
Warfighting Cliff Notes

A Synopsis of MCDP 1 *Warfighting*

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Foreword.

This publication describes the philosophy which distinguishes the U.S. Marine Corps. This publication provides the authoritative basis for how we fight and how we prepare to fight. While not a reference, this manual is meant to give broad guidance in the form of concepts and values.

This doctrine applies to all Marines. I expect all Marines to read this book, understand it, and act upon it. This publication describes a philosophy for action. The concepts in this book dictate our approach to duty, war, and peace.

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Chapter 1: The Nature of War

War Defined. War is a violent clash of interests between or among organized groups characterized by the use of military force. These groups are not always nations, but can be political groups, terrorists, or guerrillas within nations.

The essence of war is a violent struggle between two hostile, independent, and irreconcilable wills, each trying to impose itself on the other.

The object in war is to impose our will on the enemy. We do this by threatening or using military force. War may range from battles between large military forces to smaller guerrilla clashes. Military force can be used to restore civil peace, or overturn the existing social order.

Friction. Countless factors make war difficult to conduct. When the simple is difficult, and the difficult is impossible, we have friction. Friction can be mental or physical. It can come from enemy actions, terrain and weather, or be self-imposed. War is a human endeavor. Friction has a psychological effect. The main weapon against friction is the human will. Training and experience will teach us how to fight in an environment of friction.

Uncertainty. Uncertainty is the “fog of war.” All decisions in war will be based on incomplete, inaccurate, or contradictory information. We cannot predict the enemy’s actions. Through training, we learn what our capabilities are. We must make sound decisions despite uncertainty. It is important to realize that even small actions in war can have great effects. Every decision counts.

War involves risk. Greater gains often involve greater risk. That does not mean that we should conduct ourselves with reckless abandon.

Chance plays a role in war. Neither we nor the enemy may be able to control events. We must be flexible enough to take advantage of the opportunities which chance gives us.

Fluidity. No one event in war can be isolated. It has been shaped by all of the previous events. Thus war providing fleeting opportunities and surprises. Flexibility is required to adapt to a constantly changing situation. We must also be proactive and shape events to our advantage.

War ebbs and flows like the tides. A high operational tempo cannot be supported forever. Formations will mass to attack the enemy, then disperse.

Disorder. In the “fog of war,” disorder rules the battlefield. Plans are overcome by events. Flexibility and opportunistic will is required. Complex plans rarely work after the first shots.

Complexity. War is not a conflict between two individuals, but between forces consisting of many individuals. War emerges from the collective behavior of the individual parts and players responding to local conditions. No one commander can control every aspect of war.

The Human Dimension. The human will is the central factor in war. War is shaped by human morals and emotions. It is an extreme test of physical strength, will, and stamina. Through proper leadership, the human will drives all actions in war.

Violence and Danger. Violence is an element of war. It produces the greatest horrors. Danger is ever present, along with fear. Fear weakens the will. Leaders study fear and learn to counteract it, building unit cohesion and self-confidence. Courage is strength to overcome fear.

Physical, Moral, and Mental Forces. The physical forces of war are easily recognized, such as men and material. The moral factors, such as a nation’s resolve, are hard to grasp. Mental factors affect our ability to outthink our enemy. Just because the moral and mental factors are hard to identify, does not mean that they can be neglected.

The Evolution of War. The nature of war is constant. Its methods are ever changing. A major cause of these changes is technology. We must be on the cutting edge of tactics and technology while not forgetting those fundamentals which is time tested and constant.

The Science, Art, and Dynamic of War. The science of war applies to those elements which can be measured by scientific methods. This includes ballistics or the effects of weapons.

The art of war requires an intuitive ability to assess a situation and decide upon a course of action. Tactics must fit a particular situation with the assets on hand. War is characterized by human competition. War is a social interaction affected by boldness, spirit, and will.

Conclusion. War is a complex endeavor. It is shaped by the human will. It is characterized by friction, uncertainty, fluidity, danger and disorder. While the nature of war is constant, it remains unpredictable, and is affected by a mix of physical, moral and mental factors. While war has the characteristics of both art and science, it is primarily shaped by human experience.

Chapter 2: The Theory of War

War As an Act of Policy. War is an extension of both policy and politics with the addition of military force. Policy refers to the conscious objectives established in the political process. War must serve policy.

