



Commander's Intent

An Aerospace Tool for Command and Control?

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Planning for employment of joint teams begins with articulating and understanding the objective, purpose of the operations, and commander's intent (the commander's vision of the end state to be achieved).

—Joint Pub 3-0, *Doctrine for Joint Operations*

THIS ARTICLE examines the mission-tasking concept of “commander’s intent” from an Air Force perspective. What is it? Why do both the Army and Marine Corps consider it a vital combat leadership technique for all levels of command while the Air Force puts little official emphasis on it? Could greater use of commander’s intent make a good Air Force command and control system even better?

History

No plan survives contact with the enemy.

—Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke, 1800–1891

The commander’s intent concept is a time-proven technique for operational leadership. Over 150 years ago, Carl von Clausewitz defined the fog, friction, and

fear in combat that conspire against the rigid execution of a commander’s best laid plans. One of Clausewitz’s students—Field Marshal von Moltke—adroitly accounted for these wartime realities in planning and executing the campaigns that ultimately united the modern German nation by 1871.¹ Von Moltke knew that he could not reliably anticipate the course of an operation beyond first contact with the enemy. To compensate, he employed decentralized decision making through “mission-oriented” orders (*Auftragstaktik*). This command technique directed *what* to do and *why* it must be done without specifying *how* to do it. Von Moltke’s mission-oriented orders attempted to enlist “the total independent commitment of troops from the lowliest private up.”² His goal was to unleash subordinate initiative in order to both accommodate the unexpected and capitalize on opportunity.³ Improvement of this “mission tactics” technique during the First and

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Second World Wars helped produce Germany's consistent operational and tactical success against superior odds.

Key to von Moltke's mission-type tasking is the concept of "commander's intent." Instead of detailed instructions on how to execute, the commander must provide a concise written or verbal description of his vision of the operation's general form, purpose, and what he intends to achieve. This statement should offer subordinates "insight into the objectives at one [command] level, or possibly even two, above their own."⁴ It should be a "subordinate's guidepost as he strives to deal with the unexpected" by ensuring the mission remains clear in the subordinate's mind.⁵

The German-style mission tactics and the concept of commander's intent have received significant US Army and Marine Corps attention since the early 1980s. Both services recognized commander's intent to be a critical command tool for operational-level success in maneuver-style warfare.⁶ As a result, the Army and Marine Corps repeatedly emphasize the concept in basic doctrine and prescribe detailed technique for all levels of command. Additionally, since 1990, many joint publications have established the use of commander's intent as standard procedure for guiding interservice operations.

Used but Not Defined

This brings us to the motivation for this article: Though the US Air Force often employs the concept, the Air Force has not *doctrinally* embraced commander's intent as a command tool for servicewide use. This is true despite the fact that the Air Force often employs the concept (minus the label) at the tactical level in the premission briefings presented by flight leads. The Air Force even occasionally mentions the term itself in a few doctrinal publications in reference to the joint force air component commander's (JFACC) execution of the joint force commander's (JFC) intent. Joint command or staff positions often require Air Force personnel to be familiar with both the term and the technique. Similar familiarity is required of airmen who work closely with the Army in direct-support operations such as control of close air support (CAS). This fairly pervasive Air Force application of the concept at the tactical level, along with the consistent association with the term in joint operations, begs the question of whether the Air Force might not benefit from doctrinally defining an Air Force version of commander's intent and endorsing it as a tool for all levels of aerospace command and control. This article offers one answer to this question through the following sequence of discussions:

- Comparison of the Army and Marine Corps's rigorously defined and applied commander's intent technique with the Air Force's institutionally less definitive and much less frequent use.

- Comparison of institutional differences between land and air forces that have made commander's intent a less obvious (though no less useful) aerospace tool.

- Discussion of potential benefits possible with doctrinal Air Force employment of commander's intent at all command levels.

The Services' Use of Commander's Intent

The Army, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Navy command philosophies all provide common doctrinal justification for utilizing the commander's intent concept. The following discussions do not include the Navy, which, in most respects, parallels the Air Force's minimal doctrinal use of commander's intent as a leadership concept.

Tool of Decentralized Execution

The Army, Marine Corps, and Air Force all emphasize within their basic doctrine the importance of what the Air Force labels "centralized control and decentralized execution."⁷ The actual labels vary, with Marines using "decentralized command" and the Army "decentralized decision authority."⁸ However, the meanings are all compatible with their emphasis on centralized guidance and planning responsible for focusing and synchronizing all effort, complemented by decentralized decision making and subordinate initiative in the execution. Both the Army and the Marine Corps identify "commander's intent" as key to effectively decentralizing execution and decision making into workable spans of control. Both the Army and Marine Corps have rigorously standardized instruction on the definition and technique of commander's intent. In the following examples, note both the detail and servicewide standardization of "intent" as doctrine.

