

# JUNCTURES AND LEVERAGE POINTS

By Sid Heal

There are many activities involved in a tactical operation. Even the simplest involve things like assembling, briefing, movement to objective, movement to contact, the conduct of the actual operation, return to base, debriefing and more. Each of these activities is easily distinguished from the others with different purposes and equipment, involving people with different roles and responsibilities and with some even taking place in different locations. While they interact with one another, some naturally follow others, and some are even prerequisites.

Every operation of every kind for every purpose involves activities like these. When everything works well, the plan is said to be “seamless,” meaning that it was marked by an orderly, logical, consistent and effective progression from beginning to end. A question then arises: “Where are the seams?”

Every plan has natural seams between activities which are typically referred to as “junctures.” A juncture is defined as the connection between two or more actions, functions or processes. As such, junctures are always identified in time. Even when not specified with a precise instant, phrases like “at this point,” or “when this happened,” identify junctures in an unfolding series of events.

Junctures are natural weak points and when a plan goes awry the failures are frequently discovered at these connections.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, some junctures provide opportunities that if properly exploited render advantages disproportionate to the effort used to attain them. In tactical settings these are referred to

as “leverage points.” In the simplest terms, a leverage point is a critical time, place, step or event in a system where force can be applied to make a change. In many cases the change is decisive in nature. Accordingly, leverage points are sometimes described as the “moment of truth,” “defining event,” “turning point” or “crucial instant.”

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History is full of leverage points that resulted in a transformation of some type. Everyone in our modern world understands the significance of the terrorist attacks on 9/11, for one example, and can describe the changes afterwards. Likewise, the Columbine High School massacre has changed how first responders handle active shooter calls.<sup>2</sup> Leverage points also frequently appear on a smaller scale in tactical operations and disaster responses. Consider the implications in a hostage situation if the hostages can escape, an active shooter in the process of reloading, a vehicle pursuit on a dead end road, finding the tracks of a missing hiker or a brush fire when the winds suddenly die down or change direction. Each of these represents an opportunity to gain an advantage sufficient in itself to successfully ensure the outcome.

Leverage points provide asymmetry because the degree of advantage to be

gained is out of proportion to the amount of effort that needs to be applied. This is particularly important in that power is always relative — never absolute. Hence, it is only important to have enough force to achieve the desired results at a given time and place. This allows a weaker or smaller force to attain superiority without *en masse* confrontations. This is particularly important in law enforcement applications because it provides options for success using fewer people and/or less force.<sup>3</sup> Using the previous 9/11 terrorist attacks as one good example, the cost of the attack was less than \$500,000 with damage estimated at about \$100 billion. However, the cost to defend against possible future attacks is currently in excess of \$5 trillion.<sup>4</sup> In just dollars, that is a return of 10,000,000 to 1! When leverage of some type is conclusive, or nearly so, it is often said to be a “game changer” or even “showstopper.”

While all opportunities may not be leverage points, all leverage points are opportunities. As such, they have the same characteristics, most notably that they tend to be elusive, sporadic and fleeting.<sup>5</sup> The distinguishing feature is that while an opportunity presents a temporary set of favorable circumstances, a leverage point offers a disproportionate advantage in that a little effort provides a great payoff.

Some leverage points are readily identifiable while others seem obvious only in retrospect. One reason for this is that while the concept is universal, the application is not. Leverage points tend to be highly contextual and

domain specific. Understandably, the best people to recognize and exploit them are subject matter experts in the field or discipline in which they appear. Such experts understand how things work, what is significant and what is not. Their greater knowledge provides an ability to understand more completely. In short, they are able to make sense of things. Because every tactical operation and disaster response involves a unique and temporary combination of circumstances, leverage points will likewise tend to be peculiar to the situation. That does not mean that leverage points cannot be anticipated, however. Two of the most common factors that affect tactical operations and disaster

responses in different ways are lighting and weather. Depending on darkness or light, fog or sunshine, heat or cold, sleet or snow, dry or sweltering, ice or mud and countless other permutations, major advantages may be attained with minimal effort in areas like visibility, mobility and sustainability.

Because leverage points can be pivotal for success, skilled tactical commanders seek to identify and exploit them or limit the detrimental effects of adverse potentialities. In this capacity, leverage points provide a focus for developing solutions and seizing advantages, or alternatively, avoiding setbacks. They are starting points for insightful decision-making and problem-solving. ■

## Endnotes

1. For more information on these connections, see "Branches, Sequels and Couplings," *The Tactical Edge*, Fall 1999, pp. 69-70 and "Decision Points and Trip Wires," *The Tactical Edge*, Fall 1997, p. 81.
2. Not as well-known but just as significant, the murders at Columbine High School were nearly unprecedented in modern times, but in the following 22 months there were nineteen additional school shooting incidents following the same pattern (ten of which were thwarted).
3. For more information on asymmetry, see "Symmetric and Asymmetric Strategies," *The Tactical Edge*, Spring 2001, pp. 59-60.
4. Figures are available from "The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States," published by the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, July 22, 2004, and the Institute for the Analysis of Global Security, Potomac, MD.
5. For more information on opportunities, see "Windows of Opportunity," *The Tactical Edge*, Summer 2007, pp. 46-48.

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