We must not establish goals outside of our capabilities. Many political problems cannot be solved by military means. As war tends to take its own course, the decision to enter into war must be carefully weighed.

War is not simply an extension of policy or politics. War involves cultural, psychological and social factors. These factors affect the course of war as well as war's usefulness for solving particular problems.

The nature of war becomes more destructive as the policy goal of a war becomes more extreme. The destruction of a government yields more violence than a more limited policy objective. Political considerations may restrict the use of military force.

A *strategy of annihilation* seeks to destroy an enemy's military power. We do not have to physically destroy an enemy's forces, but can *incapacitate* them. We can reach policy goals by paralyzing the enemy.

A *strategy of erosion* seeks to erode the enemy's will. We raise the price of resisting our will. We use this force to meet goals we believe the enemy will eventually give in to.

Means in War. At the highest level, war involves economic, diplomatic, and psychological forces as well as military force.

The Spectrum of Conflict. War ranges from total war to military operations other than war (MOOTW). MOOTW includes peacemaking operations and humanitarian relief. "Small" wars are more probable than a general war. The Marine Corps must be prepared to respond to any situation. "Low intensity" conflicts often have very "high intensity" firefights.

Levels of War. Actions in war take place on several related levels. The *strategic* level involves national strategy and military strategy. National strategy sets policy objectives and mobilizes the nation's resources for attaining these goals. Military strategy focus on the military means for attaining policy goals. At the strategic level, forces are distributed and theaters of war are established.

The lowest level is the *tactical* level. Tactics refers to the techniques and methods for accomplishing a particular mission. Tactics focus on defeating the enemy at a particular place and time. Tactics are focused on winning battles.

The *operational* level of war links tactics and strategy. At the operational level, we decide where, when and under what conditions we will meet the enemy. The operational level is focused on winning campaigns.

The levels of war overlap and affect each other from the top down and from the bottom up.

Initiative and Response. All actions in war are based on either the *initiative* to act or a *response* to an action. Through initiative we seek to impose our will and bring the enemy to our terms. While the *striking power* of the offense is usually associated with initiative, a good defense also seizes the initiative. The defense can contain a clever way to paralyze the enemy.

We cannot maintain the offense indefinitely. When our ability to continue to attack is gone, we must switch to the defense. This is the *culminating point*. The offense is most vulnerable to *counterattack* at this point.

The offense and defense are not completely separate attitudes. Each contains the other. The defense uses patrols and spoiling attacks. The offense requires economy of force actions.

Initiative and response vary at different levels. A nation may be reacting at the strategic level while at a particular place its forces are imposing their will on the enemy.

Styles of Warfare. The styles of warfare exist on a spectrum between attrition and maneuver. Attrition seeks to wear down an enemy's material resources.

Maneuver warfare seeks to circumvent problems and attack them from a position of advantage. Maneuver warfare seeks to paralyze the enemy *system*. In maneuver warfare, enemy strengths are avoided and weaknesses are exploited. Maneuver warfare requires speed and surprise, and involves greater risk. Firepower and attrition are necessary elements of maneuver warfare when our forces are focused upon particular elements of the enemy's forces.

Combat Power. *Combat power* is the total destructive force we can bring upon the enemy at a given time or place. Combat power consists of material, men, weapons, terrain, leadership, tempo, surprise and many other factors.

Speed and Focus. *Speed* is rapidity of action. Speed over time is *tempo*. Speed and tempo are weapons. We cannot be fast at all times, so we develop a rhythm.

Focus is the convergence of combat power on the objective. We must focus our combat power at the right time and place. Focus requires cooperation toward a common goal. Speed and focus give our actions "shock effect."

Surprise and Boldness. *Surprise* creates disorientation from an unexpected act which degrades the enemy's will. Surprise is a weapon. Surprise does not have to be total. Surprise can lead to shock. Surprise allows small forces to defeat larger forces. Surprise is easily lost, and requires speed, stealth, ambiguity and deception to manipulate our enemy's expectations.

Boldness is exploiting the disorderly nature of war unhesitatingly. It does not mean we always take aggressive immediate action. Boldness requires good situational awareness, strong nerves and craftiness. Boldness involves taking risks. When we decide upon a course of action, boldness demands that we execute it violently.