Commander's Intent—Army Style

The Army defines and emphasizes commander's intent within its basic doctrine for operations. The 1993 Army Field Manual (FM) 100-5, *Operations*, defines commander's intent as follows:

- It is a concise expression of the purpose of an operation.
- It describes the desired end state.⁹
- It must be understood two echelons below the

issuing commander.

- It is the single unifying focus for all subordinate elements.
- Its utility is to focus subordinates on what has to be accomplished in order to achieve success, even when the plan . . . no longer applies, and to discipline their efforts toward that end.¹⁰

FM 100-5 also highlights the critical role that a clear and focused commander's intent plays in synchronization of all activities in time and space to collectively achieve operational objectives.¹¹ The Army repeatedly references and expands on commander's intent in eight additional doctrine manuals that supplement the basics in FM 100-5 (table 1).

Marine Corps "Mission Tactics"

The Marines likewise describe the importance of commander's intent in their basic doctrine manual, Fleet Marine Field Manual (FMFM) 1, *Warfighting*. Commander's intent complements the "mission tactics" of assigning a subordinate mission without specifying how the mission must be accomplished. It leaves "the manner of accomplishing the mission to the subordinate, thereby allowing him the freedom—and establishing the duty—to take whatever steps the subordinate deems necessary based on the situation. The senior prescribes the method of execution only to the degree that is essential for coordination." FMFM 1 stresses that the mission-type order must describe the desired result or *intent* of the action. This intent guidance is to provide "unity, or focus" to decentralized initiative. While a changing situation may make the original tasking obsolete, the intent should remain valid as a guide for action. The manual highlights how the subordinate's freedom in initiative encourages the high tempo of operations desired.¹²

The Marine Corps University—which standardizes Marine Corps doctrine and technique taught at all USMC schools from the Basic School through the Marine Corps University—has standardized the following elements of the commander's intent that are to be included within operations orders:

- A statement of the end state of the battlefield as it relates to his force, the enemy force, and the terrain.
- The purpose of the operations.
- The enemy's actions and intentions.
- An identification of the enemy's vulnerability or center of gravity.¹³

The Marine Corps University offers the following additional guidance on commander's intent:

- Every marine must know the commander's intent two levels up.
- The shortage of time usually will result in the commander's intent statement being limited to the statement of the end state of the battlefield as it relates to friendly forces, the enemy forces, and the terrain.
- A technique used to describe the end state of the battlefield is to begin the statement with "Final result desired is. . ."¹⁴

The Marine Corps defines and advocates commander's intent as a command technique in nine additional doctrine manuals (see table 1). The Army and Marine Corps both consider this concept to be a vital element of decentralized execution. As a result, both services procedurally require that commander's intent be included in operations orders issued by all levels of command.

Commander's Intent Helps Tie Together the Levels of War

Commanders at all levels should have a common understanding of the conditions that define success.

—Joint Pub 3-0, *Doctrine for Joint Operations*

Commander's intent is joint doctrine. The Joint Chiefs of Staff have embraced commander's intent as a vital tool for harmonizing the strategic-, operational-, and tactical-level actions of diverse military forces. The time-tested method helps unify the will and efforts of all services to collectively contribute to the ultimate operational or strategic goals. Fourteen joint service publications detail use of commander's intent for the operational-level commanders who are responsible for joint campaigns and major operations (see table 1). The JFC and his joint force air and land component commanders (JFACC and JFLCC) are operational-level commanders. Operational-level commanders design, coordinate, and support the joint campaigns and operations that cumulatively attain national policy at the strategic level of war. However, execution is largely in the hands of the many subordinate-level leaders, who create the tactical plans, choose the engagements, and earn the battle victories that collectively produce operational success. The operational-level leadership cannot plan and control most tactical-level details. Instead, decentralized execution relies on tactical leadership's initiative at the point where tactical-level commanders adapt the operational plan to the realities of combat. To guide his decisions, the tactical-level commander must know his boss's intent as well as the intent from

