

# END STATE

By Sid Heal

Imagine a beautiful, sunny day, and spending it golfing with a friend who has invited you to his favorite course. He proposes a friendly wager on the next hole with the loser buying dinner. You are an above-average player and are confident as you tee up. It is when you look into the distance for the flag marking the next hole that you discover there is none!

Suddenly your careful plans for victory have become meaningless. The hole is out there somewhere, but you can't see it from where you are. You struggle with a number of questions. In which direction should you hit? How far? What club should you use? Where should you not hit? What obstacles should you consider?

The precise location of the hole is critical to winning the wager, and the sooner and more precisely it can be determined, the better your chances for success. It is not a show-stopper<sup>1</sup>, per se, because you have a general idea where it is, but it will take considerably more work, not to mention wasted effort, before you are close enough to be accurate. All of these questions could be easily answered if only the flag were in place.

As an analogy, this scenario repeats itself on a fairly routine basis in law enforcement tactical operations and disaster responses. Even though the rules and tools remain unchanged, each situation is different enough to make the precise objective somewhat vague. A lack of a clear objective stymies meaningful planning. Objective is one of the nine principles of war.<sup>2</sup> It is often called the master or controlling principle because it provides the basis from which all planning must necessarily follow. Some objectives are enabling objectives, meaning that they are not an end in and of themselves, but facilitate the attainment of some goal. The ultimate objective is the end state.

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to conclude operations and provides the essential focus to create synergy by promoting a unity of effort. *Unity of effort* may be best understood as a seamless integration of people and/or organizations to accomplish a common goal. It is such a critical factor for success that the U.S. Marine Corps coined the term “gung ho,” meaning all together or work in harmony, to express and emphasize its importance.<sup>3</sup> It also connotes enthusiasm and dedication. An end state provides the beginning of a common operational picture and, because of the need for close coordination and cooperation, is particularly critical whenever a number of agencies or echelons of command are involved, such as when handling major disasters or large tactical operations.

The end state differs from other operational objectives in several substantive ways. For example, because it identifies the ultimate objective, it is always strategic in nature. Accordingly, it is a command responsibility, usually for the senior commander personally. Furthermore, while there may be many objectives in an operation, there is never more than one end state. From time to time, an end state may be revised, but there is never more than one at a time.

Since what is desired and what is attainable can be incompatible, an end state needs to be defined in such a manner that it is feasible. For tactical operations and disaster responses, there are three essential criteria. The first is that it must be attainable. Regardless of how badly an incident commander desires a particular outcome, if it is not capable of being accomplished, it is merely wishful thinking. An



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unrealistic end state dooms the entire effort to one of misconception and fantasy. Second, it must be specific enough to be visualized. While an incident commander can certainly impose conditions, an overly complex or convoluted end state leads to clouded thinking and fuzzy objectives. Generally, an end state should be able to be expressed as a single thought. Third, it should be measurable, at least in the respect of being able to determine if a particular course of action will contribute to achieving the end state. Phrases like “protecting the public,” “ensuring the safety” or “safeguarding the rights” provide no meaningful guidance. Instead, positive statements<sup>4</sup> that specifically describe the conditions necessary to successfully conclude the operation are needed.

The importance of a clearly defined and well-understood end state cannot be overstated. It is the essential tool used to determine if a particular course of action will contribute to success. To illustrate how important this concept can be, imagine the story of two men hiking through a forest when they encounter a hungry bear that begins chasing them. They begin running away, but it soon becomes apparent that the bear is gaining on them. One of the men stops and sits down while retrieving a pair of running shoes from his backpack. As he begins putting them on, his friend looks on in bewilderment.

“It won’t make any difference. You still can’t outrun the bear!”

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His friend continues lacing up his shoes and replies, “I don’t have to outrun the bear!”

One man saw the solution to his problem as having to outrun the bear, while the other saw it as not being eaten by the bear. The one with the better defined end state gained understanding that provided options not readily apparent to the other. Subtle differences in problem definition can have profound effects in problem resolution. ■

#### ENDNOTES

1. It hardly needs comment, but lacking at least some knowledge of what is expected is a barrier and no planning can take place until it is resolved.
2. For more information on the importance of objective (end state) see “Nine Principles of War,” *The Tactical Edge*, Summer 2001, pp. 49-50.
3. While the term originates from the Chinese, it was anglicized and incorporated into Marine lingo by Brigadier General (then Major) Evans Carlson during World War II, Commanding Officer of 2<sup>nd</sup> Raider Battalion.
4. A “positive statement” is one which is stated affirmatively and unequivocally. Using verbs like *attempt*, *undertake*, *try* or *search* are neither precise nor positive since success can be assured simply by the effort and not the end result. Likewise, listing inherent conditions, such as *lawfully* or *safely*, do little to add clarity and should be used sparingly, if at all.

