

Operational Initiative in Theory and Doctrine

A Monograph

by

MAJ Ian W. Fleischmann
United States Army



School of Advanced Military Studies
United States Army Command and General Staff College
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

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14. ABSTRACT Every soldier wants the initiative, but few can define what that really means. What is the initiative and how can it be seized and retained? Despite its prominence in centuries of military theory and role as a foundational attribute of the US Army operating concept since 1982, the definition of operational initiative remains vague. Furthermore, the lack of clarity on this topic blurs the lines between operational initiative and individual initiative, or the willingness of individuals to act in a given situation. A clear definition of operational initiative is necessary to prevent this critical concept from devolving to a trite military <i>cliché</i> . An analysis of dominant military theory and US Army doctrine reveals that initiative is a persistent phenomenon of warfare in which one belligerent holds and presses an advantage against the other. Operational initiative is therefore a form of control over adversaries and the environment, generated by pursuit of a positive aim, anticipation of future conditions, and relative freedom of action. This definition is clear, succinct, and consistent with the concept's use in military theory and throughout the history of US Army doctrine.					
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Name of Candidate: Major Ian W. Fleischmann

Monograph Title: Operational Initiative in Theory and Doctrine

Approved by:

_____, Monograph Director
Thomas A. Bruscino, PhD

_____, Seminar Leader
Robert J. Hallett, LtCol

_____, Director, School of Advanced Military Studies
Henry A. Arnold III, COL

Accepted this 23rd day of May 2015 by:

_____, Director, Graduate Degree Programs
Robert F. Baumann, PhD

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Abstract

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Every soldier wants the initiative, but few can define what that really means. What is the initiative and how can it be seized and retained? Despite its prominence in centuries of military theory and role as a foundational attribute of the US Army operating concept since 1982, the definition of operational initiative remains vague. Furthermore, the lack of clarity on this topic blurs the lines between operational initiative and individual initiative, or the willingness of individuals to act in a given situation. A clear definition of operational initiative is necessary to prevent this critical concept from devolving to a trite military *cliché*.

An analysis of dominant military theory and US Army doctrine reveals that initiative is a persistent phenomenon of warfare in which one belligerent holds and presses an advantage against the other. Operational initiative is therefore a form of control over adversaries and the environment, generated by pursuit of a positive aim, anticipation of future conditions, and relative freedom of action. This definition is clear, succinct, and consistent with the concept's use in military theory and throughout the history of US Army doctrine.

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Acronyms

ADP	Army Doctrine Publication
ADRP	Army Doctrine Reference Publication
CGSC	Command and General Staff College
FM	Field Manual
FSR	<i>Field Service Regulations</i>
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OODA	Observe Orient Decide Act
TRADOC	Training and Doctrine Command

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Introduction

Once you have the initiative you must exploit it and feed it constantly...It is a dynamic factor that can disappear in an instant. A lead in initiative can be converted into material gains. Or it can be augmented into a stronger and stronger initiative until your opponent simply can't keep up and falls to your attack.

—Chess Grand Master Garry Kasparov, *How Life Imitates Chess*

In chess, initiative is a dynamic advantage that belongs to the players who can force opponents to respond to their threats. By its nature, initiative requires the continuance of the attack and the spirit of the offensive. A player can seize initiative from an opponent by ignoring a threat and sacrificing a piece, or taking advantage of an opportunity when the opponent fails to make an adequate threat. The relative value of sacrifice to advantage is clear without tactical or strategic moral ramifications. No pawn weeps for the loss of its queen. Initiative is a mutually exclusive property derived from the turn-based closed-system structure of chess and is relatively easy to identify.

In war, initiative is far more complex. Turns are relative to the tempo of the belligerents. The fog of war obscures the locations, capabilities, and readiness of forces, and, occasionally, chance or the moral force of will overcomes the expected outcomes given by rules and maxims. Objectively strong militaries armed with the best equipment and training appear to struggle to find strategic advantage against poorly armed ideological insurgents. Increasing numbers of civilians, government agencies, criminal networks, and insurgent groups complicate the modern battlefield. Initiative appears to be an elusive property that is difficult to define.

Despite its vagaries, initiative is a staple of military theory. Although almost no theorist addresses initiative directly, early theorists define and use the term in varying contexts. Prussian General Frederick the Great used initiative to describe a commander's freedom to respond to

dynamic events on the battlefield, particularly when committing reserve forces.¹ Baron Henri de Jomini defined initiative only within the context of a single offensive operation as synonymous with an attack.² Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz also believed that initiative was an attribute unique to the offense and used the term sparingly. The 1984 Paret translation of *On War* uses the term initiative with far more frequency than the original German text; given that Paret contextually translated the term *handeln* (action) as initiative.³ Prussian General Friedrich von Bernhardi never addressed initiative directly but did state, “There is only one means of making decisions...preserving the initiative and acting in compliance with...one’s own intentions, instead of submitting to those of the enemy.”⁴ French General Ferdinand Foch used initiative in a similar manner implying a freedom of action to respond to conditions.⁵

The definition of initiative remains elusive in modern military theory as well. US Air Force Colonel John Boyd defined initiative as action, but not necessarily offensive action.⁶ Similarly, Brigadier General Huba Wass de Czege emphasized initiative as the most important concept guiding the development of AirLand Battle, the doctrine which served as the progenitor of the current US Army operating concept, Unified Land Operations. He described initiative as limiting the freedom of action of an adversary and the exercise of independent action by

¹ Frederick the Great, *Instructions for His Generals*, trans. Thomas Phillips (Mineola, NY: Courier Dover Publications, 2012), 92.

² Henri de Jomini, *Art of War*, trans. G. H. Mendell and W. P. Craighill (West Point, NY: 1862), 72.

³ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 84, 229, 358, 364.

⁴ Friedrich von Bernhardi, *On War of Today* (London: H Rees, 1912) 343.

⁵ Ferdinand Foch, *The Principle of War*, trans. by Hilaire Belloc (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920), 100.

⁶ Frans P. B. Osinga, *Science, Strategy and War: The Strategic Theory of John Boyd* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 185.

subordinates to overcome Clausewitzian friction on the battlefield.⁷ American military theorist Robert Leonhard argued in *Principles of War for the Information Age* that the semantics of initiative confuse the desired conceptual effect. He argues that initiative is not an action or something one does, so much as it is a condition of sustained freedom of action.⁸

Current US Army doctrine provides some precision in terms, but stops short of complete definitions. Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0 defines the ability to “seizing the initiative” as “setting and dictating the terms of action,” but this definition describes the act of seizing, not the essence of initiative.⁹ Additionally, it never defines the “terms of action.” Furthermore, the manual uses the term initiative over twenty times in four different ways (initiative, *the* initiative, disciplined initiative, and individual initiative) in just fourteen pages. Despite presenting initiative as the first foundational element of the US Army operating concept, ADP 3-0 imparts little clarity to the concept.

Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-0 attempts to clarify this confusion but fails to provide clear discrete definitions for all terms. ADRP 3-0 defines the term operational initiative as “setting or dictating the terms of action throughout an operation;” similar to “seizing the initiative” as defined in ADP 3-0.¹⁰ This linkage is important as ADRP 3-0 does not use the term operational initiative anywhere outside of the definition and elsewhere uses only “the initiative” or just “initiative,” leaving the reader to infer the proper definition from context. While not defined, the specification of operational initiative implies that this concept is somehow

⁷ Huba Wass de Czege, “Toward a New American Approach to Warfare,” *The Art of War Quarterly* 2 (September 1983): 53-54.

⁸ Robert Leonhard, *Principles of War for the Information Age* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1998), 90-93.

⁹ Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, *Unified Land Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2011), 5.

¹⁰ Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-0, *Unified Land Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2012), 2-1.

different from tactical or strategic initiative, but US Army and Joint doctrine define neither of these terms. ADRP 3-0 defines individual initiative as, “The willingness to act in the absence of orders, when existing orders no longer fit the situation, or when unforeseen opportunities or threats arise.”¹¹ ADP 6-0, *Mission Command*, uses virtually the same definition for disciplined initiative.¹² This system of similar, yet distinct, definitions of initiative in all forms across multiple manuals fails to “convey specific meaning peculiar to the profession, facilitating clarity in speech and writing,” which is the very purpose of doctrine, as defined by doctrine.¹³ This monograph clarifies these varying definitions of initiative and their component parts.

Many military theories and US doctrine rely on an indescribable concept of initiative, but this appears to be more a case of imprecise language than a truly nebulous concept. While the language and definitions change, the uniform of use of the concept throughout theory and doctrine demonstrates that a general theory of initiative exists. Collectively, theorists present initiative as a fundamental phenomenon of warfare that exists when one adversary uses a position of advantage to influence the course of conflict. More precisely, operational initiative is control over an adversary, or course of conflict, generated by positive aims, anticipation, and relative freedom of action.

The first section of this monograph analyzes theoretical models for initiative used by influential military theorists to distill a common underlying theory of initiative as a phenomenon of conflict. This approach is naturally eclectic and cannot encompass every military theorist, nor can it specifically account for the level of influence each theorist had on modern military thought.

¹¹ ADRP 3-0, 2-1.

¹² “Action in the absence of orders, when existing orders no longer fit the situation, or when unforeseen opportunities or threats arise.” Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0, *Mission Command* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2012), 4.

¹³ Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 1-02, *Operational Terms and Military Symbols* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2012), 1.

Additionally, individual theorists read each other's works and incorporated ideas, often without citation. Measuring the influence each theorist had on other theorists is difficult, if not impossible. Some cases, such as Boyd's reading of Chinese military theorist Sun Tzu, are well-documented.¹⁴ Others, like whether President Abraham Lincoln or US General Ulysses S. Grant embraced Clausewitz, remain a contested issue of history.¹⁵ This section concludes that operational initiative is more precisely defined as control generated by positive aims, anticipation, and relative freedom of action.