Table 1
Reference to Commander's Intent in Doctrinal Publications

<i>Publication</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Number of Reference</i>
ARMY (9 out of 25 pubs)		
FM 100-5	<i>Operations</i>	22
FM 100-7	<i>The Army in Theater Operations</i>	20
FM 1-100	<i>Principles for Army Aviation Combat Operations</i>	12
FM 100-10	<i>Combat Service Support</i>	5
FM 100-17	<i>Mobilization, Deployment, Redeployment</i>	4
FM 100-103	<i>Army Airspace Command & Control in Combat</i>	4
FM 44-1	<i>Air Defense Artillery Employment</i>	2
FM 90-2	<i>Battlefield Deception</i>	2
FM 101-5-1	<i>Operational Terms and Symbols</i>	1
MARINE CORPS (10 out of 54 pubs)		
FMFM 2-7	<i>Fire Support in MAGTF Operations</i>	11
FMFM 6-18	<i>Fire Support Coordination</i>	11
FMFM 5-60	<i>Control of Aircraft and Missiles</i>	10
FMFM 7-32	<i>Raid Operations</i>	6
FMFM 1	<i>Warfighting</i>	5
FMFM 4	<i>Combat Service Support</i>	2
FMFM 3-22-1	<i>UAV Company Operation</i>	1
FMFM 5-40	<i>Offensive Air Support</i>	1
FMFM 1-7	<i>Supporting Arms in Amphibious Operations</i>	1
FMFM 3-1	<i>Command and Staff Action</i>	1
JOINT PUBLICATIONS (14 out of 76 pubs)		
JP 3-0	<i>Doctrine for Joint Operations</i>	13
JP 5-00.2	<i>Joint Task Force Planning Guidance and Procedures</i>	7
JP 5-0T	<i>Planning Joint Operations</i>	4
JP 1	<i>Joint Warfare of the Armed Forces of the United States</i>	2
JP 3-05	<i>Joint Special Operations</i>	2
JP 3-15	<i>Doctrine for Barriers, Obstacles, and Mine Warfare</i>	2
JP 3-05.5	<i>Special Operations Targeting and Mission Planning</i>	2
JP 3-02.1T	<i>Landing Forces Operations</i>	1
JP 3-02.3	<i>Joint Special Operations Operational Procedures</i>	1
JP 3-06T	<i>Joint Riverine Operations</i>	1
JP 3-07.1	<i>JTTP for Foreign Internal Defense</i>	1
JP 2-0	<i>Joint Doctrine for Intelligence Support Operations</i>	1
JP 5-03.1	<i>Joint Operation Planning and Execution System</i>	1
JP 3-10.1	<i>JTTP for Base Defense</i>	1
AIR FORCE (4 out of 31pubs)		
AFM 1-1, vol. 1	<i>Basic Aerospace Doctrine</i>	5
AFM 1-1, vol. 2	<i>Basic Aerospace Doctrine</i>	4
AFP 3-20	<i>Military Operations in Low Intensity Conflict</i>	3
JFACC 94	<i>USAF JFACC Primer</i>	1

Source: From approved joint publications and selected publications produced by J-7, Joint Staff , *Joint Electronic Library 2* , no. 1, 4 April 1994.

an additional level above his boss. Commander's intent offers the cohesive focus from the top down that ensures tactical-level leaders have their boss's end-state goals in mind as they decide which battles and engagements to prosecute. The joint staff dictates the use of commander's intent to help tie the lowest tactical decisions to the highest strategic goals across service lines.

Air Force "Intent"

The sister services emphasize "intent" as a specific concept in their basic doctrine. In the Air Force Manual (AFM) 1-1, *Basic Aerospace Doctrine of the United States Air Force*, the Air Force mentions the intent of combatant and component commanders, implying its purpose and importance without clearly developing it.¹⁵ Unlike the two land services, the Air Force does not rigorously define commander's intent nor advocate it as a decentralized execution tool. The Air Force's unique organizational structure offers some explanation for the slower adoption of the concept as doctrine.

Land and Air Differences in Combat Command Structure

The command structure of land forces has encouraged evolutionary development of the commander's intent concept. Though the Air Force seems to have a similar command structure, the following discussion highlights how an air force's command structure in combat differs substantially from that of land forces.

Commander's Intent in the Army and Marine Corps

The land forces' fairly straight-forward command structure lends itself to the commander's intent concept. Figure 1 depicts the Army and Air Force components of a possible joint force for a major regional contingency. Note that the pyramiding of each Army command layer allows intent to propagate down through each succeeding level. The Marine Corps command organization is similar. Army commanders at each point in this chain—for example, the corps, division, brigade, battalion, company, and platoon—are responsible for choosing the subobjectives and targets they assign to their subordinate commanders in support of the superior's mission and intent. The line of administrative command is the same as the combat command and control (C²) line through which each level of mission orders and target selection will pass. In other words, the Army and Marine Corps chains of command encompass both unit command and combat control.

Increasing emphasis on commander's intent has been a logical evolution within this system that has so

many intervening levels of command stretching from the operational-level JFLCC to the thousands of platoon commanders at the lowest tactical level. Commander's intent has helped preserve the tempo of operations despite the span of control challenges created by the increasing size of armies over the centuries. The commander's intent concept is obviously applicable to the ground force command structure. In comparison, an air force's structure somewhat obscures the concept's utility.