Centers of Gravity and Critical Vulnerabilities. *Centers of gravity* may not always be tangible. Morale, capabilities, positions, or the relationship between elements of the enemy forces may be the vital element to the enemy's ability to fight. We want to eliminate the enemy's vital components.

We do not want to attack into the enemy's strengths. We seek to locate his *critical vulnerabilities*, where our actions will have the most destructive effects. We seek to attack centers of gravity by penetrating the enemy's critical vulnerabilities.

Creating and Exploiting Opportunity. At times it may be difficult to identify the enemy's critical vulnerabilities. We may attack each vulnerability until an opportunity arises. Decisive results come from ruthlessly exploiting these opportunities.

Conclusion. All acts of war are political acts. Thus, war must meet policy goals. War takes place on separate levels simultaneously. Each level of war requires speed, surprise, boldness and focus. Our success derives from our ability to exploit critical vulnerabilities and attack the enemy's centers of gravity. If opportunities do not present themselves, we must create them.

Chapter 3: Preparing for War

Force Planning. *Force planning* is planning associated with the creation and maintenance of military capabilities. The objective of force planning is a required state of readiness.

Marine Corps force planning is derived from the concepts which describe how Marine Corps forces operate. These concepts describe the types of missions the Marine Corps will undertake and the methods for executing them. These concepts identify what capabilities will be required and coordinate doctrine, training, and equipment purchases.

Organization. Operating forces must be organized to provide forward deployed or rapidly deployable forces capable of conducting expeditionary operations. For operations and training the forces will be organized into Marine Air-Ground Task Forces (MAGTFs). Consisting of ground, air and support elements, MAGTFs are task organized to fit specific situations.

Doctrine. Doctrine consists of the central beliefs the Marine Corps has on the subject of war. Doctrine establishes a particular way of thinking about warfare. Doctrine sets forth broad guidance for the conduct of war.

Professionalism. Marine leaders must be true experts in the conduct of war. They must be individuals of action — confident and resolute. Warfare is a thinking profession. It requires a strong intellect as well as careful study.

Marine leaders must realize their responsibility towards the Marines they will lead in combat. Their resources are human lives.

The Marine Corps' style of maneuver warfare demands leaders who are intelligent as well as bold. Marine leaders do not act recklessly, however. Mistakes are to be expected, but must not go uncorrected. Timidity is the worst trait a Marine leader can have.

Trust is an essential element in leadership. Trust is earned through mutual respect based on competence. Shared experience builds confidence within a unit.

Relationships between leaders must be based on honesty and frankness. Subordinates must provide professional opinions until a commander has reached a decision. When a decision has been made, all leaders must back up the commander.

Training. The purpose of training is to create forces which can win in combat. Training continues during war so we can learn from the lessons of combat.

All Marines share a bond, heritage, and set of values. Marines' skills are the foundation of combat effectiveness and must receive emphasis. Strong individual skills lead to strong unit skills and teamwork. Commanders must allow subordinate leaders sufficient time and freedom to train their Marines. Training should be decentralized in order to develop junior leaders.

Training should be relevant, realistic and challenging. Programs should be progressive, building on prior training. Train on all levels simultaneously. Exercises should introduce the “fog of war,” stress, and opposing wills. The art of war can only be practiced if there are opposing wills.

Critiques of training are important for improving our combat effectiveness. Critiques should allow subordinates to frankly state their opinions of an exercise.

Professional Military Education. Professional military education is designed to develop creative, thinking leaders. Marine leaders must be prepared to take on greater and greater responsibilities. Often they will have to fill in for their superiors in combat.

The early part of a Marine’s career is spent learning a particular part of warfare and how his part plays in the total scheme of war. As a leader’s career progresses, his knowledge should become broader, involving combined arms, amphibious, and expeditionary operations. At senior levels, a Marine leader should understand MAGTF capabilities and how war is conducted on all levels.

Professional military education is the responsibility of the Marine Corps, unit commanders and individual Marines. All education should focus on developing talent and judgment.

Commanders should develop their subordinates as a direct reflection on themselves.

Personnel Management. Leading personnel is important to success. Marines should work where they will be most effective. The personnel management system should foster stability and cohesion. Promotion should reward those who seek responsibility and exercise initiative.

