



# The Commander's Intent: Keep It Short

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**C**APTAIN Green's company moves through surprisingly weak resistance during the counterrattack and easily secures its objective. Green hopes all is going as well for the rest of the attacking forces so that they will then easily reestablish the FEBA (forward edge of the battle area) in preparation for the coming offensive. Suddenly he notices enemy vehicles moving rapidly to their rear. Grabbing the handset, Green calls his commander, but radio communications are out. What a target, he thinks: do I attack or stand fast on my objective?

Several kilometers to the north, Lieutenant Colonel Grimm also finds the going much easier than he had anticipated. Although not yet at their objectives, his company commanders should be there shortly. A call coming in from the commander of Company C breaks these pleasant thoughts: a lucrative target is in the battalion sector to

the north of his attacking units. Grimm realizes that he can swing his units north and take advantage of this unexpected opportunity, but that in so doing he would fail to make his objectives on time. He ponders the situation: do I strike north, or is the battalion objective the prime target?

These two scenarios address simple examples in which the commander's intent could act to guide subordinate unit leaders in the absence of direction from seniors. If Green's and Grimm's commanders had properly briefed these subordinates on their respective intents regarding the missions at hand, each unit leader could quickly make a decision, confident that it would support the objectives of the larger force of which they were a part.

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ing the commander's visualization of an operation and what he expects to achieve as a result of unit execution. Paragraph 3a of unit operation orders (OPORD) states the intent of the commander at the level to which the OPORD applies. The intent of the commander one level higher is in paragraph 1b. Some commanders in the field state their intent during preoperation briefs in three to five minutes; others take an hour and expand upon the entire OPORD. What is this commander's intent, and how can a commander effectively communicate it to his subordinate unit leaders?

Current doctrine writers are wrestling with the definition and best means of communicating the commander's intent. One Fort Leavenworth text, for example, defines it as "the statement of what the higher commander visualizes the battlefield will look like as a result of accomplishing the mission. This is stated in terms of the status of the enemy and the posture of the unit."<sup>1</sup> In other words, the intent communicates what the result of an operation should be in the mind's eye of the commander. The Army's manual on terms and symbols, however, defines the commander's intent as the "commander's vision of the battle—how he expects to fight and what he expects to accomplish."<sup>2</sup>

The critical difference between these two definitions is scope. The first definition describes what the commander hopes to find after the battle; the second also tells how to achieve such an objective. Both definitions require that the commander's intent be more than a restatement of the mission, but the first, unlike the second, does not impinge on the territory covered by the concept of the operation. However, neither adequately provides the commander a workable concept for specifying his intent in the field.

The importance of the debate is obvious. The mission statement denotes the what,

when, who and where of an operation. The concept of operation details the how of mission accomplishment. The mission statement cannot afford the space or the time to

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describe how to act in contingency situations such as those Green and Grimm faced.

The concept of the operation is a description of the commander's battle execution; it is the how that denotes the means of mission accomplishment. It too cannot cover all possible branches and sequels to the operation. The commander's intent spans the gap between the broad statement of mission and the details of the concept. It also sets the framework within which the commander structures his mission statement and concept of the operation. The mission statement and concept are both derivatives of the commander's intent, but neither fully achieves the scope or depth of that intent.

The commander's intent is the statement of his purpose for initiating an operation. It is that to which a subordinate can look for guidance in the absence of orders. In his few lines or several minutes, the commander must communicate that which he wants his leaders to remember when they face the unexpected. Intent defines the essence of the operation. Because it should be utmost in the subordinate's mind, it should be broader



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in scope and more farsighted than the mission statement. When a subordinate faces a situation outside the scope of the mission, his superior's intent should guide him. In the absence of specific instructions, the subordinate should act in accordance with the intent, knowing that his actions thereby fit with the "master plan." Intent does not include guidance on how to conduct an operation, for the commander realizes the impossibility of identifying every contingency, much less how to act when confronting each.

How does the commander communicate this intent to his leaders in a manner that concisely conveys the critical information? Envisioning the battlefield after the operation is difficult; to communicate such a vision tasks the most eloquent officer. Rather, the commander must communicate what his unit is to do in the frame of reference of the "big picture." His statement of intent should provide subordinates a framework for analyzing which branches or sequels to the primary course of action would support

the commander's objectives. This statement of intent must be concise, so the subordinate leader can grasp it readily and retain it easily in his mind as he moves to mission accomplishment. The commander's intent is a statement of essence: what is the overriding objective for this and related operations?

With an understanding of the commander's intent, both Green and Grimm could act with confidence that they were supporting their commander. Each could see the situation at hand, analyze it with regard to what he knew was his commander's intent, and act accordingly. Two examples of the commander's intent follow. Each makes the overriding objective of the operation clear to subordinates without attempting to identify specific branches or sequels to the original operation.

Intent 1: We will reestablish the FEBA in preparation for the corps's counterattack through our division sector. Our job is to establish the launching pad for the corps's killing blow; you must secure the key terrain assigned to each of you.

Intent 2: The division now wrests the initiative from the threat forces and puts them to their heels. The primary objective is destruction of the enemy's ability to fight.

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In the first case, the terrain objectives specified in the mission statement are of primary importance, so Green and Grimm know that they must forgo their targets of opportunity. In the second intent statement, the commander has clearly stated that destruction of the enemy is the number one objective, so our leaders know that they should immediately exploit any lucrative targets of opportunity. The commander who carefully and concisely states his intent greatly increases the odds that his subordinates will act as he would have them act when they face the unexpected. MR

## NOTES

1. US Department of the Army, CGSC Student Text 100-9, *The Command Estimate*. (Fort Leavenworth, KS: US Army Command and General Staff College, July 1986), 3-2.

2. US Department of the Army, Field Manual (FM) 101-5-1, *Operational Terms and Symbols*. (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, October 1985), 1-17.



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