Air Force "Mission Tactics"?

Air forces have a less traditional combat organization through which battlefield control often does not accompany unit command. Figure 1 displays the administrative unit command lines of a joint air component based on a numbered air force. This is not the line of combat command through which mission tasking and combat control pass. Instead, figure 2 depicts a common aerospace C² chain.

Unlike the two land services, the Air Force does not rigorously define commander's intent nor advocate it as a decentralized execution tool.

Airpower's potential for significant operational- or even strategic-level effect often depends more heavily than ground forces on the tenet of centralized control. This centralized control is the theater-level planning, coordination, and direction that focuses available aerospace power on those enemy vulnerabilities that will reap the greatest effect in pursuit of the JFC's operational design. This system significantly confuses the development of subordinate-level commander's intent.

How and Why It Is Different

At each level, ground units can generally focus on a limited geographic area within which the unit commander can subtask subordinate commanders. Ground unit commanders at each level select the missions and targets they assign to their subordinate commanders. In comparison, the Air Force does not assign individual unit responsibility for a particular region. Aerospace platforms best employ their range and speed advantages in combination with their geographic flexibility of massing anywhere in the theater as required by operational-level design. As a result, an aerospace unit, such as interdiction wings and squadrons, may receive tasking to simultaneously attack locations throughout the theater. Since all interdiction units in the theater

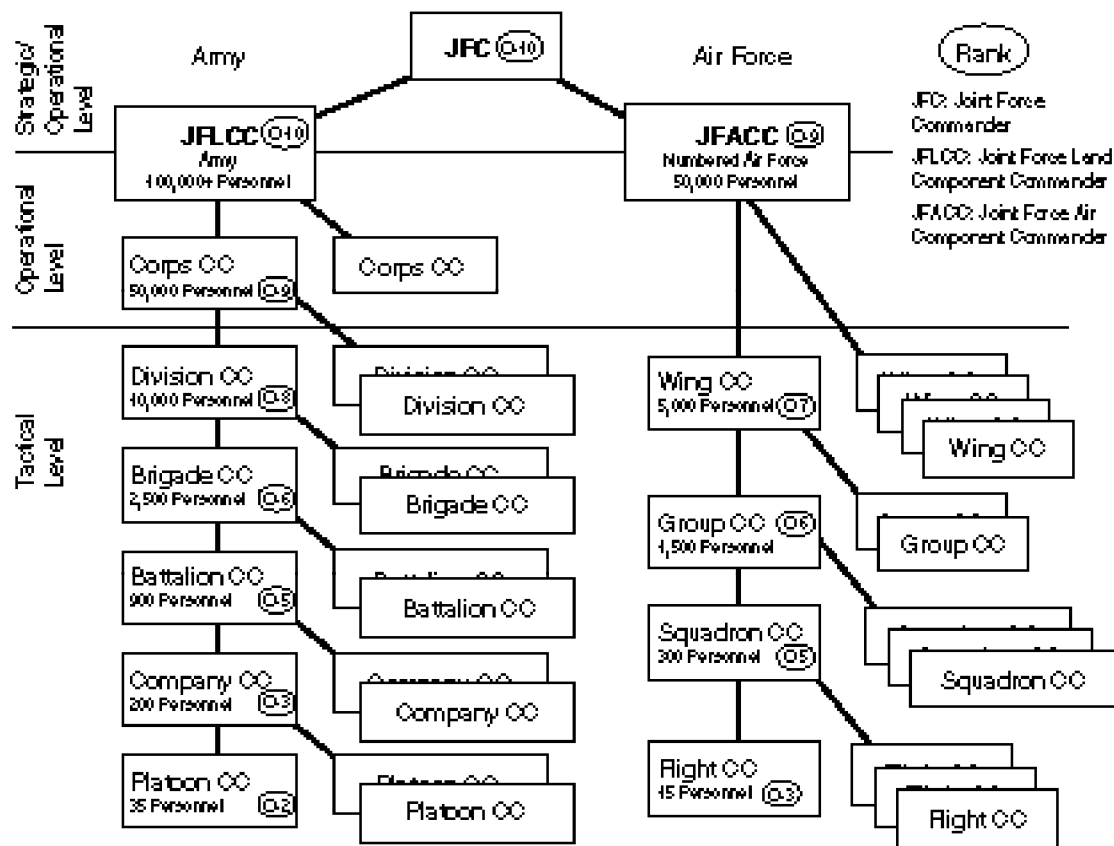


Figure 1. Chain of Unit Command

can be used to hit a particular target, most of the target selection and mission assignment must issue from a centralized, operational-level control mechanism—not from the tactical-level unit commanders.