The second section of this monograph analyzes the evolution of operational initiative in American capstone doctrine (*Field Service Regulations*, Field Manual (FM) 100-5: *Operations*, FM 3-0: *Operations*, and ADP 3-0: *Unified Land Operations*) to establish a consistent American conception of initiative. This genealogical approach assumes a continuum of logical evolution of thought throughout doctrine, from core texts and dominant military theory prior to 1905 through the current catalogued system of doctrinal manuals. For the purpose of clarity, this monograph assumes that *the* initiative and operational initiative are the same, given the similarity in their definitions and usage. As individual initiative and disciplined initiative have similar definitions but imply different usages, this monograph will consider them separately and weigh the merits of this distinction. This section concludes that operational initiative is a core element of US Army doctrine. This American version of initiative seeks to control conflict through the delineation of clear objectives (positive aim), accurate estimates of the situation (anticipation), and the manipulation of tempo and depth (freedom of action).

This monograph concludes that operational initiative is not only a general phenomenon of conflict where one adversary has and presses an advantage against another, but also that a

¹⁴ Osinga, *Science Strategy and War*, 36.

¹⁵ Christopher Bassford, *Clausewitz in English: The Reception of Clausewitz in Britain and America, 1815-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 53-55.

consistent theory of operational initiative evolved within American doctrine. Current doctrine poorly describes this theory, despite holding it as a fundamental element of the current operating concept. Redefining the term operational initiative as a form of control generated by positive aim, anticipation, and relative freedom of action frees the concept from its cultural baggage and aids professional understanding.

Initiative in Military Theory

Initiative is inseparable from superiority in capacity to wage war.

—Mao Tse Tung, *Selected Writings of Mao Tse Tung*

Initiative is the greatest advantage in war.

—Huba Wass de Czege, “Towards a New American Approach to Warfare”

British naval strategist Julian Corbett compared military theory to a map.¹⁶ Explorers who have travelled the terrain record their knowledge in maps, which must be the starting point for any new adventurer. Likewise, any exploration of the role of initiative in operational art must start with an analysis of the map provided by the current body of military theory. Unfortunately, no such cohesive map currently exists; rather, military theorists have charted the terrain of initiative piecemeal. This section seeks to assemble these partial charts, identify emerging trends, and form a more coherent theoretical definition of initiative.

Almost every classic military theorist has addressed the concept of initiative, at least tangentially. Many theorists posit similar definitions of initiative but there is no unified definition of initiative in war. Jomini, Clausewitz, US General Henry Halleck, and British military theorist B. H. Liddell Hart described initiative in terms of the offense. French General Pierre-Joseph de Bourcet, Napoleon Bonaparte, US Colonel Gustave Fiebeger, and Sun Tzu described initiative as a product of detailed analysis and planning. Chinese military theorist and leader Mao Tse Tung, US Colonel William Naylor, Boyd, and US General George Washington described initiative as freedom of action. US Colonel James Mercur, Boyd, and some current US Army leaders described initiative in terms of individual action according to complex conditions. Mao, Mercur, and Wass de Czege further described initiative as a quantitative advantage. US Admiral J. C.

¹⁶ Julian Corbett, *Some Principles of Military Strategy* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1998), 15.

Wylie and Soviet military theorist Alexander Svechin described initiative as a state of control over the environment and one's adversary. While none of these theorists individually presented a complete theory of initiative, each described part of a coherent concept in which initiative appears as a form of advantage. This advantage is a form of control over an adversary, which requires three things. First, control requires a positive aim towards a clear and definable end state or decision. Second, control requires anticipation of future conditions which grants an adversary inherent advantages in terms of preparation and surprise. Third, control requires a relative freedom of action to enable choice between possible future conditions and avoid passive reaction. The remainder of this section analyzes each of these requirements and the idea of initiative as control to determine their theoretical roots, then proposes a clearer definition of operational initiative.

Positive Aim

The first requirement of control is a positive aim, or definable end state. Naturally, the ability to force that end state into being requires action, thus naturally associating initiative with the offense. Given that initiative derives from the Latin *initium* (beginning), this makes sense. The attacker begins an engagement by marching onto the field of battle. Jomini drew this correlation in his observation that “the army taking the initiative has the great advantage of bringing up its troops and striking a blow where it may deem best, whilst the army which acts upon the defensive...is always obliged to regulate its movements by those of the enemy.”¹⁷ Clausewitz echoed Jomini's association of initiative and the attacker's ability to choose the point

¹⁷ Jomini, *Art of War*, 184.

of engagement.¹⁸ Taking the initiative (i.e. attacking) conveyed great advantage, hence its prominent place in the military theories of Napoleon and Frederick the Great.¹⁹

These same theorists, however, argue against the universal advantage of the offense and its association with initiative. Frederick the Great saw offensive operations as a positive means toward the achievement of objectives in line with a planned strategy, but he also acknowledged the value of *Ermattungsstrategie*, a war of exhaustion characterized by the defense, when such a way of fighting was both essential and led to his desired strategic end state.²⁰ Napoleon advocated assuming the defense or avoiding engagement when inferior in forces.²¹ Clausewitz envisioned a defense as a system of minor offensive actions. This approach combined the strategic defensive advantages of fighting on familiar territory with strong supply lines with the offensive advantage of morale to justify the defense as the stronger form of war.²² Liddell Hart aptly summarized, “While it is axiomatic that the attacker enjoys the initiative, it may not carry him far...if the defender disposes of adequate mechanized forces.”²³

Both sides in any conflict will attack and defend, thus theorists understood the need to unify offense and defense in a single operational approach oriented primarily on advancing towards a defined end state. Frederick the Great’s approach advocated the offensive always, the defensive when required, and transition back to the offensive when possible with “the only

¹⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, 364.

¹⁹ Napoleon emphasized the offense in his maxim that “once the offensive has been assumed, it must be maintained to the last extremity.” Conrad Lanza, trans., *Napoleon and Modern War: His Military Maxims* (Harrisburg, PA: Military Service Publishing, 1943), 11; Frederick the Great expressed his emphasis in his belief that “wars must be short and lively.” Jay Luvaas, trans., *Frederick the Great on the Art of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1966), 141.

²⁰ Luvaas, *Frederick the Great*, 23.

²¹ Lanza, *Napoleon and Modern War*, 16.

²² Clausewitz, *On War*, 357-358.

²³ Basil Liddell Hart, *The Defence of Britain* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1939), 50.

purpose...to force the enemy to consent to an advantageous peace.”²⁴ Jomini saw the wisdom in the unification of offense and defense through positive aims as he lauded Frederick the Great and the Duke of Wellington for knowing “how to use these two systems, and ... to take the initiative during the progress of a defensive war.”²⁵ Liddell Hart similarly championed the idea of a dynamic defense, which presents as a defense but attacks the enemy as they move in the offense, a maneuver he labelled a “counter-stroke.”²⁶

Clearly, “taking the initiative” by choosing the place of battle is not an advantage unique to either offense or defense; the advantage lies in the ability to force an engagement that puts an adversary at risk. Clausewitz described this fundamental question of forcing an engagement in terms of polarity oriented on “the object [they] both seek to achieve: the decision.”²⁷ Forces with a positive aim seek to force an engagement where adversaries place themselves at risk, whereas a negative aim only resists or denies that engagement. Only through positive aims can a force advance toward their envisioned endstate of a conflict, whatever their combination of offensive or defensive operations.

Anticipation

The second requirement of control is the ability to understand the current situation and anticipate possible future conditions, to bring a positive aim into being. Two theorists, Sun Tzu and John Boyd, extensively address the role of anticipation in initiative. Boyd’s theory, presented in the Observe-Orient-Decide-Act (OODA) loop, posits that the force that is more efficiently able to observe the environment, orient themselves with an understanding of causal effects, decide on

²⁴ Luvaas, *Frederick the Great*, 310.

²⁵ Jomini, *Art of War*, 74.

²⁶ Basil Liddell Hart, *Dynamic Defence* (London: Farber and Farber, 1941), 51-52.

²⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, 84.

the best course of action, and act will win.²⁸ While all four phases are essential to Boyd's OODA loop, Orientation is the center of his model; it makes sense of the observed environments and play-tests many options to find the best one.²⁹ Sun Tzu expressed the necessity for understanding and anticipation in his famous axiom, "Know the other, know yourself, and the victory will not be at risk; Know the ground, know the natural conditions, and the victory can be total."³⁰ In any conflict, the entity with more perfect knowledge is better able to discern causal relations, allowing for economical use of force against an adversary's vulnerabilities. Sun Tzu described this approach as arranging forces in the best possible configuration (*hsing*) within the local conditions (*yin*) according to a commander's foreknowledge (*chih*) to achieve a clear advantage (*shih*).³¹ A strong enough *shih* forces an adversary to submit with limited resistance; hence, "the highest excellence is to subdue the enemy without fighting."³² This method of attaining *shih* is more than a Taoist aphorism; it generates two distinct advantages: surprise (the counter to anticipation) and planning (the product of foresight).

British military theorist J. F. C Fuller believed "surprise should be regarded as the soul of every operation...the secret of victory and key to success."³³ Surprise grants one belligerent clear physical advantage over another, and the lack of surprise reverses any advantages of a positive aim. Jomini stated that the army with the initiative could strike anywhere, but "only when surprise is present does the initiative confer an advantage; otherwise, in war as in card games, it is

²⁸ Osinga, *Science Strategy and War*, 49.

²⁹ Osinga, *Science Strategy and War*, 232.

³⁰ Sun Tzu, *The Art of Warfare*, ed. and trans. Roger T. Ames (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 151.

³¹ Sun Tzu, *The Art of Warfare*, 82-85.

³² Sun Tzu, *The Art of Warfare*, 111.

³³ John F. C. Fuller, *Foundations of the Science of War* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Command and General Staff College, 1993), 272.

a disadvantage.”³⁴ Saddam Hussein’s 5th Mechanized Division proved this necessity of surprise during the 1991 Gulf War when they launched a preemptory attack on the Saudi Arabian border town of Khafji. US-led coalition forces detected the oncoming attack and maneuvered forces to defeat it. The Iraqi force may have chosen the initial point of conflict, but their inability to surprise the coalition lost them the advantage.³⁵

Surprise not only grants a force a physical advantage, but also strikes directly at an adversary’s morale, affecting their will to continue fighting.³⁶ Jomini’s fundamental principle of war was “To throw by strategic movements the mass of an army, successively, upon the decisive points of a theater of war.”³⁷ Fuller expanded on this theory by arguing that surprise is a method of concentrating a force’s will against the decisive point of an adversary’s morale.³⁸ Destruction of morale is therefore far more potent and economical than physical destruction, making surprise a critical component of seizing and maintaining the initiative.³⁹

The effects of surprise are strong, but temporally limited. An enemy can always adapt once surprised, even though they may be at a disadvantage. Other theorists sought to extend the effects of surprise using shock to impose a condition of temporary paralysis on the adversary. Soviet military theorist Mikhail Tukhachevsky argued that deep and rapid offensive strikes in the opening stages of conflict paralyzed an opponent, allowing one side to seize and hold the

³⁴ Jomini, *Art of War*, 184; Carl von Clausewitz, *Two Letters on Strategy*, ed. and trans. Peter Paret and Daniel Moran (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Command and General Staff College, 1984), 29.

