



# What Marines Believe About War and Warfare

A declaration<sup>1</sup>  
by Two Maneuverists<sup>2</sup>

**M**arines have fought many of the Nation's most difficult battles over nearly two-and-a-half centuries and reflected on those experiences afterward. Marines have also been astute students of classical military theorists such as Carl von Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, and Julian Corbett, as well as of modern masters like Col John Boyd. They have synthesized this experience and study into their own unique doctrine.

Marines have also led the way with innovative concepts in amphibious warfare, vertical lift, and counterinsurgency operations, often employing cutting edge technologies such as amphibious fighting vehicles, helicopters, radar-controlled bombing, vertical takeoff and landing aircraft, and remotely piloted vehicles.

It is fitting at a time when the Marine Corps is considering major institutional changes to pause and—drawing upon all that we have experienced and understand—codify our beliefs about war and warfare.

This declaration is one attempt to assert what we as Marines believe to be true about war and warfare. We argue that these fundamental beliefs should guide all aspects of operations and force development, especially doctrine development.

Our goal is to energize a conversation about the core beliefs that animate the Marine Corps. We encourage feedback.

1. War is a violent clash of interests between or among political groups characterized by the use of military or

paramilitary force. Its essence is a contest between hostile, independent wills, each trying to impose itself on the other and/or upon a common, contested population through violence and other means. This essential nature of war is immutable, but the forms and character it may take are varied and continuously evolving.

2. Universal attributes of war are danger, friction, uncertainty, unpredictability, and disorder. No amount of planning or preparation can eliminate or control these attributes. The requirement is to be able to operate effectively despite—or even to exploit—these conditions. Human factors are paramount in war. War is arguably the greatest physical, psychological, and intellectual trial known to humankind.

3. The enemy will do everything in its power to be inscrutable, unpredictable, and disruptive of your plans. War being a clash between or among independent wills, it is important never to forget that the enemy always gets a say in how things turn out. Flexibility and adaptability are vitally important.

4. As Sun Tzu said: “Know the enemy and know yourself, and you will never be in peril.” The greatest teacher in war is the enemy. Learn from the enemy. Focus on the enemy rather than on procedures and processes.

5. War is an instrument of policy, initiated, guided, and constrained by policy. All war is political, politics being the process of distributing and exercising power in pursuit of

*War is arguably the greatest physical, psychological, and intellectual trial known to humankind. (Photo by LCpl Joshua Brittenhen.)*

interests. The original motive for war will always be political, but war is also a process of human and social interaction, driven by cultural, economic, ethnic, emotional, and psychological factors.

6. Warfare is the conduct of military action in war. Warfare involves the application of art, science, and will.

7. War requires the conduct of several distinct activities: policy, strategy, operations, tactics, techniques, and procedures. These generally nest hierarchically, although they cannot properly be assigned to any particular echelons of command. Practitioners should engage in discourse up and down this hierarchy to ensure mutual reinforcement among the activities.

8. There are two basic strategies for applying military force in war: *strategy of incapacitation*, which aims to render the enemy unable to resist by negating his military capability, and *strategy of erosion*, which aims to erode the enemy's will to resist. (Traditionally called *strategy of annihilation* and *strategy of attrition*.)

9. Warfare's many forms fall into two broad categories: *regular warfare* between generally similar forces endeavoring to obtain and exploit positions of advantage in relation to each other and *irregular warfare* fought through the people and for the support of the people. Most actual warfare will combine both forms.

10. All military operations, but especially offensive ones, will deplete resources, which if not replenished will cause units to eventually reach a culminating point where they must pause for rest or replenishment.

11. It is critical in war to seize, maintain, and exploit the initiative. All warfare involves the interplay between initiative and response. Taking the initiative allows you to dictate the terms of conflict, pursue a positive aim, and impose your will upon the enemy. If the enemy seizes the initiative, you must respond. The response has the aim of negating the enemy's positive aims and ultimately of seizing the initiative yourself.

12. It is likewise critical to create advantage. Any such advantage should then be ruthlessly exploited to create even greater advantage for further exploitation—ideally creating a cascading chain of deteriorating conditions for the enemy.

