all strive to

meet (but probably never can)—*MCDP 1* provides an excellent guide for Marines (akin to the "golden rule," or "first, do no harm"). As a doctrine, a document that articulates *how* the Marine Corps intends to fight, *MCDP 1* has significant flaws. This article assumes that *MCDP 1* is an accurate representation of the manner in which the Marine Corps believes it actually intends to fight, as opposed to general normative statements about warfare. In this case, *MCDP 1* must be re-examined for the 21st century; indeed, Gen Charles C. Krulak wrote on page one of the 1997 version of *MCDP 1* that "military doctrine cannot be allowed to stagnate … [it] must continue to evolve based on growing experience, advancements in theory, and the changing face of war itself."[8] It has been more than twenty years since the Marine Corps addressed significant portions of our primary doctrine in any meaningful way. There are several flaws we must engage in order to ensure it remains up-to-date and useful to the 21st century Marine Corps.

Systemic Collapse

First, the most basic foundational underpinning of *MCDP 1, Warfighting,* as a separate way of warfighting has proven suspect. Our doctrine is founded on the idea that our primary objective must be to "penetrate the enemy system and tear it apart … shatter[ing] his cohesion."[9] In the 30-plus years since the development of this doctrine, there are scant examples that show success in this sort of systemic destruction—despite the fact that the Marine Corps has been involved in combat for at least 25 of these years! Indeed, if combat is the ultimate test of our maneuver warfare doctrine, then we should be able to point to multiple occasions where the enemy's will was shattered; he was defeated by seeing his "system" broken into "noncooperative centers of gravity,"[10] and the Marine Corps won the day (either as a part of or as the entire friendly force).

There are few straightforward examples of this sort of penetration and subsequent shattering of the enemy's system from the combat operations of the last 30 years. When challenged to

produce one, many Marines point to the success of I MEF during Operation DESERT STORM. It is true that I MEF penetrated the Iraqi minefields and subsequently forced Iraqi retreat and mass surrender. This is a fair argument; although, the I MEF frontal attack only really fits our doctrinal definition of maneuver warfare if one does the mental gymnastics required in order to associate a direct frontal attack with the idea of seeking out an enemy "gap." Beyond this, however, the penetration *was not their mission!* Indeed, in this example, our doctrine actually worked contrary to the overall operational plan, which intended I MEF to fix the Iraqi Army force in order to enable 3d Army to conduct a "left hook" to encircle the majority of the Iraqi Army. By following our doctrine, I MEF actually operated at cross-purposes to the Joint Force Commander's operational approach.[11]

Others may offer the example of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM I as a clear case of penetration into the enemy system followed by the disintegration of the Iraqi Army as a viable enemy fighting force. Perhaps. It is completely accurate to say that the speed and violence of 1st MarDiv's advance was disruptive to the Iraqi system. It is also accurate to say that the Marine and Army elements penetrated the enemy system, caused it to break down, and then it subsequently reformed itself into a warfighting system far more resilient and effective against U.S. conventional forces.[12] The disruption of the Iraqi system did not shatter the enemy system's cohesion, and thus eliminate his ability to resist, but instead created a more difficult problem than had we taken an attrition-based approach—killing or capturing the preponderance of Iraqi Army and Fedayeen Saddam forces. The crucial question these examples bring up is if shattering the enemy system is legitimate as *the* primary objective at all. Since armies are human systems and are thus complex, interactive, and nonlinear, it is the height of hubris to believe that war planners will be able to forecast the effects of our actions to disrupt the system with any degree of accuracy.[13] By creating a doctrine where we deliberately focus on systemic disruption as the ultimate

goal, it is possible that the Marine Corps has placed its leaders and planners in an impossible situation, where they attempt to disrupt complex enemy systems, and in doing so created an endless spiral of more complex problem sets. Systemic disruption cannot be the end in and of itself; despite the guidance found in *MCDP 1*, this is simply a *way* to achieve specific conditions.

