



Shaping operations

By Sid Heal

About 400 years ago, Miguel de Cervantes wrote in his epic *Don Quixote*, “He who is prepared has his battle half fought.”¹ This adage is as true today as when it was first written. While most law enforcement tactical operations cannot be predicted with any degree of certainty, many are capable of being foretold long in advance. Parades, political rallies, championship sporting events, protests, strikes, carnivals, festivals and parties are only a few of those that are commonly preceded by invitations, posters, notices, handbills, brochures and the like. These identify not only the type of occasion, but even the times and places they will occur.

Other situations, like responses to natural disasters, are not quite so accommodating, but experienced experts can often identify likely locales and vulnerable times and effects, or at least eliminate those so improbable that they do not merit serious consideration.

With all this information available, why should a commander accept a tactical operation on the terms offered? Why not maximize those factors and influences that will enhance success and degrade those that would interfere, while at the same time avoiding the competing interests inherent in any ongoing operation? This is the purpose of a “shaping operation.”

A shaping operation can be defined as any series of actions taken in anticipation of an engagement or tactical operation designed to promote accomplishment of strategic objectives. They enhance success by negating or mitigating potentially adverse effects while strengthening or increasing potentially favorable factors. Accordingly, they focus on any factor or combination of factors that may influence the outcome and

can involve any or all echelons of a tactical organization.

Perhaps the most easily understood shaping operation involves the conduct of the operation itself. Say, for example, that the control of a piece of terrain has been determined critical for success. The force that occupies and reinforces it before the onset of the operation gains a defensive

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advantage. Such actions can be decisive in nature.² In law enforcement such actions can be just as critical. It is commonplace, for example, to occupy stadiums, arenas, theaters and auditoriums hours before an event to “sterilize” the area by sweeping for bombs and removing unauthorized persons. Failing to take such actions early makes them nearly impossible to achieve after an event is underway. Likewise, evacuation of innocent persons inside a containment before attempting to arrest a barricaded suspect not only ensures their safety but enhances freedom of action for law enforcement personnel by removing concerns and distractions.

Some shaping operations may be taken months or years prior to actually employing

them. This is especially important when governmental involvement is required. One excellent example is with emergency statutes. These are statutes that are crafted and approved by the local governmental authorities but not enacted. They remain “on the books” awaiting only a vote to make them law. One of the better known examples involves curfew laws. Curfews have proven one of the most effective tools for quelling and preventing escalation in civil disturbances, although failing to anticipate and take the necessary steps to approve a curfew statute for future use negates their value because of the time-consuming legislative process.

In tactical operations, late is the same as absent! Similarly, other statutes, not as critical, may involve building codes and zoning or parking ordinances. These seemingly innocuous statutes can be used in support of all sorts of tactical and emergency response operations because they provide abilities to “shape the battlespace” by controlling such things as traffic routes and congestion, loitering and more serious dangers. Consider the possibilities if a no-parking zone had been in place beside the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City prior to the bombing.

One of the most often overlooked aspects of a shaping operation involves information. Like other shaping operations, information operations are multi-faceted. The most well-known involves gaining an advantage by acquiring and verifying information of value for making informed decisions. Among other things, this involves scanning the environment for indications and clues for impending events of concern.³ Indeed, vigilance is the most indispensable ingredient for preparedness. There

is also a countermeasure factor inherent in information operations. Informing the public in advance of tactical operations, for one example, not only allows them to take personal measures to avoid inconveniences and adverse consequences but serves to “inoculate” them from exaggerations and propaganda from adversaries who seek to gain advantage with misinformation.

Shaping operations are nearly always in a supporting role,⁴ but they are not always

prior to other operations. In fact, shaping operations may continue through and even after the supported operation. Moreover, law enforcement shaping operations are frequently multi-disciplinary, and include those not ordinarily viewed as law enforcement in nature. Skills, knowledge and support from people working in parks and recreation, water and power, mass transit, public works, education and others, are commonly needed for a comprehensive

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approach to shaping a time and place to make them more conducive for a successful operation. Any commander who neglects or ignores the value of these types of operations does so at his or her own peril.

How important are shaping operations? Having the advantage of hindsight, would just two additional officers have made a difference in the JFK assassination? What if they had been stationed on the grassy knoll and book depository building? It hardly needs further comment that no commander should willingly accept a tactical operation on the terms offered without challenge. ◀◀

Endnotes

1. Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, Chapter XVII, 1615. Of note: Although it is nearly impossible that Cervantes was aware of it, the concept was expressed even earlier by Sun Tzu in *The Art of War* (c. 500 BC., translated by Samuel B. Griffith) when he stated “. . . to be prepared beforehand for any contingency is the greatest of virtues.”
2. As just one notable example, the Union’s early occupation and resolute defense of Cemetery Ridge during the Battle of Gettysburg is often cited as the decisive action that ensured the Union victory. For a law enforcement example, consider the implications of who controlled the “Texas Tower” and when.
3. It should go without saying that in this day and age, the “environment” includes all dimensions, especially the Internet.
4. On exceptionally rare occasions, a shaping operation can be designated as the principal operation. In law enforcement, this may occur when factors like favorable public opinion are deemed more important than prevailing in a civil disturbance.

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