13. Where possible, it is better to defeat an enemy through *systemic disruption* than *cumulative attrition*—historically the two basic defeat mechanisms—because disruption can achieve disproportionately greater results for the resources expended. Disruption works by degrading an enemy's ability to function as a coherent whole, even if individual elements of the enemy remain undefeated. Attrition works through the cumulative wearing down of enemy combat power or will. The two can be nested; for example, attrition of one key enemy element can trigger disruption in the broader whole. The effectiveness of disruption depends significantly on the vulnerability of the enemy to being disrupted.

14. Deciding where, when, and how to attack an enemy requires the combined consideration of *vulnerability* and *criticality*. Some elements of the enemy system are more vulnerable than others, and attack against those elements

would tend to make greater and immediate progress. Some elements of the enemy system are more critical to the enemy than others, and successful attack against those would tend to yield greater ultimate results, although they tend to be better protected. The idea is to reconcile this tension by focusing efforts where and when they will be successful but also where they will have the greatest and longest lasting ultimate effects, employing strict economy elsewhere. In practice, this generally means avoiding surfaces and exploiting gaps, applying strength against weakness, and reinforcing success, not failure.

15. Combat power traditionally has been applied against the enemy through a combination of *fire* and *maneuver*. Today, the employment of *messaging* to influence perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of external audiences is increasingly important, sometimes equally or even more important than fire and maneuver. (Messaging refers not to situational information or intelligence used to build situational awareness or to internal communications to direct and coordinate friendly action, but rather to information transmitted externally to influence an enemy or other foreign audience through information products or actions.)

16. Every action sends a message, whether intended or not. What matters is the message received by others and not the message you might have intended to send. Different audiences will interpret the same message differently. Be sensitive to that and act accordingly.

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17. Military operations are becoming increasingly transparent because of pervasive media and individual access to information and, as a result, will be increasingly scrutinized and criticized. Consequently, incidents that in the past would have been insignificant will have outsized impact today. As a result, the requirement for discipline in all activities and for discrimination in applying combat power is greater than ever before.

18. Modern warfare takes place in several domains simultaneously—land, sea, air, space, cyberspace, and the electromagnetic spectrum. Actions in any domain affect conditions not only in that domain but in the other domains as well—and often more significantly in those other domains. Ultimately, such cross-domain actions must affect conditions on the land, where peoples and governments





**It is essential to employ the elements of combat power without regard to artificial boundaries.** (Photo by PFC Patrick King.)

reside and where the final resolution must be sought. The portions of domains in which operations are expected to occur is the battlespace. Within the battlespace, it is essential to employ the elements of combat power—fire, maneuver, and messaging—as combined arms in and across domains without regard to artificial boundaries.

19. Speed, boldness, and surprise are force multipliers. With respect to speed, the aim is to generate a higher tempo of operations than the enemy can match. Boldness unhesitatingly exploits opportunities to achieve major results rather than marginal ones. Surprise, achieved through stealth,



**Militaries historically have been strikingly unsuccessful in predicting the characteristics of the next war.** (Photo by LCpl Colton Brownlee.)

ambiguity, or deception, is a state of disorientation resulting from an unexpected action that degrades the enemy's ability to react.

20. It is important to have a plan but equally important to be ready to improvise and adapt to unfolding events. The greatest value of planning is the learning that takes place and the shared understanding it builds. The plan is not an inviolable script to be followed but a common point of departure for adaptation.

21. Mission command, a style of command based on assigning a subordinate a mission but refraining from directing how to accomplish it, is the defining feature of maneuver warfare. Mission command, also known as mission tactics, is based on decentralization. It is a principle to devolve authority to act to the lowest possible level capable of effectively exercising that authority. Mission command demands trust between seniors and subordinates. Seniors must trust their subordinates, but subordinates must earn that trust. Without this trust, mission command will fail.

22. By decreasing the requirement for explicit communication up and down the chain of command, mission command helps generate tempo, increases adaptability, encourages creativity, and distributes the responsibility for dealing with uncertainty and friction throughout the force rather than centralizing it in one place.