Mission Tactics

The second flaw in *MCDP 1* the Marine Corps must address is our notion of mission tactics.[14] Although this warfighting methodology has extraordinary merit—indeed, it was perhaps the most essential quality of the World War I Imperial German Army and World War II *Wehrmacht's* "fighting power"—it was a product of a unique national culture, military culture, and technological era.[15] The essential point of the German *auftragstaktik* model was that "subordinates could be implicitly trusted to execute missions without oversight … precisely because their superiors could count on them to interpret situations in a predictable manner."[16] The U.S. military has lionized the decentralized action and broad capabilities of German forces in the major 20th century conflicts since [at least] the late 1970s "intellectual reawakening" that manifested the so-called "maneuverists," yet rarely have we addressed the difficulty and general inability of our culture to integrate the concept of *auftragstaktik* wholesale. Nationally, American culture may simply not support the idea of mission tactics. Since militaries are necessarily products of their larger society, the basic culture of that society will also be a part of its military.[17] This may fundamentally be a problem for the Marine Corps. Indeed, despite a perceived love of individualism, American society also manifests many qualities that are antithetical to the employment of mission tactics such as risk aversion, centralization, and lack of trust.[18]

The institutional Marine Corps also has a number of cultural characteristics that prevent the wholesale importation of mission tactics. Compared to the originators of the concept, we are overly hierarchical, bureaucratic, and resistant to developing cohesive elements through deliberate manpower management strategies. Indeed, since the inception of *Warfighting,* we have *increased* the bureaucratic complexity of our force instead of flattening the organization to improve speed of execution and command as our doctrine suggests would be necessary.[19] To continue to support this vast bureaucracy, we remain wedded to a Weberian manpower management design that prizes centralized control and efficiency instead of shared understanding throughout the chain of command and trust between seniors and subordinates. As an illustration of the contrast, soldiers of the inter-war German Army spent ten years or more in the same unit—all of this time developing relationships with their seniors and subordinates (the victorious Allies imposed a twelve-year term of service on the Weimar Republic Armed

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Forces as a part of the Treaty of Versailles; this was largely responsible for many of the manpower policies that helped create the *Wehrmacht*).[20] The effect of this relationship building was to develop implicit trust and understanding throughout the force, leading to a fundamental assumption that "subordinate units possessed more accurate local knowledge than headquarters and would therefore be better able to adapt to changing circumstances and demonstrate the appropriate creativity and initiative."[21] Today's Marine Corps certainly espouses this idea: *MCDP 1,* the *Commandant's Planning Guidance*, and literally hundreds of other Service orders and directives, all claim that the Service will act using mission tactics and trust small unit leaders. The reality, however, appears to be the opposite, as evinced by the constant calls for de-

centralization, authority, and trust at the small unit level that one can find scattered throughout Service journals and military websites.[22]

Finally, technology has a crucial part to play in the discussion regarding the efficacy of mission command. In the modern world, where wireless communications and computer technologies enable the collection, transmission, and analysis of massive amounts of information, instant, ubiquitous, and constant communication is the norm. Notwithstanding leaders' attempts to close the lid on this particular Pandora's Box, it is nonetheless true that modern war, like modern life, is sure to have far more data and communications than we have ever seen before. One of the fundamental reasons for the employment of mission tactics as a command style is to minimize the requirement for constant instruction from higher headquarters—originally designed this way because constant instruction was *impossible*. Dispersed, decentralized units had to make their own decisions because there was no way to ask for guidance in a timely manner. This is no longer the case; worse, although many thinkers are forecasting that modern communications will be unusable in a major war, the society we live in has inculcated young men and women with an expectation of constant connection. It is pure fantasy to believe that we will be able to break our young Marines and Sailors of a literal lifetime of training with connected devices to instead execute mission tactics with no communications. It is also pure fantasy to assume that our headquarters and leaders will have the self-discipline to avoid abusing these constant communications and will instead execute *Wehrmacht*-style mission tactics. We need to think more deeply than that. Modeling the 21st century Marine Corps' command and control (C2) doctrine off the Germans in 1940 is analogous to the soldiers of World War I employing Civil War style battlefield tactics. Indeed, in many ways, our thinking on C2 technology resembles nothing so much as the Royal Navy before World War II. Despite ample evidence to the contrary, the Royal Navy resisted outfitting their ships with

