



TACTICAL CONCEPTS

By Sid Heal

Rules of engagement

Effective tactical plans are never contrived in a void. They must be adapted to meet the needs of all sorts of influences that are always unique to the particular operational activity, time and place. Good planners will consider not only what will be required to accomplish tactical objectives, but also whether the means used to achieve them will be acceptable. After all, every legitimate government serves at the pleasure of the people and must act within the scope and authority it has been granted. While tactical commanders are usually given considerable leeway in handling situations, there are times when existing laws and policies do not provide sufficient guidance or they permit actions that may hinder and even prevent the attainment of strategic objectives. This is particularly the case in planning for civil disturbances, protests, demonstrations, walk-outs, sit-down strikes, job actions and so forth. A useful tool for avoiding these situations is a set of rules commonly called "rules of engagement."

Rules of engagement describe the circumstances and set forth the conditions under which law enforcement officers may initiate and/or continue actions against adversaries. They are crafted to address the specific situation for a particular operation and are usually, but not always, more restrictive than existing policies generally permit. They provide three major advantages. First, they provide a commander with an ability to maintain a higher measure of control of forces and events while focusing on strategic objectives. For example, they may forbid arrests for minor or unrelated offenses or in sight of protestors. Thus, forces avoid being distracted and remain focused on the overall objectives. Second, they prevent a single individual from committing the entire tactical organization to an undesired course of action. Regardless of how unintentional or benign the action, in the context of emotion,

nothing is so insignificant that it can't be blown out of proportion. A rash or impetuous act by a single individual could very well instigate an incident that requires intervention and support by the entire force to resolve. Third, they provide clarification and guidance for decisions. Terms such as, "sufficient provocation," "riotous acts," or "reasonable and necessary," may require interpretation when applied specifically to the situation at hand, and they are too important to be taken for granted.

To see how rules of engagement enhance a plan, consider the example of a militant group intent on creating a riot to embarrass local officials and police. Standing operating procedures would have each individual officer acting to make an arrest of a lawbreaker whenever a violation is detected and a suspect is identified. In this case, however, a single officer making a minor arrest could start a riot that law enforcement officials are trying to prevent. To avoid this, the commander temporarily removes the individual officer's authority to arrest for some minor offenses and vests it with the squad leader or platoon commander. Now, when an arrest is necessary, the decision is made by higher authority and the entire squad or platoon is automatically involved.

Complications of rules of engagement

On rare occasions, rules of engagement may broaden the actions of an officer. This is particularly the case where historical facts and/or reliable intelligence make certain actions conspicuous in furtherance of a conspiracy or inciting a riot. Using the previous example and adding only the fact that the group has instigated violent actions on previous occasions, the rules of engagement may require officers to arrest persons carrying quantities of old spark plugs, wheel

weights and other potential missiles. Likewise, potential rioters may also be in violation of injunctions or court orders, prohibited from wearing masks in public, carrying extraordinarily large sticks for placards, and other forms of behavior. These preemptive actions provide a means of removing provocateurs before violence erupts.

When crafting rules of engagement, two principles are inviolate. The first is that rules of engagement can never violate law. When doubts arise, counsel should be sought from city officials or a prosecuting attorney. Second, rules of engagement can never remove the inherent right of self-defense. Indeed, people will act to save themselves regardless of imposed policies, so any rule that attempts to transcend a person's legitimate right to protect his own life will be immediately disregarded and is doomed from the onset. Rules of engagement do, however, prescribe acceptable actions, equipment and appropriate conduct for handling volatile situations. Examples of issues often addressed are the authority to arrest, authority and conditions to intervene, authority to negotiate, authorized weapons and munitions, employment of some types of weapons, especially chemical agents, and so forth.

In the presence of well thought-out policies, most plans will not benefit from including rules of engagement, but for those special situations that are especially susceptible for exploitation by adversaries, rules of engagement provide a greater assurance of achieving success and avoiding a loss of public confidence and esteem. One of the oldest tactical adages sums it up very nicely when it states, "The objective is to win, not to fight." ("The Art of War," Sun Tzu.) Notwithstanding the best intentions and purist of motives, any tactical organization that neglects the significance of well-crafted rules of engagement may very well be providing the stick to beat them with. ■