The JFACC owns this planning and execution mechanism. Joint Pub 3-56.1, *Command and Control for Joint Air Operations*, specifies that when a JFACC is designated, the JFACC's air operations center (AOC) produces the air tasking order (ATO). In the JFACC's name, this "staff" organization assigns the mission tasking for the lowest tactical units of two-ship fighter elements (or single night bombers) and even details the specific targets for most of the interdiction and strategic-attack sorties.¹⁶ Decentralized execution lives in the ATO format. It provides mission-type orders to the units on targets or objectives, resources, timing, boundaries, support, and so on without specifying how to accomplish the mission. The ATO leaves specific mission techniques to a unit's mission-planning cell or the mission commander leading the forces. Unlike their ground

force counterparts, aero-space wing, group, and squadron commanders seldom have a direct hand in the AOC's mission and target tasking of their aircrews. This has been both a function of the commander's geographic separation from the AOC and the nonstop tempo of the ATO process.

Similar to the planning phase, battlefield control for decentralized aerospace execution diverges from the chain of unit command. When aircraft are airborne or on alert, the C² line passes from the JFACC through the AOC and the various levels of control agencies directly to the aircraft mission commanders and flight leads. Note that the line bypasses the unit commanders. Wing, group, and squadron commanders ensure resource availability and assign aircrews and aircraft to fill the air tasking order. Though outside the combat C² line, these unit commanders lead the critical unit esprit de corps, discipline, and tactics selection. To this extent, the combat command role of Air Force unit commanders is more characteristic of the land force

fire support units such as artillery rather than maneuver units such as infantry or armor.

Much of the Air Force's combat command falls on the air control system that links the airborne flight lead to the JFACC. These intervening control agencies, such as the air support operations center (ASOC) for close air support or the airborne warning and control system (AWACS) for offensive counterair (OCA) are not currently considered "commanders" in their own right. Instead, their authority is similar to that of the JFACC's staff, directing action in his name. Curiously though, these control agencies choose and assign subobjectives and targets in support of the JFACC's operational design much the same as the intermediate-level ground commanders. They own tactical control (TACON) of the aircraft under their direction and make the associated real-time calls on mission changes and tasking priorities. An example is an AWACS directing a flight of F-15Cs to target an inbound air threat. This begs the question—to be discussed later—of whether greater

standardization and use of "intent" to and from these combat control agencies might not offer the benefits reaped by the Army and Marine Corps.

Figure 2 highlights air and ground differences in the span of control challenge. Note the ground and air structure difference in the number of "commanders" between the operational level and the lowest tactical level. Aerospace forces work with a much narrower span of control. This helps explain the lesser aerospace emphasis on a doctrinal concept meant to guard tempo, flexibility, and initiative in a challengingly large span of control.

The Missing "Why"

As discussed, the ATO abides by the mission-tactics concept by directing *what* to do without generally going too far into the *how*, other than key coordination issues. Yet, the ATO is often not clear on the *why*, or mission purpose, that would be part of a commander's