Equipping. Equipment should be easy to operate and maintain, reliable, and interoperable with other equipment. Furthermore, equipment should be consistent with Marine Corps doctrine and missions. Marine equipment must operate in areas with little infrastructure for support.

To reduce research and development costs, the Marine Corps employs “off the shelf” systems. All equipment must increase our combat effectiveness. The enhancement in capabilities must outweigh the support structure necessary for maintaining a given piece of equipment.

There must be a balance between specialized equipment and equipment which can be used in many applications. Specialized equipment is easily countered. A broad range of equipment is required in order to allow different courses of action.

As equipment is developed, methods of employment must be devised so that the equipment is immediately useful. Operator training must take place during the development stage.

We must not rely on technology. Technology only enhances our capabilities. Equipment development must be balanced with the development of tactics. By training in basic skills, we will be able to operate even if our equipment fails.

Conclusion. There are two military functions: waging war and preparing for war. Conduct and preparation are intimately related: failure in preparation leads to failure on the battlefield.

Chapter 4: The Conduct of War

The Challenge. The challenge for the Marine Corps is to develop a style of warfighting which takes into account the chaotic and fluid nature of the modern battlefield. The challenge is to develop a concept which allows us to use tempo as a weapon. The philosophy must fit the broad spectrum of conflict the Marine Corps is likely to face. We must consider the physical, moral and mental factors of war. The style of warfare must fit our expeditionary nature, where support will be scarce and we will often be outnumbered.

Maneuver Warfare. The Marine Corps style of warfare is based upon rapid, flexible and opportunistic maneuver. Maneuver takes place in both space and time. We can also maneuver into the intangible realms of psychology and technology.

Maneuver warfare seeks to shatter the enemy's cohesion through rapid, focused and unexpected actions which create a chaotic situation with which the enemy cannot cope.

We seek to bypass enemy defenses and *penetrate* his system and tear it apart. We make him incapable of resisting. Individual units may fight on, but their actions will not be coordinated.

Firepower is central to maneuver warfare. We will focus our combat power on decisive points when it fits our aims. When we engage the enemy, we violently destroy his forces, aiming to destroy his system.

In order to paralyze the enemy, we must place him in a dilemma from which he has no escape. His situation seems hopeless, causing panic and paralysis.

Speed is necessary to keep the enemy off balance. Besides the ability to move forces in terms of distance and time, we must be able to think, plan and carry out support functions faster than the enemy. *Focus* maximizes the effects of our combat power. Violence of action causes a shock effect which concentrates on the disruption of the enemy's ability to react. We strike critical vulnerabilities, and ruthlessly exploit opportunities, searching for the *decisive* opportunity to inflict final defeat upon the enemy.

Surprise is an essential element of maneuver warfare. We study the enemy to learn about his perceptions and expectations. We exploit these expectations and strike from unexpected avenues. Our axes of attack should allow to strike in many directions in order to keep our intentions ambiguous.

Maneuver warfare demands individuals to be bold, creative and able to cope with uncertainty and chaos. Individuals must have the moral courage to act responsibly. Leaders must think one level above their own in order to keep their unit focused on the mission of higher headquarters.

Orienting on the Enemy. Maneuver warfare focuses on destroying the enemy system. We must understand how the system works so we can penetrate it and rip it apart. We find critical vulnerabilities by looking at the enemy's unique characteristics.

Penetrating the system means getting into the enemy's thought process. We must see the enemy as he sees himself, and use his own fears and weaknesses against him. We must realize that our enemy may not fight as we do.

Philosophy of Command. *In order to support the fluid and chaotic nature of the battlefield, command must be decentralized.* Subordinate leaders must use their own initiative to accomplish tasks which support their senior's intent.

Our philosophy of command must be based upon human relationships and the human factors in war. Our leadership styles must bring out boldness, the force of will, imagination and initiative.

Decentralized command relies upon implicit communication and mutual understanding. This understanding allows us to anticipate each others actions and decisions without communication, increasing tempo. This requires seniors and subordinates to work closely together and build strong relationships. Leaders should always talk to each other directly.