³⁵ Leonhard, *Principles of War*, 88-89.

³⁶ Fuller, *Foundations*, 273.

³⁷ Jomini, *Art of War*, 70.

³⁸ Fuller, *Foundations*, 217.

³⁹ Fuller, *Foundations*, 265.

initiative.⁴⁰ Vladimir Triandafillov, Tukhachevsky's pupil, extended this theory by explaining that destruction was not required; one belligerent only had to suppress their opponent's capabilities until they achieved a position of advantage.⁴¹

The advantages of surprise and shock, gained from proper anticipation, are strong and harnessed through planning and preparation. Napoleon reinforced this necessity of planning in several maxims, but primarily "in forming the plan of a campaign, it is requisite to foresee everything the enemy may do, and to be prepared with the necessary means to counteract it."⁴² Napoleon developed this focus on planning from a study of Bourcet, who understood the dynamic nature of war and emphasized the development of numerous branch plans.⁴³ Napoleon and Bourcet were not the only theorists to understand the linkage between planning and initiative. Sun Tzu wrote that "in war it is not numbers that give advantage...It is only the one who has no plan and takes his enemy lightly who is certain to be captured by him."⁴⁴ Frederick the Great also endorsed the need for constant planning: "Anticipate everything...and in so doing you will have found remedies beforehand for all inconveniences...Improvisation can succeed, but it is always better when you have made plans in advance."⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Jacob Kipp, foreword to *The Nature of the Operations of Modern Armies*, by Vladimir Triandafillov (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1994), xix.

⁴¹ James Schneider, introduction to *The Nature of the Operations of Modern Armies*, by Vladimir Triandafillov (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1994), xxxvii.

⁴² Napoleon Bonaparte, *Napoleon's Maxims of War*, trans. George Charles D'Aguilar (Richmond, VA: West & Johnson, 1862), 10.

⁴³ James Wasson, "Innovator or Imitator: Napoleon's Operational Concepts and the Legacies of Bourcet and Guibert," (master's thesis, Command and General Staff College, 1998), 10.

⁴⁴ Sun Tzu, *The Art of Warfare*, 144.

⁴⁵ Luvaas, *Frederick the Great*, 311.

Relative Freedom of Action

The third requirement of control is relative freedom to choose actions based on an accurate anticipation of future conditions to bring a positive aim into being. Many theorists phrase initiative in similar terms of action over passivity. Naylor, heavily influenced by Jomini and Prussian General Colmar Von der Goltz, wrote that assuming the offensive at the beginning of operations affords a commander the advantage of “freedom to move his forces wherever expediency dictates.”⁴⁶ Mao Tse Tung believed initiative and freedom of action were synonymous; “the initiative means freedom of action for an army. Any army which, losing the initiative, is forced into a passive position and ceases to have freedom of action, faces the danger of defeat or extermination.”⁴⁷

Boyd’s OODA loop serves as a model for generating freedom of action through an iterative process of increasing friendly options while limiting those of the adversary. At the tactical level, this means that a commander cycles through the process faster and more accurately than the enemy.⁴⁸ Operationally, this requires a commander to “get inside [the enemy’s] mind-time-space, create a tangle of threatening and non-threatening events, generate mismatches between those events ... and maneuver the adversary beyond his moral-mental-physical capacity to adapt or endure.”⁴⁹

To limit the adversary’s freedom of action, Boyd sought to act with “variety and rapidity [that] allows one to magnify the adversary’s friction, hence to stretch out his time to respond.”⁵⁰

⁴⁶ William K. Naylor, *Principles of Strategy, With Historical Illustrations* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: General Service Schools Press, 1921), 18.

⁴⁷ Mao Tse Tung, *Selected Writings of Mao Tse Tung* (Peking, China: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), 159.

⁴⁸ Osinga, *Science Strategy and War*, 177.

⁴⁹ Osinga, *Science Strategy and War*, 177.

⁵⁰ Osinga, *Science Strategy and War*, 86.

In this context, variety requires unpredictability and surprise as well as the planning and flexibility to enact that variety. In fact, Mao believed that flexibility was “a concrete expression of the initiative.”⁵¹ Rapidity does not necessarily require absolute speed, but merely a higher speed relative to the enemy. Degrading the enemy’s ability to comprehend and react through the execution of deception operations or the destruction of intelligence assets and command nodes, or merely acting faster than the enemy, establishes a favorable tempo of operations. Boyd was hardly the first to conceptualize the use of tempo and flexibility to degrade the capacity of an adversary. Soviet Theorist Colonel G. S. Isserson advocated “breaking enemy resistance through its whole depth.”⁵² Liddell Hart advised, “[putting] your opponents on the horns of a dilemma” to gain at least one objective, if not more sequentially.⁵³ Cumulatively, these actions serve to limit enemy options and constrain their freedom of action.

Simultaneously, Boyd’s theory sought to increase friendly freedom of action with “harmony and initiative... [that diminished] one’s own friction, hence compressing one’s own time to exploit variety/rapidity in a directed way.”⁵⁴ In this context, harmony is synonymous with synchronization, and initiative means individual initiative, not operational initiative. Boyd’s choice of the word harmony to describe this relationship is important. On face value, individual initiative and synchronization act against each other. Synchronization is a product of deliberate planning but individual initiative requires modifications of that planning in time with potentially disastrous side effects for synchronization. Harmony suggests that while individual initiative may slip an octave, the tune itself remains the same. Regardless, the resulting product of harmony and individual initiative is diminished friction, which serves to widen the friction gap with the

⁵¹ Mao, *Selected Writings*, 161.

⁵² Georgii Samollovich Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art* trans. Bruce Menning (Moscow: State Military Publishing House, 1937), 54.

⁵³ Basil H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (New York: Faber & Faber, 1974), 330.

⁵⁴ Osinga, *Science Strategy and War*, 186.

adversary. Boyd argued that the complexity of the environment acted against a commander's efforts to synchronize, therefore individual initiative hedged against complexity much like how Clausewitz's genius hedged against chance.⁵⁵ The roots for this concept lie in Sun Tzu's adaptation of position (*hsing*) in accordance with an accurate perception of local conditions (*yin*) to achieve strategic advantage (*shih*), but the same concept exists throughout American military theory.⁵⁶ Mercur, an instructor at West Point at the turn of the 20th century, for example, emphasized that commanders should rely on the individual initiative of their subordinate commanders to enact the general plan.⁵⁷

Individual initiative serves a critical enabling function to operational initiative, but its role is easy to overstate. Svechin recognized that a force's level of individual initiative was a product of national character and training, but that it is fundamentally different from "the initiative."⁵⁸ The idea that an American, by nature, would be more prone to action than a Russian due to cultural background does not preclude the latter from controlling the course of a conflict by restricting the American's freedom of action. Individual initiative can augment freedom of action to adapt plans to complex conditions, but it cannot singularly create operational initiative. No amount of personal prerogative or drive can sustain a corps offensive without a positive aim or a division at the point of culmination with no freedom of action.

Boyd's iterative cycle of increasing options while constraining others results in a gap of capability to act (i.e. relative freedom of action) which serves as a foundational advantage in any conflict. This iterative approach is not unique to Boyd. Frederick the Great speculated that small

⁵⁵ Osinga, *Science Strategy and War*, 186.

⁵⁶ Sun Tzu, *The Art of Warfare*, 126-127.

⁵⁷ James Mercur, *Elements of the Art of War: Prepared for the Use of the Cadets of the United States Military Academy*, 3rd ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1894), 158.

⁵⁸ Alexander A. Svechin, *Strategy*, ed. Kent Lee (Minneapolis, MN: East View Publications, 1992), 331.

advantages cumulatively generated a great advantage for further exploitation.⁵⁹ Mao argued that the comparative military weakness between a guerrilla unit and a fielded force was such that only through building small local advantages could the guerrilla gain a position of superiority.⁶⁰ Boyd explained the effect of this accumulated advantage by comparing armed forces in war to complex adaptive systems. Open systems are free to interact with their environment, but closed systems trend toward chaos via the increasing entropy dictated by the second law of thermodynamics.⁶¹ In this metaphor, entropy is equivalent to the inability to choose actions and higher entropy means a more passive and reactive state. As Mao indicated, this kind of process can never reach the extremes of absolute superiority against absolute passivity, but it can create a gulf of capability sufficient to cause system failure.⁶² German psychologist Dietrich Dörner described this passive approach as “repair-service behavior” in which an actor can only react to the problems of the moment resulting in the inability to judge progress, focus on the wrong problems, and disregard of future path-dependent critical problems, ultimately resulting in failure.⁶³

Control

Operational initiative is a form of control over adversaries and events generated by a positive aim, anticipation of future conditions, and freedom of action. In application, this form of control appears as the application of the elements of operational art. Wylie’s theory of control

⁵⁹ Luvaas, *Frederick the Great*, 335.

⁶⁰ Mao, *Selected Writings*, 237.

⁶¹ Osinga, *Science Strategy and War*, 124-125.

⁶² Mao, *Selected Writings*, 236.

⁶³ Dietrich Dörner, *The Logic of Failure: Recognizing and Avoiding Error in Complex Situations* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996), 60.

mimics the role of initiative in many other theories and demonstrates it in application.⁶⁴ Wylie theorized that “manipulation of the pattern of war” and “strategic weights or centers of gravity” is the basis of control, “the fundamental key to the conduct of warfare.”⁶⁵ Manipulation of centers of gravity “unbalances the enemy,” while “varying the pattern of war” prevents the enemy from rebalancing until they are eventually defeated.⁶⁶ Wylie’s terminology is vague and he used historical metaphors to illustrate this concept. For example, Wylie described how General Ulysses Grant’s 1864 Overland Campaign and General William Tecumseh Sherman’s Atlanta Campaign were sustained efforts to change the pattern of war, and their combined effect shifted the “weight of the war” south, unbalancing the Confederacy.⁶⁷ In describing these same campaigns, other authors, including Sherman himself, phrased these actions in terms of tempo, shifting or threatening logistical bases, and operational reach.⁶⁸ Current doctrine would describe them in terms of tempo, phasing, basing, and operational reach.