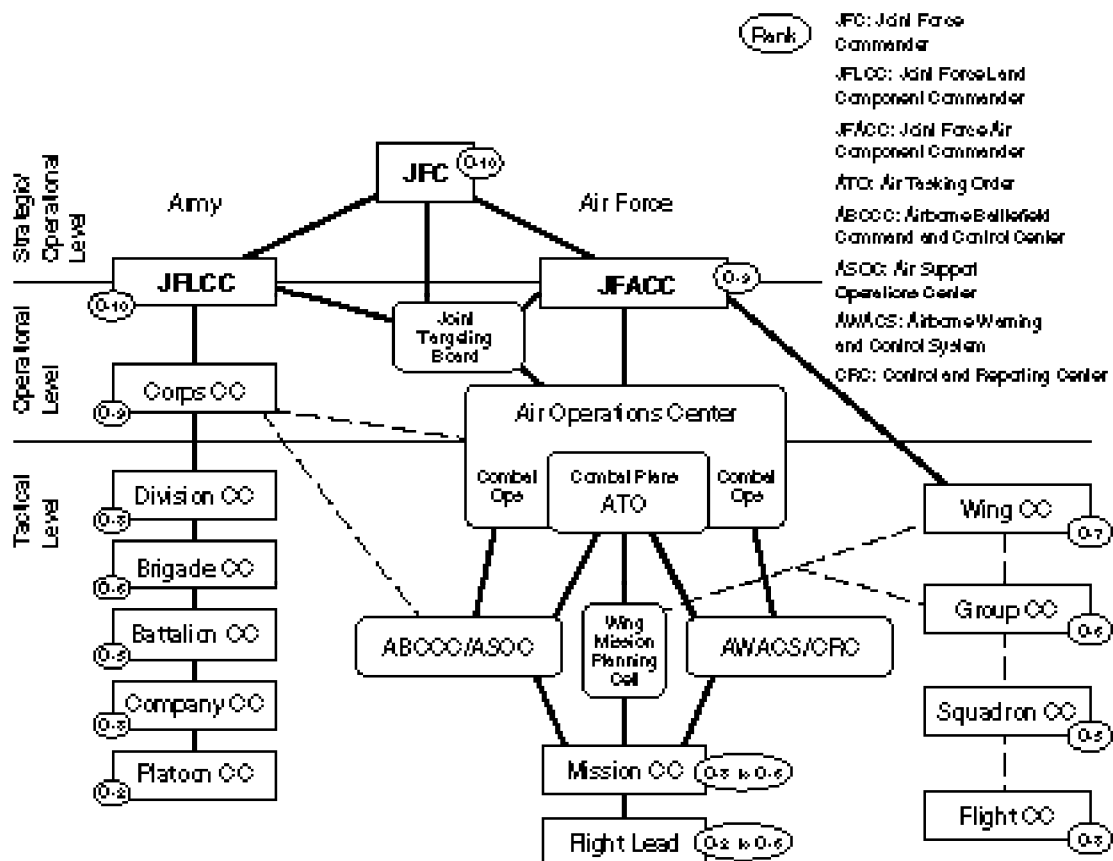


Figure 2. Line of Command for Selection of Shooter's Objectives and Targets (i.e., Who must develop and assign mission-type orders with commander's intent?)

intent statement. The JFC provides definitive commander's intent to the JFACC. Additionally, the JFACC provides his end-goal vision as intent to his higher-level AOC staffs who are selecting targets and allocating missions in the ATO. Formulation and issue of commander's intent below this level is much less consistent. Mission commanders and flight leads designing and leading the tasked sorties certainly attempt to offer their wingmen the equivalent of intent. However, their intent judgment is only tenuously founded on the intent from the two command levels above since the cryptic ATO tasking may be the only reference from which to infer the desired mission end state and purpose. Similarly, wing and squadron commanders attempt to provide general interpretations on risk management related to intent judgments. However, they have no commonly institutionalized reference from their superiors on which to base these judgments. A bottom line here is, though commander's intent is not part of Air Force doctrine, the technique is consistently used at the top operational level and the lowest tactical level. The Air Force could possibly profit from a more rigorously defined and pervasive use of commander's intent.

Aerospace Potential with Commander's Intent

The following points highlight how the Air Force has nothing to lose and much to gain from doctrinal definition and servicewide application of commander's intent as a procedure. First, our better commanders essentially already employ the concept without the label as part of the Air Force's advocated total-quality leadership technique—communicating to subordinates a vision of the desired end state and the purpose for achieving it. Second, emphasis on the development and dissemination of a standardized Air Force version of commander's intent in line with the variation used in the fighter community's flight briefings may offer potential for focusing combat efforts at operational tempos higher than the ATO's three-day cycle. Finally, commander's intent is already a joint procedure that the Air Force must understand and skillfully exercise for effective interservice operations.

Harnessing Initiative

Commander's intent is simply working with "that vision thing" so heavily emphasized in the Air Force's total quality management (TQM) instruction. TQM leadership stresses that dissemination of an organizational vision to our top-quality people is the first critical step in harnessing their initiative to achieve our

goals. This is the essence of commander's intent. In recognizing TQM's potential contributions to daily operations, the Air Force must also seriously consider how it can incorporate the same "vision" concept into the main line of work—war. The Army and Marine Corps simply have a leg up on the Air Force in academically defining and procedurally prescribing battlefield "vision" in mission tasking.

ATO Flexibility

Procedural employment of commander's intent could increase Air Force operational tempo by helping to focus decentralized execution decisions. The AOC currently develops ATO tasking 24 to 48 hours out, with some targets chosen 72 hours or more in advance of attack. This long cycle would constrain tempo if execution adhered too rigidly to the ATO. Instead, ATO execution is flexibly adapted through decentralized decision making at all levels of the air control system. This decentralized execution enables the JFACC's air control system to exploit opportunity and operate inside the opponent's decision cycle. In the future, the information age and the digitization of the battlefield promise to dramatically increase availability of near-real-time targets such as Scud launchers, tank columns, or mobile headquarters. As a result, an even greater number of significant targeting decisions may migrate from the JFC/JFACC's targeting board or ATO shop to the mid-level air control agencies. As doctrine, commander's intent would offer a method of focusing the air control system's judgment in these decisions. Commander's intent would help ensure that these subordinates chose targets, engagements, and battles with the JFACC's operational vision in mind as opposed to simple random attrition.