The Corps must integrate appropriate 21st century C2 technologies while exercising discipline in the employment of these technologies. (Photo by LCpl Tyler Andersen.)

wireless radios.[23] (All Royal Navy ships would not have voice radio transmission capability until the 1940s!) In hindsight, this was an obvious mistake; the Marine Corps should do everything we can to avoid this same mistake and instead deliberately integrate and adopt appropriate technologies to develop a new, 21st century style system of C2. Although this will clearly have associated risks, it is nonetheless necessary to recognize reality. Instead of attempting to import a command style that is no longer a fit for either the current era or our national and Service cultures, we must design a new one that better captures the reality of life in the 21st century. This article does not purport to suggest that mission tactics is anything less than the most effective method for creating success on the battlefield. It does, however, claim that modern Marine Corps and American cultures will not allow for the implementation of mission tactics properly; if we continue to pretend otherwise, the Service will create an insurmountable say-do gap between our doctrine and our actual warfighting methodology.

What is to be Done?

The idea of systemic collapse, although difficult to measure and perhaps even harder for Marines to truly understand, must be returned to its proper place as one of many options for battlefield victory. Collapsing the enemy system is not inherently the wrong objective, but we must return it to the broad pantheon of what joint doctrine now refers to as "defeat mechanisms."[24] When written, *MCDP 1* (and the so-called "maneuverists" who informed its development) created a false dichotomy between maneuver and attrition. This false dichotomy suggests that the only objective in any battle or Marine Corps action should be systemic collapse, as the only other option is World War I-style attrition.[25] (Although *MCDP 1* is clear that maneuver and attrition exist on a spectrum, this is not well understood or even thought through by most Marines.) Systemic collapse is clearly *an* option, but it is only one of many. Our leaders and planners must be exceptionally wary of using it as a dogmatic solution for the desired end state. We must be able to recognize that there are times when short-term collapse of the enemy system is absolutely the wrong answer. Our doctrine must make clear that there are other options—defeat and competition mechanisms, to use the parlance of the joint force. We must revise our doctrine to emphasize and encourage more nuanced thinking in this regard; although the Germans

were successful when they pushed into France in 1940, to use this as a model for all Marine Corps actions, everywhere and all the time, suggests that we do not understand the breadth and complexity of military operations in the 21st century.

We must also revise our thinking on mission tactics and all the intellectual baggage that comes along with this term. First, the contrast between what *MCDP 1* states and the micromanagement that most Marines experience on a daily basis creates a massive say-do gap that undermines leadership and creates an enormous amount of disillusionment throughout the force. Second, this is a rearward looking doctrine. This article does not suggest that the basic ideas of decentralization, commander's intent, and execution based on intent are wrong—far from it! However, our current model attempts to import wholesale the idea of *auftragstaktik*, developed in a particular cultural milieu and shaped by the searing experience of Europe's cataclysmic wars. We must be better. We must develop C2 doctrine specific to our time, place, technology, and culture that integrates the best of the mission tactics model while simultaneously recognizing the realities of the cultural, societal, and technological changes that continue to shape the 21st century. Right now, we are pretending that the force is able to execute the C2 model of the 1942 *Wehrmacht* while actually executing a bastardized version of the C2 that grew organically from experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. We must look forward and develop a model that works for the Marine Corps of the 21st century—not the *Wehrmacht* of 1940 or the Marine Corps of 1997.

Conclusion

MCDP 1, Warfighting, is one of the most successful doctrines ever published by a military organization. Indeed, it has survived, essentially untouched, for more than 30 years. Nonetheless, there is a basic incoherence to some of the points found within it, and this leads to an institutional say-do gap that promises to continue to induce frustration and disappointment throughout the force. The time for revision of our doctrine is