Creative application of the theory of control extends far beyond the battlefield to generate operational initiative. Svechin also saw operational initiative as a form of control and posited several methods of manipulating “strategic weights,” which involve long periods of military, economic, and political planning and synchronization.⁶⁹ Militarily this requires detailed

⁶⁴ Substituting “initiative” for “control” in Wylie’s model of war reveals the clear similarities: “The pattern of war consists of [the aggressor’s] attempts to establish and maintain, primarily by military means, *initiative* over the [defender]...If [the defender] is successful in first minimizing then neutralizing the aggressor’s *initiative* then there comes into being a period of comparative equilibrium.” Joseph Caldwell Wylie, *Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1967), 88.

⁶⁵ Wylie, *Military Strategy*, 90.

⁶⁶ Wylie, *Military Strategy*, 90.

⁶⁷ Wylie, *Military Strategy*, 93-94.

⁶⁸ William Tecumseh Sherman, “Grand Strategy of the War of the Rebellion,” *Century* 13 (1888): 596-597; Arthur Wagner, *Strategy* (Kansas City, MO: Hudson-Kimberly Publishing, 1903), 25-26.

⁶⁹ Svechin, *Strategy*, 320.

mobilization plans, preparation of theaters, and construction of fortifications.⁷⁰ Economically this requires a robust defense industry synchronized with mobilization and the ability to sustain production in accordance with the chosen operating concept.⁷¹ Politically this requires the cultivation of foreign and domestic allies while preparing forces to fight within coalition structures.⁷² The US Army drew similar conclusions after World War I resulting in a series of Industrial Mobilization Plans, continued support for the Selective Service Act of 1917, and the development of a Secretary of War Planning Branch.⁷³ These applications demonstrate how the physical mechanisms of control may change, but given its applicability both tactically and strategically, the concept of initiative as control transcends the limitations of discrete levels of war.

Initiative Defined

While many theorists discussed initiative, few attempted a holistic definition. For most practitioners and theorists, initiative falls into the category of “I know it when I see it,” and begs no further clarification; but as an explicit foundational element of US Army doctrine since 1982, a clearer definition is in order. Examining the writings of multiple theorists from various backgrounds reveals that initiative is a fundamental phenomenon of conflict in which one adversary assumes a position of advantage over another. Initiative is therefore more precisely a form of control over adversaries and events that stems from three key requirements. First, having and maintaining operational initiative requires the pursuit of a positive aim; whether the

⁷⁰ Svechin, *Strategy*, 216.

⁷¹ Svechin, *Strategy*, 117.

⁷² Svechin, *Strategy*, 143.

⁷³ Russell Weigley, “The Interwar Army,” in *Against All Enemies: Interpretations of American Military History from Colonial Times to the Present*, ed. by Kenneth Hagan and William Roberts (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 1986), 267-268.

acquisition of that aim occurs on the offense or defense is immaterial. Second, operational initiative requires anticipation of future conditions to generate surprise and shock through planning. Third, operational initiative requires relative freedom of action achieved through repetitive incremental degradation of enemy freedoms and expansion of friendly options.

Together, these three requirements characterize initiative as a general advantage versus the enemy. Each requirement provides some advantage, which cumulatively creates a sum advantage relative to an adversary. This vague interpretation is consistent across the spectrum of military theorists. Mao wrote, “Initiative is inseparable from superiority in capacity to wage war.”⁷⁴ Wass de Czege, the primary author of the US Army’s AirLand Battle doctrine, wrote, “The initiative is the greatest advantage in war.”⁷⁵ This general position of superiority is, in essence, a position of relative advantage; a force with the initiative *ipso facto* holds a position of relative advantage versus an adversary.⁷⁶

The advantage generated from these three requirements is more succinctly described as a form of control. Furthermore, control strips away the confusing cultural imagery surrounding initiative. A more coherent definition of operational initiative is a degree of control over an adversary or conflict developed through a positive aim, anticipation of future conditions, and relative freedom of action. This definition brings clarity to operational initiative’s shifting imagery and contextualizes its developing usage in US Army doctrine by defining the “terms of action” and introducing the concept of control.

⁷⁴ Mao, *Selected Writings*, 36.

⁷⁵ Huba Wass de Czege, “Toward a New American Way of Warfare,” 53.

⁷⁶ Initiative as a *de facto* position of relative advantage reveals redundancy in Unified Land Operations as defined in ADP 3-0: “Unified land operations describes how the Army seizes, retains, and exploits the initiative to gain and maintain [the initiative / a position of relative advantage] in sustained land operations...” ADP 3-0, 1.

Initiative in US Army Doctrine

It isn't just a matter of tactics; it isn't just a matter of maneuvering. A lot of people misunderstood that...That isn't what AirLand Battle is all about at all. AirLand Battle is about taking the initiative.

—General Donn Starry, *Press On*

In 1914, the US Army *Field Service Regulations* were less than a decade old and yet, on the eve of entry into World War I, General Leonard Wood believed that “the fundamental principles of war are neither very numerous nor complex.”⁷⁷ Generals John Hines, George C. Marshall, and Omar Bradley repeated this phrase in their introductions to subsequent *Field Service Regulations* over the next four decades despite some of the most rapid advancements in military technology and organization in history. Over this time, tactics, organization, and the strategic context of US Army operations changed dramatically, but a common thread of military theory unified the successive doctrinal concepts.

Initiative is one such common thread in American military tradition. As doctrine evolved over the past two centuries, initiative took a more prominent role. This section traces this evolution of doctrine, its corresponding increasing reliance on initiative, and the emergence of the doctrinal concept of operational initiative as control using the three elements of initiative proposed in the last section as a framework. This analysis shows that the American tradition of initiative stresses control using clear objectives (positive aim), emphasis on commanders' estimates and understanding (anticipation), and the use of tempo and depth (relative freedom of action).

⁷⁷ *Field Service Regulations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1914), 3.

Evolution of US Army Doctrine

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “doctrine” as “that which is taught or laid down as true concerning a particular subject ... a body or system of principle or tenets.”⁷⁸ To most, “military doctrine” implies stacks of field manuals and publications; but the modern system of indexed and approved manuals published by the US Army did not exist prior to the publication of the first *Field Service Regulations* in 1905. Prior to 1905, the Army used informal doctrine found in the form of popular military theory, common textbooks, and professional journals. Officers like Dennis Hart Mahan and Henry Halleck published textbooks for the instruction of cadets and officers at the United States Military Academy and the Army at large. Many of these texts, including Halleck’s *Elements of Military Art and Science*, incorporated contemporary foreign military theory, specifically the study of Napoleon’s campaigns and organization for war.⁷⁹ Beyond the well-known translations of Jomini’s *Art of War*, officers read, translated, and published European military theory such as Edward De La Barre Duparcq’s *Elements of Military Art and History*, Guillaume-Henri Dufour’s *Strategy and Tactics*, and even Clausewitz’s *On War*.⁸⁰ Furthermore, military journals such as the *Army and Navy Journal*, *United States Service Magazine*, and the *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States* printed translations of French and German theorists, historical and contemporary commentaries on campaigns and tactics, and original articles by US officers, which all depict a thriving intellectual tradition behind American military theory.⁸¹

⁷⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “doctrine,” accessed April 1, 2015, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/56322?rskey=eZzSxb&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

⁷⁹ Michael Bonura, *Under the Shadow of Napoleon: French Influence on the American Way of Warfare from the War of 1812 to the Outbreak of WWII* (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 111.

⁸⁰ Bonura, *Under the Shadow of Napoleon*, 118. See also Christopher Bassford, *Clausewitz in English*, 54-56.

⁸¹ Bonura, *Under the Shadow of Napoleon*, 109 and 139.

After the Civil War, General William T. Sherman created and sustained officer education programs such as the Artillery School at Fort Monroe and the School of Application for Infantry and Cavalry at Fort Leavenworth.⁸² The military texts in use at these schools, including Arthur Wagner's *Organization and Tactics* and *Strategical Operations* and John Bigelow's *Principles of Strategy*, further refined American military thinking.⁸³ Wagner's work in particular highlighted that the US Army was not just copying European traditions but drawing on its own experiences in the creation of military theory; his textbooks clarified the thinking of many officers and served as semi-official manuals for the Army.⁸⁴ As a whole, these books, texts, and articles on military history and theory created a common and coherent understanding of the US Army approach to war and thus became informal doctrine.⁸⁵

In 1899, President William McKinley appointed Elihu Root as Secretary of War. Root instituted a series of reforms resulting in the creation the War Department staff, which controlled the creation and development of formal doctrine in addition to consolidating a coherent system of Army service schools for advanced officer education.⁸⁶ In 1905, the War Department published the Army's first official doctrinal manual, *Field Service Regulations (FSR)*, which it revised in 1910, 1913, and 1914.⁸⁷ Additionally, officers and schools continued to augment formal doctrine

⁸² Russell F. Weigley, *History of the United States Army* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 273.

⁸³ John L. Romjue, *American Army Doctrine for the Post-Cold War* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), 12.

⁸⁴ Walter E. Kretchik, *U.S. Army Doctrine: From the American Revolution to the War on Terror* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2011), 93.

⁸⁵ Andrew J. Birtle. *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine: 1860-1941* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1998), 5-6.

⁸⁶ Romjue, *American Army Doctrine*, 13.