23. Mission command stems from the mission statement, normally paragraph two in an operation plan or order. That mission statement contains one or more tasks with associated purposes or intents. Of the two, the intent that provides the reason or the *why* behind each task takes precedence.

24. The intent for a unit is established by the commander assigning that unit's mission—usually the next higher commander. The purpose of providing intent is to allow subordinates to exercise judgment and initiative—to depart from the original plan when the unforeseen occurs—in a way that is consistent with higher aims. It is important to understand the intent of commanders at least two levels up.

25. Leaders are responsible for accomplishing the mission while maintaining established standards of conduct and behavior within their purview. This requires interpreting orders and, on occasion, may even necessitate disobeying orders. "Following orders" is no justification for doing the wrong thing.

26. Maneuver warfare relies on the exercise of judgment more than the application of procedure. While techniques and procedures are important, it is more important to focus outwardly on the enemy than inwardly on your own processes.

27. Any activity that is not part of the conduct of war is justifiable only as part of the preparation for war.

28. Militaries historically have been strikingly unsuccessful in predicting the characteristics of the next war. Especially for the Nation's force-in-readiness, it is generally better therefore to prepare for a range of possibilities and to be able to adapt quickly once conflict arrives.

29. The mind is a leader's primary weapon; professional military education and experience provide the "ammuni-

tion.” The profession of arms requires a keen intellect and a life-long commitment to study and learning.

30. Because decentralization requires that subordinates be willing to act on their own initiative rather than waiting for orders, commanders must promote, develop, and demand a sense of initiative among their subordinates. Commanders should instill a bias for action among their subordinates, judging mistakes of initiative lightly but mistakes of inaction more harshly.

31. To capture the dynamic of independent, opposing wills that is the essence of war, it is important to ensure that exercises and wargames are free play and force-on-force. There should be a thinking and adaptive “enemy” in every instance.

32. Despite advancements in weaponry and other technologies, most recently in robotics and autonomous systems, war is still waged by humans. Technology intelligently developed, fielded, and employed can provide a potentially important advantage, but there can be a tendency to over-rely on that technology. The most advanced technology is not necessarily the most useful on the battlefield. In some situations, greater numbers of less capable systems may be more advantageous than small numbers of “exquisite” systems.

33. Frank and open dialogue among all Marines is essential, regardless of rank.

34. “Every Marine a rifleman” is more than a mere saying. It is an assertion of self-identity that every Marine, regardless of MOS or duty assignment, is a warrior first. Fighting spirit is reflected in an open willingness—even a desire—to join in combat and a dedicated pursuit of combat prowess, especially mastery in the use of weapons, as the highest soldierly virtue.

35. Marine Corps culture embraces the spartan qualities of toughness, discipline, austerity, and the willingness to



**War is still waged by humans.** (Photo by Cpl Nello Miele.)

endure—even to embrace—extreme hardship. Marine Corps culture values the unit over self, to the point that the fear of letting comrades down in combat is greater than the fear of death.

36. The core values of honor, courage, and commitment—first learned by all Marines during recruit training and Officer Candidates School—reflect this culture. Honor is living life with integrity, responsibility, honesty, and respect. Courage is the mental, moral, and physical strength to do what is right and necessary in the face of fear. Commitment is unwavering, selfless dedication to mission accomplishment and personal and professional responsibilities.

37. Marine Corps culture includes a deep and conscious awareness of the history of the Corps, including its customs and traditions, and the determination to live up to that heritage at all costs. That awareness is carefully instilled in all Marines, starting again at recruit training and Officer Candidates School. It is every Marine’s duty to maintain and reinforce that heritage, including calling out fellow Marines who fail to live up to its standards.



**Marine Corps culture values the unit over self.** (Photo by LCpl Jacqueline Parsons.)

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#### Notes

1. This declaration is adapted from work performed to support a review of Marine Corps Doctrinal Publications.

2. The authors want to note that they are beneficiaries of the mentoring of the first two “Maneuverist Commandants,” Gen Alfred M. Gray and Gen Charles C. Krulak, as well as the intellectual father of maneuver warfare, the late Col John R. Boyd, USAF(Ret).