The Air Force should consider requiring the development and dissemination of *intermediate-level* commander's intent. In Desert Storm, this was accomplished to some extent within the ATO, where, for example, target tasking included words on the purpose and importance of the target. With the AOC offering this mission purpose along with the desired end state (target destruction), flight leads were better armed to produce their own commander's intent for their flight members—offering guidance on priorities and levels of risk management. Each level of the Air Force C² system could benefit from similarly usable words from the immediately adjacent source of mission guidance.

The Air Force has nothing to lose and much to gain from doctrinal definition and servicewide application of commander's intent as a procedure.



By using the technique of commander's intent, the Air Force could improve the battle management function of such command and control agencies as AWACS.

The Air Force could possibly use the commander's intent technique to improve the "command" function of the C² agencies such as AWACS. These intermediate air control agencies tactically "command" the aircraft under their TACON similar to the land force division, brigade, or battalion commanders who receive tactical control of additional subordinate units. AWACS is responsible for the battle management command decisions that (1) require a bigger picture than what exists in the fighter flight leads' cockpits, and (2) are too time critical to defer to the AOC for resolution. The following is an example of how intermediate levels of intent could be produced and disseminated through AWACS. The AWACS mission commander would receive the JFACC's intent defining the operational vision of the *whole air operation* from two levels above. Based on this same guidance, the AOC commander would provide his operational-tactical vision for the *day's air action* from one level higher. Next, either the AWACS mission crew commander or airborne command element (ACE) officer would translate the two preceding levels of guidance into his own tactical-level intent tailored to the AWACS crew for their *on-station time period*. Even the individual AWACS crew members/controllers would define intent to the extent that

they could pass, time permitting, an abbreviated version to the aircraft they control within an *engagement*. (An example of providing intent to a flight of F-15Cs is "Rambo 1 flight, skip that target which is RTB [returning to base]. Instead, snap 300 degrees, 60 miles, for multiple low fast threats to the package. You are the only flight in position to engage.") A procedurally standardized location in the ATO could be the source of the JFACC's intent. The same is true for the AOC commander's intent for the day's operations, as well as combat plan's intent for specific missions. In addition, verbal updates of the words published in the ATO would be provided as required. For the AWACS's mission commander, and the levels below him, commander's intent would be a required element of mission planning and briefings.

Similar to this AWACS example, the Air Force could stress commander's intent in all C² agencies, such as the command and reporting center (CRC), the airborne battlefield command and control center (ABCCC), and the ASOC. By standardizing "intent" procedure at each level within the air control system, the Air Force would improve the foundation on which these C² agencies based their battlefield decisions and resulting commands. Applied in this manner,

commander's intent could help focus decentralized execution on the JFACC's centralized priorities even as the Air Force increasingly incorporates the information revolution to push execution tempo further beyond the ATO's targeting cycle.

The ASOC is an air control agency that is already steeped in the methodology of the commander's intent issued by the supported Army corps commander. This fact emphasizes the point that commander's intent expertise is often already required for joint operations.

A Jointness Requirement?

Joint command and staff emphasis on commander's intent suggests that some level of Air Force attention to the concept is appropriate. Commander's intent is the specified label for the doctrinally prescribed dissemination of a joint commander's vision of an operation. Joint publications specify that the JFC will employ commander's intent in his command relationship with the JFACC, requiring of the JFACC (who is likely to be an Air Force officer) experienced proficiency with the concept. Commander's intent is a common element of all Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan (JSCP)-tasked operations plans and concept plans produced by the regional commanders in chief (CINC)—with the assumption that all levels of subordinate command understand the concept. Air Force officers in Joint Staff billets consistently work for Army and Marine Corps commanders who expect their staffs to be fully proficient at producing recommended intent statements and interpreting intent to subordinate commands. Additionally, Air Force personnel execute many operations in direct support of sister services. Effective execution of these support operations, such as support of the Army with CAS or airlift, requires thorough understanding and application of the supported ground commander's intent. Currently, as noted before, Air Force commanders often communicate their vision for an operation to subordinates without a doctrinally rigorous "intent" label or procedure. However, joint operations involving Air Force officers would benefit from the airmen having the same familiarity with the jointly defined concept that the Army and Marine Corps officers possess. Table 1 demonstrates how pervasive the concept is throughout Army, Marine, and joint doctrine as compared to the minimal Air Force reference.

The professional training and command systems of the Army and Marine Corps provide their officers experience in interpreting senior commander intent at each level of rank and command, beginning with second lieutenants. Additionally, they become proficient at designing and disseminating their own "intent." Many Air Force leaders informally employ the con-

cept at the lower tactical levels (for example, as pilots). However, the flight, squadron, group, and wing command assignments do not offer formal opportunity to build on the skill. Air Force officers might be even better prepared to command or otherwise contribute to joint operations if they possessed the same career-long proficiency in creating and disseminating commonly defined commander's intent that a senior Army or Marine Corps officer possesses. This jointness issue alone provides significant Air Force motivation to consider institutionalizing the concept at all levels of training and employment, thus ensuring that airmen grow up with the technique.