⁸⁷ The structure of these manuals, with chapters on security and reconnaissance operations titled as "The Service of Security" and "The Service of Information," clearly demonstrates the influence of informal doctrine such as Wagner's *The Service of Security and Information*.

with informal doctrine such as Fieberger's *Elements of Strategy* and Naylor's *Principles of Strategy*. In 1923, General Hugh Drum supervised the revision of the *FSR* and carried on Wagner's American-centric tradition by drawing primarily on the US experience in World War 1. The 1923 *FSR* highlighted the American approach to aggressive offensive operations in open warfare and gave considerable attention to the employment of large unit formations.⁸⁸ As British military theorists Fuller and Liddell Hart gained popularity, General Charles Summerall directed a further revision of the *FSR* in 1929 resulting in the creation of *A Manual for Commanders of Large Units*, which attempted to build on, but not replace, the 1923 *FSR* doctrine for divisions, corps, and armies. The War Department never officially published this manual, although it remained influential at the Command and General Staff School; the War Department eventually revised it with the 1942 publication of FM 100-15: *Field Service Regulations - Larger Units*.⁸⁹ On the eve of US entry into World War 2, George C. Marshall approved a revised FM 100-5: *Operations (Tentative)* in 1939. Subsequent revisions in 1941, 1944, and 1949 continued to encapsulate the lessons from increasingly larger and more complex battlefields. As a whole, these manuals identified that divisions, corps, and armies faced fundamentally different problems than those encountered by companies, battalions, and brigades, such as the integration of all combat arms and the sequencing of tactical actions within larger offensives to defeat larger and more resilient enemies.

The introduction of the nuclear battlefield forced a significant change in US Army doctrine. The 1954 revision of FM 100-5 briefly addressed nuclear weapons but acknowledged, "The full import and extent of changes resulting from the employment of the latest developments, the nuclear and thermonuclear weapons and the guided missiles, is not clear at this time."⁹⁰ The

⁸⁸ Kretchik, *U.S. Army Doctrine*, 137.

⁸⁹ Kretchik, *U.S. Army Doctrine*, 142.

⁹⁰ Field Manual (FM) 100-5, *Field Service Regulations: Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1954), 8.

1962 and 1968 revisions more fully addressed defensive postures and delivery authorizations for nuclear weapons, but the greatest shift in doctrine came with the 1976 *Field Manual 100-5*. While it did not solve the problems of nuclear release on the battlefield, General William DePuy and Major General Donn Starry's doctrine of Active Defense proposed that precision-guided munitions neutered bold offensive maneuvers requiring integrated firepower and attrition within a proactive defense.⁹¹ This manual primarily focused on the defense of Europe from Soviet aggression and largely discounted the American tradition of emphasizing the offense over the defense.⁹²

Heavily criticized by both civilian reformers pushing for "Maneuver Warfare Doctrine" and military officers looking for a more comprehensive approach to warfare, the doctrine of Active Defense gave way to AirLand Battle with the 1982 publication of FM 100-5, spearheaded by Starry and Wass de Czege.⁹³ The 1982 version of FM 100-5 used history and theory to highlight a clear distinction in tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war, the formal introduction of operational art, and a focus on interservice integration to achieve true operational depth. The manual's shift in tone from an exaltation of the defense to an initiative-based offense startled some North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) partners resulting in a refined publication in 1986, which stipulated that despite its orientation to the offense, US forces would abide by NATO's forward defense plans.⁹⁴ Revised in 1993, FM 100-5 addressed the post-Cold War battlefield by expanding the initiative-based offensive approach to warfare to include

⁹¹ Donn Starry, Letter to Richard Swain, 7 June 1995, 10-11. Starry wrote the defense section of the 1976 FM 100-5 in an attempt to demonstrate the possibility of seizing the initiative in the defense. He states he was not pleased with the result.

⁹² Kretchik, *U.S. Army Doctrine*, 200.

⁹³ Saul Bronfeld, "Did TRADOC Outmanoeuvre the Manoeuvrists? A Comment," *War & Society* 27, no. 2 (October 2008): 111-114.

⁹⁴ Field Manual (FM) 100-5, *Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1986), i. See also Starry, Letter to Swain, 2.

“operations other than war.”⁹⁵ In 2001, FM 3-0: *Operations* replaced FM 100-5 and defined an operating concept of Full Spectrum Operations, which codified stability operations on the same level as offense and defense. The 2008 version and short-lived “Change 1” published in 2011, introduced the philosophy of mission command, aimed at emphasizing individual freedom of action within a higher commander’s intent, but retained the operating concept of Full Spectrum Operations. In 2011, ADP 3-0: *Operations* replaced FM 3-0 as part of the Doctrine 2015 initiative. ADP 3-0 replaced Full Spectrum Operations with Unified Land Operations and shrunk the manual from over 200 pages to just under 30, but held true to the foundation of an initiative-based offense. In fact, despite drastic changes in length, strategic context, and military experience, US Army formal doctrine from 1982 onward remained true to the aggressive initiative-based approach.

Increasing Reliance on Initiative

Initiative forms a central theme with increasing usage throughout US Army formal and informal doctrine. While it would be impossible to survey the frequency in which informal doctrine featured initiative over the last two centuries, the trend is easily identifiable in formal doctrine. Counting the number of times the word “initiative” appeared in each formal doctrinal manual from 1905 to 2011 and dividing this number by the total page count results in an “initiative” per page value, or “initiative density,” value for each manual. A graph of these values appears in Figure 1 and shows a clear increasing trend of usage with only two major deviations: 1976 and 2001. The 1976 version of FM 100-5, as already discussed, advocated Active Defense and served as a significant departure from US Army traditions. While the 2001 version of FM 3-0 did not push an unconventional doctrine, it did almost double the total page count of the 1993

⁹⁵ Kretchik, *U.S. Army Doctrine*, 226-227.

version of FM 100-5 (163 pages to 318 pages including front and back matter), likely contributing to the slight deviation from increasing usage.

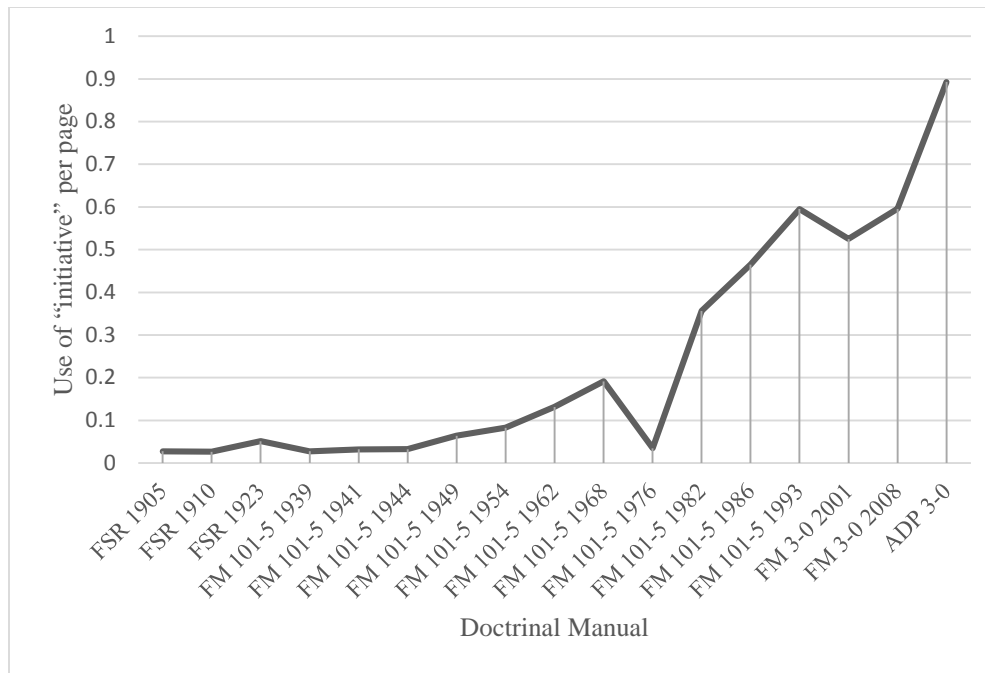


Figure 1. Initiative Density of US Army Formal Doctrine, 1905-2011

Source: Created by the Author.

As formal doctrine increased the usage of the term initiative, two distinct, but linked, concepts of initiative evolved. All formal doctrine valued operational initiative, which is described as an object to be possessed and used, external to the identified actor (i.e. seize the initiative, rob the enemy of the initiative, etc.). At the same time, doctrine valued individual initiative, which it described as an innate characteristic of an individual (i.e. commander's initiative, initiative of subordinates, exercising his/her initiative, etc.). Alternate phrases used throughout doctrine to imply this same concept are "province of subordinates" and "willingness and ability to act."⁹⁶ Altogether, and through all of the various versions, doctrine presents an evolving concept of operational initiative as a form of control, compatible with the theoretical

⁹⁶ *Field Service Regulations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1910), 60; FM 100-5 (1986), 15.

definition of initiative, that prioritizes defined objectives (positive aim), clear understanding and commanders' estimates (anticipation), and operations in depth (relative freedom of action).

Positive Aim

American doctrine seeks control over the course of conflicts with a positive aim through clear and defined objectives. Informal doctrine clearly states the selection of objectives is the first duty of strategy.⁹⁷ The strategic objective, also known as the ultimate objective, may require intermediary objectives, but informal doctrine typically constrained their selection to enemy forces.⁹⁸ Formal doctrine quickly adopted objective as a term meant to focus offensive operations with the ultimate objective being the destruction of enemy forces in battle and the first listed principle of war.⁹⁹

The focus on military destruction may seem like a narrow aim, but both informal and formal doctrine adopted a Clausewitzian perspective of war as an extension of policy, where military destruction directly enabled the political aim. Lieutenant Colonel Oliver Robinson's *Fundamentals of Military Strategy*, an influential textbook at Fort Leavenworth between World Wars I and II, drew heavily from Clausewitz by stating that "war develops directly from the political conflicts of states" and "the objectives thus selected must assure the accomplishment of the national purpose."¹⁰⁰ One of the US Army's first manuals on strategy tiered objectives as national, strategic, and tactical; stating "the selection of a proper objective is the first problem

⁹⁷ Henry W. Halleck, *Elements of Military Art and Science; or, Course of Instruction in Strategy, Fortification, Tactics of Battles* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1846), 38; Wagner, *Strategy*, 7; Naylor, *Principles of Strategy*, 49.

⁹⁸ Wagner, *Strategy*, 43.

⁹⁹ Field Manual (FM) 100-5, *Field Service Regulations: Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1939), 27.