now. There is no need to throw the baby out with the bathwater, but we must change or add to the concepts discussed above. The concept of systemic disruption, although convincing, has seen very little evidence to support it since *MCDP 1* codified it as the Marine Corps way of warfighting. Indeed, it may be that the concept is akin to the basic ideology of Marxism: it is extraordinarily convincing in its written form, it makes great sense to most readers, and it seems like it *ought to work*. Yet, when challenged to provide clear evidence that support it, proponents either cite examples that do not really show success or explain that it simply has not been properly executed yet. The Marine Corps has conducted some form of combat operations in at least 25 of the 31 years since *MCDP 1*'s inception as the Marine Corps' doctrine; should we not be able to point to at least *one* obvious example where systemic collapse completely won the day? In addition to this, the idea of mission tactics in the modern world—small units operating on their own, executing based solely on commander's intent—is simply not realistic. American culture does not allow for it, the Marine Corps Service culture destroys the idea of mission tactics on a daily basis, and modern technology ultimately will probably render it irrelevant. We must develop a doctrine that looks forward, not one that pretends to execute a command style that was only effective given a very specific, contingent, milieu. As the Commandant moves aggressively forward with massive changes to the Marine Corps, to include changing the basic mission of the Corps to one of sea denial, we must develop a forward-thinking doctrine. It must move beyond aspirational platitudes that we cannot actually make work and instead it has to provide a realistic guide for the way we actually intend to fight and win future wars.

Notes

1. Daniel P. Bolger, "Maneuver Warfare Reconsidered," in *Maneuver Warfare: An Anthology*, ed. Richard D. Hooker, Jr., (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1993).

2. Jeannie L. Johnson, *The Marines, Counterinsurgency, and Strategic Culture: Lessons Learned and Lost in America's Wars*, (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018).

3. This was a complaint about *MCDP 1* almost as soon as it was published. For example, see: G. Stephen Lauer, "The Theory of Maneuver in USMC Doctrine and Force Structure," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: April 1993).

4. Andrew Gordon, *The Rules of the Game: Jutland and British Naval Command*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1996).

5. *The Marines, Counterinsurgency, and Strategic Culture*.

6. Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984).

7. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v., "Philosophy," available at www.merriam-webster.com.

8. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1997).

9. *MCDP 1*.

10. Frans P.B. Osinga, *Science, Strategy, and War: The Strategic Theory of John Boyd*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007).

11. Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Generals' War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf*, (New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 1995).

12. Austin Long, *The Soul of Armies: Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Military Culture in the US and UK*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016).

13. Zachery Tyson Brown, "A Crude Look at the Whole: A Simple Guide to Complexity for National Security Professionals," *Strategy Bridge*, (January 2019), available at https://thestrategybridge.org.

14. *MCDP 1*. Although *MCDP 1* uses the term "mission tactics," the literature generally uses this term interchangeably with mission command and "*auftragstaktik*." This article will generally use mission tactics in order to differentiate from the U.S. Army's warfighting function of mission command.

15. Eitan Shamir, *Transforming Command: The Pursuit of Mission Command in the U.S., British, and Israeli Armies*, (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

16. David Kilcullen, "Strategic Culture," in *The Culture of Military Organizations*, ed. Peter R. Mansoor and Williamson Murray, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

17. James Holmes, *A Brief Guide to Maritime Strategy*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2019).

18. See Thomas Kolwicz, "The Side Effect of Tech for Decentralized Command," available at https://www.usni.org. See also Uri Friedman, "Trust Is Collapsing in America," *The Atlantic*, (January 2018), available at https://www.theatlantic.com.

19. Jim Storr, *The Human Face of War*, (London, UK: Continuum, 2009). Although this book focuses largely on U.S. Army and British Army formations, the descriptions of staff sizes and production are generally representative of Marine Corps organizations and staffs as well.

20. Martin van Creveld, *Fighting Power: German and U.S. Army Performance, 1939–1945*, (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1982).

21. Antoine Bousquet, *The Scientific Way of Warfare: Order and Chaos on the Battlefields of Modernity*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009).

22. For example, see James Camp and David Laszcz, "Two Small-Unit Leaders Respond to the Marine Commandant's Note," *War on the Rocks*, (January 2020), available at https://warontherocks.com. See also *The Rules of the Game*.

24. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 5-0: Joint Planning*, (Washington DC: 2017).

25. William F. Owen, "The The Manoeuvre Warfare Fraud," *Small Wars Journal*, (2008), available at https://smallwarsjournal.com.