



# Commander's intent

By Sid Heal

An effective operational plan focuses the efforts of each individual toward a common objective. This unity of effort is the most crucial aspect of any tactical operation and the responsibility falls squarely on the senior commander. Because most tactical operations in law enforcement are spontaneously reactive to an unfolding set of circumstances, the response is oriented, initially at least, to tried and true procedures rather than a detailed plan crafted specifically for the particular circumstances. In these cases, the principal objective for a response to a foot pursuit, robbery in progress or officer requesting assistance can be reliably inferred from the nature of the incident. When an operation is more complex, however, the precise objective may be neither clearly understood nor universally shared. In these situations it is essential that everyone fully comprehends what is required. The method used to express this concept is called the commander's guidance, or more formally, *commander's intent*.<sup>1</sup>

Simply put, the commander's intent may be defined as a concise expression of the purpose of the operation and the desired end state. It provides the essential focus to concentrate activities and facilitate coordination. Accordingly, it serves as the initial impetus and provides a foundation for the planning process to follow. Even when changing circumstances render a plan or concept of operations no longer appropriate, the commander's intent provides a direction for what needs to be done to achieve a satisfactory end state and subordinates can improvise, adapt and overcome obstacles without burdening superiors with endless details.

The commander's intent is formed

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and provided during the earliest stages of planning<sup>2</sup> and is based upon a commander's estimate of the situation. In law enforcement operations it is usually issued verbally. Nevertheless, complex operations are those which most benefit from a written plan<sup>3</sup> and in like manner, a written statement of commander's intent is even more important when a written plan is also required. When providing a written commander's intent, it is done in "free form" (without a standard format), and describes both the commander's vision of an acceptable end state and a concept of operations to achieve it.

Additionally, it may also include *follow-on actions*. Follow-on actions are those intended procedures and activities that follow others. It is important to note that follow-on actions are often contributory to a desirable end state but are not necessarily prerequisites. They are typically preparatory in nature in that they anticipate and prepare for additional requirements. An example of an order for a follow-on action might be, "Upon completion of your mission, move to location A and prepare to support unit B."

It is important to note that while the *end state* is part of a statement of command-

er's intent, it is a distinct concept of its own and is not interchangeable. The end state describes the desired result or final outcome of a tactical operation. It specifically describes the situation that needs to exist for an acceptable resolution. It is *never* a return to the way it was before, because any situation that requires an intervention to achieve a resolution has already indelibly altered the future. Thus, it is impossible to return to an identical previous state. Therefore, a commander must develop a clear picture of what will be necessary to achieve a satisfactory end state in order to provide a focal point for directing efforts to attain it. Without this vision, the operation will run on its own inertia, lacking both guidance and impetus. The operation becomes an "end unto itself," neither efficient nor effective.

Moreover, every operation has one and only one end state. A commander's intent, however, is usually issued at all echelons of command with each subordinate commander providing the necessary guidance to achieve the objectives of their individual units. Even though an end state is a separate and distinct concept, when providing a commander's guidance it is usually beneficial to reiterate it to enhance the clarity and promote unity of effort.

To illustrate how a commander's intent is used for planning, consider the following scenario. A law enforcement agency is called upon to handle the security for a large political rally concerning a highly controversial election issue. The rally will undoubtedly draw activists on both sides of the issue and in past incidents violence has erupted between the two groups. Typical control measures for mobs and riots have included dispersing the mob, isolating and containing the rioters or early

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intervention by identifying and arresting the provocateurs. Needless to say, each of these strategies requires different tools and methodologies and the choice of one will affect everything from the selection of personnel to the logistical support required. Furthermore, they are often in competition with one another. In this scenario, for example, a strategy that advocates mass arrests as opposed to one that promotes dispersing a mob cannot both be simultaneously implemented and preparations for one may actually hinder the other. The decision for the preferred course of action rightfully lies with the senior commander and failing to provide the necessary guidance not only unduly complicates planning but cedes the essential decision to subordinates. To avoid this untenable situation, the senior commander issues guidance on the preferred course of action. This allows planners to develop strategies, identify enabling objectives, gather logistical support, select and stage equipment, and so forth.

As can be seen, the role of a commander's guidance is vital to planning. It is an indispensable tool for communicating essential guidance to staff and subordinate commanders alike. Accordingly, as a plan becomes more mature and comprehensive, subordinate commanders can then issue their own guidance for enabling objectives assigned to their respective units. ◀◀

## Endnotes

1. For the remainder of this topic, the terms "commander's guidance" and "commander's intent" will be used interchangeably.
2. This stage is normally referred to as "mission analysis" and is focused on identifying what is required for an acceptable resolution, the factors and influences involved and conceiving a general concept of how to succeed.
3. For more information concerning when written plans are required, see "Components of a Tactical Plan," *The Tactical Edge*, Summer 2003, pp. 50-52.

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