¹⁰⁰ Oliver P. Robinson, *Fundamentals of Military Strategy* (Washington, DC: United States Infantry Association, 1928), 57.

which confronts a commander.”¹⁰¹ Later doctrine updated this line of thought through the introduction of operational art, which uses military force in varying ways to achieve strategic objectives.¹⁰²

The best objectives are clear and defined, but become less clear with both level of force and time. Early doctrine repeatedly used the phrase “clear-cut” to describe ideal objectives.¹⁰³ The 1949 FM 100-5 clarified that objectives should be “possible within the time and space limits imposed by the assigned mission...compel the enemy to evacuate [their] position...facilitate contemplated future operations...produce a convergence of effort...[and] be easily identified.”¹⁰⁴ At the same time, American doctrine recognized and accepted that objectives cannot always be so “clear-cut.” Robinson and Wylie both described war as essentially a state of broken policy and thus the politicians have only vague ideas of the national objective.¹⁰⁵ Doctrine echoed this thought process by presenting objectives on a scale of clarity with immediate tactical objectives as “definite” and farther-reaching operational or strategic objectives as “probable.”¹⁰⁶ General Dwight Eisenhower described these latter objectives in application:

In committing troops to battle there are certain minimum objectives to be attained, else the operation is a failure. Beyond this lies the area of reasonable expectation, while still further beyond lies the realm of hope... A battle plan normally attempts to provide guidance even into this final area, so that no opportunity for extensive exploitation may

¹⁰¹ *Principles of Strategy for an Independent Corps or Army in a Theater of Operations* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Command and General Staff School Press, 1936), 25.

¹⁰² FM 100-5 (1986), 10. See also ADP 3-0, 9.

¹⁰³ *Principles of Strategy for an Independent Corps or Army in a Theater of Operations*, 26.

¹⁰⁴ Field Manual (FM) 100-5, *Field Service Regulations: Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1949), 80.

¹⁰⁵ Robinson, *Fundamentals of Military Strategy*, 57-58; Wylie, *Military Strategy*, 68.

¹⁰⁶ *Field Service Regulations* (1914), 78-79. See also *Field Service Regulations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1923), 100.

be lost through ignorance ... concerning the intent of the commander. These phases of a plan do not comprise rigid instructions, they are merely guideposts.¹⁰⁷

While these distant guideposts were not as “clear-cut,” they still provided sufficient direction to drive the force towards a positive aim.

The focus on positive aim through clear objectives naturally translated into an emphasis of the offense over the defense, which conflated positive aim with offensive action. The roots of this fallacy lay in the writings of Jomini and the primacy of the offense in his system of war. Jomini’s ideas filtered through Mahan and Halleck and dominated American military theory leading up to the Civil War.¹⁰⁸ Mercur’s *Elements of the Art of War*, an influential textbook at West Point from 1889-1899, maintained this intellectual tradition of equating the offense with the initiative.¹⁰⁹ This conception carried over into formal doctrine when the 1905 *FSR* stated “the commander of the force on the offensive has the great advantage of the initiative...he has a specific object, whereas the defender has only the general object of repelling the adversary.”¹¹⁰ General Hines reiterated the primacy of the offense in the 1923 *FSR*, “War is positive and requires positive action... All training should...develop positive qualities of character... The basis of training will be the attack.”¹¹¹ By 1941, FM 100-5 identified offensive action as key to exercising individual initiative, freedom of action, and the commander’s will.¹¹² Subsequent doctrine labelled the offensive “the decisive form of war.”¹¹³

¹⁰⁷ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (New York: Doubleday, 1948), 256.

¹⁰⁸ Bonura, *Under the Shadow of Napoleon*, 79.

¹⁰⁹ Mercur, *Elements of the Art of War*, 143.

¹¹⁰ *Field Service Regulations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1905), 103.

¹¹¹ *Field Service Regulations* (1923), III.

¹¹² Field Manual (FM) 100-5, *Field Service Regulations: Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1941), 22.

¹¹³ FM 100-5 (1986), 91.

At the same time, American doctrine acknowledged the power of the defense in achieving positive aims. Halleck himself distinguished between a purely negative aim and a defensive style of war.¹¹⁴ The 1930 *Tentative Manual for Commanders of Large Units* claimed, “Forces that contemplate the offensive are careless and negligent in their organization for defense” and speculated that commanders should instead attempt to assume a strong defense and compel adversaries to attack.¹¹⁵ This section, largely copied from a French doctrinal pamphlet after World War I, was never fully accepted and did not appear in the approved version of FM 100-15 in 1942 despite its obvious theoretical roots in Napoleon’s principle that “the whole art of war consists in a well-reasoned and circumspect defensive, followed by a rapid and audacious attack.”¹¹⁶ To bring this concept into doctrine more coherently, the 1949 FM 100-5 recast this idea as a counteroffensive; “If the defender seizes the initiative...the results are often decisive.”¹¹⁷ The 1976 FM 100-5 attempted to codify this style of war in the Active Defense operating concept, but included language that cautioned commanders to “attack only if [they] expect the eventual outcome to result in decisively greater enemy losses.”¹¹⁸ Much like the tentative 1930 FM 100-15, this language seemed incongruous with a historical operating concept that touted the primacy of the offense; it was eliminated in the subsequent publication.

¹¹⁴ “To merely remain in a defensive attitude, yielding gradually to the advances of the enemy, without any effort to regain such positions or provinces as may have fallen into his power, or to inflict on him some fatal and decisive blow on the first favorable opportunity; such a system is always within the reach of ignorance, stupidity, and cowardice; but such is far from being the true Fabian system of defensive war.” Halleck, *Elements*, 43.

¹¹⁵ Field Manual (FM) 100-15, *A Manual for Commanders of Large Units (Provisional)* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1930), 11.

¹¹⁶ John F. C. Fuller, *The Conduct of War* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 1992), 51.

¹¹⁷ FM 100-5 (1949), 114.

¹¹⁸ Field Manual (FM) 100-5, *Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1976), 4-1.

Individual operating concepts may have emphasized offense or defense, but doctrine as a whole advocated a unified approach oriented on the objective (positive aim). Bigelow's *Principles of Strategy*, an influential textbook at Fort Leavenworth prior to the Spanish American War, proposed such an approach; "It is one of the highest marks of generalship to be able to alternate judiciously between offense and defensive modes of action, and thus practically to unite the two opposite characteristics of initiative and resistance."¹¹⁹ World War II doctrine prioritized selection of the objective and only then offensive or defensive courses of action.¹²⁰ AirLand Battle unified offense and defense with the goal of seizing and retaining the initiative.¹²¹ Full Spectrum Operations "[combined] and [sequenced] offensive, defensive, stability, and support operations."¹²² Currently, Unified Land Operations promotes "simultaneous offensive, defensive and stability operations."¹²³ Each of these concepts highlights the need for multiple forms of military operations unified in a positive aim towards a decisive objective.

Anticipation

American doctrine seeks control over the course of conflict with superior understanding and anticipation through commanders' estimates. Informal doctrine argued that a commander's estimate of the situation formed the intellectual base of all operations. Wagner believed the essential quality of both strategists and tacticians was their ability "to form a correct estimate of

¹¹⁹ John Bigelow Jr., *Principles of Strategy* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1891), 20.

¹²⁰ *Principles of Strategy for an Independent Corps or Army in a Theater of Operations*, 24.

¹²¹ Field Manual (FM) 100-5, *Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1982), 7-2.

¹²² Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2001), 1-16.

¹²³ ADP 3-0, 1.

[their] own and [their] enemy's condition and available resources."¹²⁴ Fiebeger argued "The essential requisites of a good plan of campaign are that it should be simple, be based on a correct estimate of the military situation, and on correct military principles."¹²⁵ Early doctrine called for commanders to "make an *estimate of the situation*, culminating in a *decision* upon a definite plan of action [emphasis in original]."¹²⁶

As the complexity of military operations increased, the responsibility for the commander's estimate expanded to the staff as well. Mercur described the collection and presentation of information to the commander as one of the staff's primary responsibilities.¹²⁷ Formal doctrine reflects this responsibility of the staff from the first *Field Service Regulation* to the present day.¹²⁸ Current doctrine holds that commanders, aided by their staffs, drive the operations process through understanding the context of the current situation and visualizing a desired future condition.¹²⁹

The commander's estimate is not, however, without its own context. Assigned objectives provide a frame of reference for understanding current and future conditions and enable individual initiative as a means of synchronization. Early doctrine dictated that commanders "will be guided, in the first instance, by the orders...received from higher authority; then, information of various degrees of reliability as to the enemy and the theater of operations."¹³⁰ Likewise, when

¹²⁴ Wagner, *Strategy*, 47.

¹²⁵ Gustave Fiebeger, *Elements of Strategy* (West Point, NY: United States Military Academy Press, 1917), 58.

¹²⁶ *Field Service Regulations* (1910), 59.

¹²⁷ Mercur, *Elements of the Art of War*, 9.

¹²⁸ *Field Service Regulations* (1905), 14.

¹²⁹ Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 5-0, *The Operations Process* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2012), 2-3.

¹³⁰ *Field Service Regulations* (1905), 28.

commanders wrote their own orders, they were to “lay stress upon *the object to be attained*, and leave open the means to be employed [emphasis in original].”¹³¹ Individual initiative served an essential subordinate function to operational initiative, but operational initiative remained the goal. Later doctrine clarified that a thorough understanding of the “commander’s intent and the situational assumptions on which it was based” enables individual initiative to adapt orders in decentralized operations to overcome the complexities of fog and friction.¹³² More plainly, AirLand Battle codified that “to preserve the [operational] initiative, subordinates must act independently within the context of an overall plan.”¹³³ Between 2001 and 2008, doctrine rebranded the accepted idea that individual initiative was naturally constrained by a commander’s intent with the term “disciplined initiative.” Current doctrine has maintained the use of both disciplined initiative and individual initiative, but comparison of their definitions reveals no appreciable difference, and with good reason.¹³⁴ Individual initiative synchronized through commander’s intent has always been a central component of US Army doctrine’s approach to synchronizing operations within a positive aim and anticipation of the future.

Relative Freedom of Action

American doctrine seeks control over the course of conflict with freedom of action achieved through depth and tempo. Three dominant conceptions of depth developed throughout doctrine to achieve relative freedom of action. The earliest use of depth refers to the disposition of friendly forces in depth to respond to enemy actions and maintain friendly freedom of action. Correspondingly, a formation organized in depth is capable of sustaining offensive operations in

¹³¹ *Field Service Regulations* (1905), 30.