Commanders should command from where they can best shape the action, usually well forward. This allows commanders to influence critical points on the battlefield and makes decisionmaking faster. It also allows for leadership through example.

Leadership by example does not equate to micro-managing. Leaders must also be able to maintain their objectivity and cannot lose sight of the bigger picture.

We must learn to fight effectively in an atmosphere of chaos. Thus, we avoid formulas and procedures. A good plan executed violently now is better than a perfect plan executed later.

This philosophy of command must be practiced during peacetime if it is to be effective during combat. This will develop subordinate leaders.

Competent leaders are required at all levels. Leaders must be bold, and possess sound judgment and initiative. Confidence and trust must exist throughout the chain of command. Shared experience will build trust and cohesion.

Shaping the Action. Through our initiative, we seek to shape the course of events in a conflict. We do not merely take things as they come, but create opportunities by striking the enemy's critical vulnerabilities. By looking through the enemy's eyes, we identify our own weaknesses and protect them. We must impose our will forward in time through planning. We seek to cause general effects in order to shape the character of war.

By bending the situation to our demands, we maintain momentum and freedom of movement. The further ahead in time we seek to impose our will, the less precision we will be able to achieve. The higher the level of command, the further ahead in time we must think. We must picture a desired result and shape the battle to meet these desires.

Decisionmaking. All actions in war are the results of decisions or nondecisions. Nondecisions surrender initiative to the enemy. Any decision is preferable to no decision.

When making a decision, we must remain focused on the enemy, his expectations, and his possible reactions.

Time is a critical factor in decisionmaking. Making decisions and executing tasks faster than the enemy gives us a great advantage. We should recognize times when we must make decisions rapidly and when we have the time to carefully think things through.

Decisionmaking requires situational awareness. Creative solutions, based on intelligence, knowledge and experience, are required.

Moral courage is required to make difficult decisions in the face of uncertainty. Marine leaders must be willing to take on the awesome responsibilities of their positions.

Mission Tactics. *Mission tactics* support decentralized command. Subordinates are told what to do, but not how to do it. This allows higher level commanders to focus on tactical concerns rather than the details of execution.

Mission tactics are a contract between senior and subordinate. The senior gives the order and provides the tools for the mission. The subordinate executes the mission in accordance with the larger tactical picture.

Commander's Intent. *Commander's intent* allows subordinates to use initiative and judgment. Subordinates can depart from the original plan when the situation demands it. All actions must be consistent with the intent.

There are two parts to any mission: the *task* and its *purpose*. Of the two, the purpose, or intent, is more important. The intent is assigned by the commander. This unifies the chain of command's actions and decisions. The commander's intent can be a simple "in order to" statement.

Main Effort. The *Main Effort* is our bid for victory. The unit assigned as the main effort is reinforced with additional combat power in order to achieve success at a given point. Supporting units must think of how their actions will help the main effort.

The main effort must be aimed at an objective that has great effect. Committing the main effort involves risk by concentrating our combat power, and relying on economy of force actions. In the course of an operation, a commander may shift the main effort in order to exploit an opportunity, hoping to achieve greater success.

Surfaces and Gaps. Surfaces are enemy strengths. Gaps are his weaknesses. We seek to avoid surfaces and penetrate gaps. Surfaces and gaps do not refer to physical forces alone, but to mental and moral factors also. Gaps may also exist in time, such as a period when the enemy can take no action.

Surfaces and gaps are unique to each situation and are constantly changing. Gaps represent opportunities, and when found, must be exploited. When we locate a gap, we seek to "pull" our combat power through it. If no gaps exist, we must create them.

Combined Arms. Combined arms is the full integration of arms so that the enemy is placed in a dilemma. In order to counter one arm, he becomes vulnerable to another. We give the enemy a no-win situation.

Combined arms is accomplished through tactics at lower levels and through task organization at higher levels. Each weapon is used so that it complements another. Through this method we exploit the strengths of each individual weapon. Mobility and maneuver are key weapons in combined arms.

Conclusion. Maneuver warfare exists in the mind of the Marine. It applies to both the battalion commander and the fireteam leader. Maneuver warfare can be used in any situation. It is a basic way of thinking about warfare, and should shape our every action. Maneuver seeks to generate the most decisive effect upon the enemy at the least possible cost to ourselves. It is “fighting smarter.”