So What's My Point?

The wording of . . . orders I left to [the staff], with the exception of one paragraph, the shortest, which I invariably drafted myself—the intention. This gives, or should give, exactly what the commander intends to achieve. It is the dominating expression of his will by which, throughout the operation, every officer and soldier in the army will be guided. It should, therefore, be worded by the commander himself.

—Field Marshal Sir William J. Slim, commander in the Burma Theater, 1941–45

Commander's intent is a time-tested ground force tool for focusing decentralized decision making and initiative. The subordinate's knowledge of the intent from the two levels of command above has proven vital to focusing all theater energies and actions toward achieving operational-level goals. Commanders must arm subordinates with their intent in preparation for decisions that are to be made amidst the battle's fog, friction, and chaos that so often overcome the original planning. As a result, the Army, Marine Corps, and Joint Staff have extensively incorporated the concept into their doctrine. Airpower's unique combat command and control structure, which dissociates intermediate-level mission tasking from unit command, has restrained Air Force definition and prescription of the technique. Yet, there are no major C² constraints on institutionalizing commander's intent. Additionally, there is simple logic to doctrinally embrace a wartime command concept that mirrors current Air Force TQM philosophy. More rigorous use of the concept has theoretical potential for helping focus airpower's increasing combat tempo. Decentralized decision making, guided by commander's intent, can help keep decentralized execution focused on the JFACC's centralized priorities as the information revolution increases the number of decision-action cycles that occur inside the ATO's two-to-three-day limits. Finally, the increasing

national emphasis on joint teamwork motivates multiservice standardization of this concept and the cultivation of an Air Force officer corps that is thoroughly proficient with the tool.

The Air Force should consider borrowing this command tool from joint doctrine and the standardized practices of the ground forces with whom the Air Force is teamed. The Air Force should consider doctrinally defining and embracing this tool in a manner appropriate to the unique organizational structure—institutionalizing commander's intent through common, servicewide instruction in all professional training from flight and tactics schools to war colleges and commanders' courses.

Notes

1. Michael D. Krause, "Moltke and the Origins of Operational Art," *Military Review*, September 1990, 28–44.
2. Martin van Creveld, Steven L. Canby, Kenneth S. Brower, *Air Power and Maneuver Warfare* (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air University Press, 1994), 7, borrows from the World War II Wehrmacht's regulations.
3. Milan N. Vego, "Operational Art Lecture Notes," unpublished lecture note handout, US Naval War College, Newport, R.I., 1995, 11. Although commonly translated as "mission-type orders" or "mission tactics," a more accurate translation of *Auftragstaktik* may be "task-oriented orders."
4. Creveld, Canby, and Brower, 3–8.
5. Milan N. Vego, "Operational Leadership," addendum to Naval War College (NWC) 4001, *Operational Art: A Book of Readings*, 21 March 1995, 6.
6. John L. Romjue, *From Active Defense to AirLand*

Battle: The Development of Army Doctrine, 1973–1983 (Fort Monroe, Va.: US Army Training and Doctrine Command, June 1984), 58–59.

7. Air Force Manual (AFM) 1-1, *Basic Aerospace Doctrine of the United States Air Force*, March 1992, vol. 2, 130–31.

8. Fleet Marine Field Manual (FMFM) 1, *Warfighting* (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, March 1989), 65; and Field Manual (FM) 100-5, *Operations*, 1993, 2–6.

9. At the strategic and higher operational levels, *desired end state* is "the set of required conditions that achieve the strategic objectives." At these levels, it normally connotes diplomatic, economic, and informational conditions in addition to the desired or required military conditions. At the lower levels, it generally refers only to the *military end state*. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Pub 3-0, *Doctrine for Joint Operations* (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, September 1993), III-2.

10. FM 100-5, 6-6.

11. *Ibid.*, 2–9.

12. FMFM 1, 70–71.

13. *Center of Gravity*: The hub of all power and movement upon which everything depends. It is the characteristic, capability, or location from which enemy and friendly forces derive their freedom of action, physical strength, or will to fight. FM 100-5, 6–7.

14. Michael L. Ettore, "Commander's Intent Defined," *Marine Corps Gazette*, April 1993, 52–53.

15. AFM 1-1, vol. 1, 3.

16. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Pub 3-56.1, *Command and Control for Joint Air Operations* (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 14 November 1994), vii–viii.

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