¹³² FM 100-5 (1986), 15.

¹³³ FM 100-5 (1986), 2-2.

¹³⁴ ADRP 3-0, 2-1; ADP 6-0, 4.

depth of time and purpose. Lastly, striking enemies in depth limits enemy freedom of action through surprise, shock, and destruction.

First, the arrangement of friendly forces in depth generates friendly freedom of action through the provision of time and capability to respond to enemy positive aims and exploit opportunities. Informal doctrine largely interpreted depth as a means to gain time for the main body to respond to threats, or for the advanced guard to reduce unforeseen obstacles and prevent the loss of time.¹³⁵ Early doctrine similarly stated, “Sufficient depth makes available means to meet the contingencies of combat and the unforeseen developments in the situation as they arise.”¹³⁶ World War II doctrine more succinctly stated, “The commander retains his freedom to act by disposing his forces in great depth.”¹³⁷ AirLand Battle and all subsequent doctrine sustained this conception of depth as part of the doctrinal tenet of depth.¹³⁸ Through this use of depth, friendly forces are capable of remaining focused on their assigned objectives while still negating enemy attempts at developing initiative.

Similarly, the arrangement of forces and resources in depth maintains friendly freedom of action by providing the capability for sustained action in achieving an objective. Doctrine commonly depicted this use of depth in relation to the designation and use of reserves. Halleck argued that commanders should array both cavalry and artillery as reserve in depth.¹³⁹ Mercur provided guideline depths for defensive and offensive combat formations capable of sustaining a

¹³⁵ Arthur Wagner, *Service of Security and Information* (Washington, DC: James Chapman, 1983), 7.

¹³⁶ *Field Service Regulations* (1914), 71.

¹³⁷ FM 100-5 (1941), 81.

¹³⁸ FM 100-5 (1982), 2-2. See also Field Manual (FM) 100-5, *Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1993), 2-7; FM 3-0 (2001), 4-17; Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2008), 6-17; ADP 3-0, 8.

¹³⁹ Halleck, *Elements*, 122.

sufficient rate of fire or shock effect upon the enemy.¹⁴⁰ Early doctrine acknowledged the reserve as “the leader’s weapon, which...enables him to shape the course of the action and finally force a decision.”¹⁴¹ World War II doctrine succinctly linked the retention of freedom of action to the maintenance of strong reserves, as reserves give the commander options.¹⁴² AirLand Battle described this use of reserves and depth as “momentum...[which] is achieved and maintained when resources and forces are concentrated to sustain operations over extended periods.”¹⁴³ Through this use of depth, friendly forces retain freedom of action by maintaining reserves and echeloned forces capable of sustaining operations in time and purpose.

Lastly, offensive operations throughout the depth of an enemy formation reduce enemy freedom of action. The initial stage of this approach requires removing the elasticity of enemy formations, which forces the commitment of reserve forces. Pre-World War I doctrine purposed the preparatory stage of an offensive as compelling the enemy to assume a defensive posture and commit their reserve forces while preventing the movement or introduction of any additional forces.¹⁴⁴ By World War II, doctrine codified attacks throughout the depth of enemy formations using both artillery and combat aviation as the prime mechanisms for limiting enemy freedom of action.¹⁴⁵ Combat aviation gave commanders the ability to project power far beyond the tactical battlefield and allowed for strikes on enemy mobilization means or industry, further constraining the enemy’s options.¹⁴⁶ On the atomic battlefield, doctrine envisioned mobile forces engaging the

¹⁴⁰ Mercur, *Elements of the Art of War*, 146 and 148.

¹⁴¹ *Field Service Regulations* (1914), 73.

¹⁴² FM 100-5 (1941), 98.

¹⁴³ FM 100-5 (1986), 16.

¹⁴⁴ *Field Service Regulations* (1910), 160.

¹⁴⁵ FM 100-5 (1941), 8 and 13.

¹⁴⁶ Field Manual (FM) 100-15, *Field Service Regulations: Larger Units* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1942), 78-82.

enemy with tactical and strategic nuclear weapons in great depth to limit enemy freedom of maneuver.¹⁴⁷ All of these suggested forms of maneuver resulted in forcing the enemy to commit reserves or decentralize forces to the point where individual formations do not have the depth to respond to sustained friendly offensives.

The use of tempo in doctrine is more than simply acting faster; it is acting with a speed that creates the physical and moral effect of shock that ultimately defeats an adversary by limiting their morale and physical freedom of action. That merely acting first and faster grants some level of freedom of action is axiomatic. Informal doctrine accepted the advantages of choosing the time and place of attack as one of the essential elements of operational initiative.¹⁴⁸ Informal doctrine expressed the central idea of tempo in terms of an “offensive executed with vigor and rapidity...[in which] the adversary is reduced to the passive defense of warding off the blows struck by the assailant.”¹⁴⁹ Once an adversary assumed a reactive posture with reduced freedom of action, informal doctrine dictated continued pressure to further reduce their freedom of action until victory was complete; “Give him time to breathe...and your project is blasted.”¹⁵⁰

While the idea that acting first and faster is advantageous to friendly freedom of action percolates through formal doctrine, tempo and speed are primarily a means to achieve surprise and create a state of shock in an opponent, thereby nullifying their freedom of action. Surprise has been a tactical goal of the US Army since George Washington and the continental army surprised an outpost of Hessian troops at Trenton. By the Civil War, however, informal doctrine recognized that the decentralization of forces and proliferation of communications technologies “[confined]

¹⁴⁷ Field Manual (FM) 100-5, *Field Service Regulations: Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1962), 61. See also John Cushman, “The Pentomic Infantry Division in Combat” *Military Review* (January 1958): 23-24.

¹⁴⁸ Halleck, *Elements*, 40. See also Mercur, *Elements of the Art of War*, 143; Bigelow, *Principles of Strategy*, 20.

¹⁴⁹ Fiebeger, *Elements of Strategy*, 63.

¹⁵⁰ Halleck, *Elements*, 42.

the surprise to a part, at most, of the forces employed.”¹⁵¹ Even under the best of circumstances, surprise “[could] never be guaranteed, and even when achieved, rarely lasts.”¹⁵² Formal doctrine distinguished this tactical conception of surprise from the operational effect. “Surprise is secured...not by ambush...rather the surprise consists in striking such an unexpected, supremely violent, blow that the enemy through lack of time or immediately available forces, cannot parry it.”¹⁵³ Tempo, or speed, denied the enemy time to respond, contributing to surprise.¹⁵⁴ Deception operations, feints, and varying forms of maneuver denied enemy anticipation and forced the commitment of forces thereby limiting enemy freedom of action.¹⁵⁵ When combined with strikes throughout the depth of an enemy’s formation, surprise and deception resulted in a condition of “shock and paralysis,” breaking enemy momentum and freedom of action.¹⁵⁶

The intended effect of surprise and shock through depth and tempo was not only to surpass the enemy’s freedom of physical action, but also to “shatter the enemy’s hopes for victory.”¹⁵⁷ A surprise blow thereby “[destroys] his moral power, his courage, and his confidence in himself and results from a breaking up of his discipline...disorganizing him so that his will is subordinated.”¹⁵⁸ AirLand Battle famously advocated a similar approach of imposing the commander’s will upon the enemy through rapid, powerful, and sustained blows (tempo) that

¹⁵¹ Halleck, *Elements*, 117.

¹⁵² FM 100-5 (1986), 96.

¹⁵³ *Tactical and Strategical Studies* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: General Service Schools Press, 1922), 116.

¹⁵⁴ FM 100-5 (1949), 93.

¹⁵⁵ *Field Service Regulations* (1923), 77.

¹⁵⁶ Field Manual (FM) 100-5, *Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1976), 3-7.

¹⁵⁷ *Tactical and Strategical Studies*, 116.

¹⁵⁸ *Tactical and Strategical Studies*, 117.

degrade the coherence of the enemy in depth and prevent recovery or counteraction (freedom of action).¹⁵⁹ Together, tempo and depth (depth) serve to incrementally generate and maintain friendly freedom of action while degrading that of the adversary. The resulting relative freedom of action provides the ability for forces to pursue and achieve objectives (positive aim) while accounting for current and future conditions (anticipation). This approach grants American forces a degree of control over the adversary and the course of conflict, and thus operational initiative.

¹⁵⁹ FM 100-5 (1986), 14.

Conclusion

Another factor that has acted adversely to the progress of the infantry arm is the somewhat injudicious teaching that has been promulgated of late years on the subject of “taking the initiative.” ...on every side we hear preached “take the initiative,” or “act on the initiative,” but without any attempt being made at the same time to define what the term “initiative” ...All this injudicious teaching has led to a good deal of go-as-you-please tactics, ending in abuses and censures all round until officers, who have also an idea that it is essential to “win” in our usual hurried and unreal mimic warfare, refuse to have anything to do with such a dangerous thing as an initiative that only brings on them so much abuse and censure.

—C.B. Mayne, “Training Infantry for Attack,” 1900

Disciplined initiative? You mean those who take initiative will be disciplined?

—Anonymous US Army Captain, CGSC Solarium 2014

Operational initiative is not only a foundational element of Unified Land Operations, it is a foundational element of the American approach to warfare. Despite this central nature, terminology associated with initiative is laden with cultural imagery and fails to describe the concept succinctly. Current doctrine uses the term “initiative” in place of operational, individual, and disciplined initiative, often relying on the reader’s ability to infer which specific term should have been used. The current definition of operational initiative, setting or dictating the terms of action, is largely ignored and the surrounding discussion centers on interpreting operational initiative through a framework of “seize, exploit, and retain the initiative.”¹⁶⁰ This description takes anywhere from one to five paragraphs, depending on the manual, and never actually defines “the terms of action.”¹⁶¹ The complicating nature of this description is evident in current military parlance that uses the phrase “seize or take the initiative” to refer to everything from exercising individual initiative to tactical offenses to legitimate attempts to establish operational initiative.

¹⁶⁰ ADP 3-0, 5.

¹⁶¹ ADRP 3-0, 2-2.

Overall, the *je ne sais quoi* of initiative overwhelms its meaning resulting in the use of imprecise language to address a foundational element of doctrine.

An analysis of influential military theory and genealogical examination of US Army doctrine reveals a more precise and useful definition of operational initiative: control over the course of a conflict generated by pursuit of a positive aim, anticipation of future conditions, and relative freedom of action. Subordinate to this idea, individual initiative, constrained by a commander's intent, overcomes friction and synchronizes operations oriented on a positive aim. This more precise definition of operational initiative helps to eliminate confusion and expand understanding, the *prima facie* role of doctrine.¹⁶² Furthermore, precise language is essential to translate tacit working knowledge of operational initiative (what it feels like) into explicit knowledge that can be propagated throughout the force.¹⁶³

Defining operational initiative as control through positive aims, anticipation, and freedom of action maintains consistency with the current framework of "Seize, Retain, Exploit" although further analysis is required to clarify this relationship. Seizing operational initiative requires a positive aim, anticipation of conditions and opportunities, and freedom to act. Retaining operational initiative is not passive, but implies action to continue pursuing positive aims, denial of those enemy efforts, and, by extension, maintaining relative freedom of action. Exploiting operational initiative is a necessary function of retaining operational initiative, hence its absence from formal and informal doctrine prior to 2008. Regardless, the use of individual initiative to exploit opportunities to further positive aims established by clear objectives contributes to operational initiative in the proposed definition.¹⁶⁴ The results of this further analysis may have

¹⁶² ADP 1-02, 1.

¹⁶³ Donald Schön, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Boss, 1987), 14.

¹⁶⁴ FM 3-0 (2008), 3-3.

implications on the Army core competencies, which currently define combined arms maneuver in terms of seizing the initiative and wide area security in terms of retaining the initiative.¹⁶⁵

Short of a wholesale replacement, doctrine could revise the current definition of operational initiative to define the terms of action and the methods used to set or dictate them. In this context, the terms of action are the conditions surrounding the decision sought by the commander, namely the time, location, and available force composition for all combatants. The methods used to reach the decision include a positive aim expressed in clear objectives, understanding and anticipation conveyed in a commander's estimate and intent, and relative freedom of action attained through operations in depth with varying forms and tempo. This approach maintains consistency in the current framework while providing additional clarity to operational initiative, but falls short of providing a clear and concise definition of the concept.

Failure to refine the terminology and theory of operational initiative risks a fundamental misunderstanding and misapplication of the current operating concept, which could possibly lead to mission failure. One example of this misunderstanding is the prioritization of individual initiative to overcome daunting complexity without contextualizing it in the greater role of generating operational initiative. This approach relies on individual initiative to create a positive aim through the discovery of objectives with the excuse that a decentralized force and the complex environment undercuts the ability of a centralized approach to control. Without clear objectives, individual initiative desynchronizes operations whereas past operating concepts envisioned individual initiative as a method of re-synchronizing operations in the face of complexity.¹⁶⁶ These cracks are already apparent in the foundation of operational initiative. In a recent interview with the Combat Studies Institute, General David Perkins explained Mission Command as a recursive process of individual soldiers and leaders seizing the initiative for their

¹⁶⁵ ADP 3-0, 6.

¹⁶⁶ FM 100-5 (1986), 17-18.

commanders through individual action.¹⁶⁷ This description uses the language of operational initiative to describe individual initiative and creates the perception that individual initiative is the central component of battle. This overemphasis of individual initiative plays out in professional literature as well. In 2014, *Military Review* published 11 articles addressing individual initiative and only two mentioning operational initiative.¹⁶⁸

Armies in the past have also struggled with the overemphasis of individual initiative undercutting military effectiveness, especially after a long period of decentralized combat. General E. T. H Hutton noted a similar problem with the British Army in 1898, which had experienced decades of “small wars” in India, New Zealand, Ghana, Abyssinia, and South Africa. Hutton observed that “it is far more probable subordinate commanders may compromise the general plan of attack by an impetuous onslaught, than that by their slow understanding or lack of [individual] initiative they will hang back at a critical moment and neglect to seize an opportune chance.”¹⁶⁹ British military author C.B. Mayne reinforced this critique two years later

¹⁶⁷ David Perkins, interview by Tony Carlson and Kelvin Crow, May 6, 2013, transcript, Operational Leadership Experiences Collection, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 3-4.

¹⁶⁸ In 2014, only two articles published in *Military Review* addressed operational initiative: Brendan Gallagher, “Managing Risk in Today’s Army,” *Military Review* 94, no. 1 (2014): 90-96; and A. M. Roe, “Review of Guns at Last Light,” *Military Review* 94, no. 1 (2014): 78-82. Eleven articles, however, addressed individual initiative: Sholto Stevens, “Lessons of a Coalition Partner in Afghanistan: 2002-2013,” *Military Review* 94, no. 1 (2014): 68-73; Matthew Cavanaugh, “On Strategic Understanding: Teaching Strategy from the Ground Up,” *Military Review* 94, no. 4 (2014): 13-17; Robert Cone, Richard Creed, and Adrian Bogart III, “Strategic Leadership for Strategic Landpower,” *Military Review* 94, no. 4 (2014): 22-27; Thomas Zubik, Paul Hastings, and Michael Glisson, “Sustaining the Army National Guard as an Operational Force,” *Military Review* 94, no. 4, (2014): 33-42; Michael Symanski, “You are Fired,” *Military Review* 94, no. 4 (2014): 71-76; William Kenna McCurry, “Review of RUCKZUG,” *Military Review* 94, no. 4 (2014): 104-105; Dennis Eger, “Noncommissioned Officers and Mission Command,” *Military Review* 94, no. 5 (2014): 5-11; Joseph Rank and Bill Saba, “Building Partnership Capacity 101,” *Military Review* 94, no. 5 (2014): 24-35; Andrew Knight, “Retaining the Warrior Spirit,” *Military Review* 94, no. 5 (2014): 88-99; Christopher Papparone, “Two Faces of Critical Thinking for the Reflective Military Practitioner,” *Military Review* 94, no. 6 (2014): 104-110; and John Culclasure, “No Shortage of Campfires,” *Military Review* 94, no. 6 (2014): 111-119.

after observing a division-level exercise fail because multiple battalions each thought they were in the best position to attack and the division commander sacrificed synchronization for his subordinates' individual initiative.¹⁷⁰ In both cases, the authors feared the subordinates' individual initiative, nurtured by decades of decentralized experience, would overwhelm the collective positive aim and thus desynchronize operations.

Beyond merely avoiding failures of understanding, clarifying the concept of operational initiative allows for new understanding and creative application. For example, “dictating the terms of battle” bears little relevance to the banter of ideas in the information domain; perhaps this is why FM 3-13, *Inform and Influence Activities*, mentions initiative only once outside the definitions of Unified Land Operations and Mission Command.¹⁷¹ Using the proposed definition, operational initiative in information operations becomes controlling the agenda by defining a clear narrative, anticipating counter narratives, and building resilience within the narrative to allow for freedom of action. In practice, this looks like information operations “keeping some big ideas to the fore and not allowing them to be crowded out by trivialities...[and] ensuring party members stay 'on message.’”¹⁷² Lawrence Freedman advanced a similar idea when he proposed

¹⁶⁹ Edward T. H. Hutton, “The German and French Military Maneuvers of 1897: Some Retrospective Deductions,” *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States*, vol. 22 (January-May 1898): 383.

¹⁷⁰ C. B. Mayne, “Training Infantry for Attack,” *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States*, vol. 26 (January-June 1900) 401-403.

¹⁷¹ Field Manual (FM) 3-13, *Inform and Influence Activities* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2013), 2-6.

¹⁷² Lawrence Freedman, “Networks, Culture and Narratives,” *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs*, 23.

redefining current conflicts as “wars of position” in which a desired physical or ideological position serves as the positive aim to unify action.¹⁷³

Improving the professional understanding of operational initiative will be difficult, but several concrete steps could initiate the process. First, a clear definition of operational initiative is essential for further understanding. The doctrinal definition of operational initiative should be rewritten as control over an adversary or conflict generated through positive aim, anticipation of future conditions, and relative freedom of action. Alternatively, the current definition could be refined to define the terms of action and the methods for dictating them, namely positive aims through clear objectives, anticipation through a commander’s estimate and intent, and relative freedom of action through operations with both depth and tempo.

Second, theoretical models for operational initiative are essential for developing a professional understanding of the topic. Some theorists are clearer on this topic, including Mao Tse-Tung’s *Selected Writings*, Alexander Svechin’s *Strategy*, and John Boyd as written in Frans Osinga’s *Science, Strategy and War*. These books should be included on Army professional reading lists and maintained in staff officer courses like the Combined General Staff Officer’s Course and the School for Advanced Military Studies. The best method for achieving understanding of the role of operational and individual initiative in US Army doctrine is to read all past published capstone doctrine. In place of that time-consuming task, Russell Weigley’s *History of the United States Army* and Walter Kretchik’s *US Army Doctrine* summarize key developments and create a shared understanding of the Army’s historical roots and relationship with operational and individual initiative.

¹⁷³ Lawrence Freedman, “Stop Looking for the Center of Gravity,” *War on the Rocks*, June 24, 2014, accessed March 23, 2015, <http://warontherocks.com/2014/06/stop-looking-for-the-center-of-gravity/>.

Third, informal doctrine continues to exist in the form of online and physical periodicals. Professional discussion of operational initiative on the modern battlefield will develop new and creative applications of this concept, ensuring continued relative advantage. Reframing the discussion on initiative from Mission Command and individual initiative to operational initiative could be as simple as devoting an issue of *Military Review* to the topic.

Initiative, both operational and individual, is the foundation of US Army doctrine and deserves more attention than an appeal to cultural imagery. Worse, continued misuse of the term may push the profession away from thinking about conflicts in terms of operational initiative. It is time to reframe the discussion on initiative to enable new and creative applications of the concept to an increasingly complex environment. Refining understanding of the “greatest advantage in war” should be a central focus for a professional military.¹⁷⁴ By clarifying doctrine, enforcing precise use of terms, and fostering an informed and adaptive environment, initiative will remain the bedrock of future Army operating concepts.

¹⁷⁴ Huba Wass de Czege, “Towards a New American Approach to Warfare,” 53.

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