

By Robert S. Dudley, Editor in Chief

## It's the Effect, Stupid

**F**OR much of US history, the American way of war was simple: destroy the enemy's forces, occupy his territory, and then accept his surrender. It worked, but it produced, inevitably, horrific battle casualties, burned-out cities, and massive costs.

Things began changing after the 1991 Gulf War, which introduced stealth, precision strike, and advanced information systems. Meat-grinder-type battles, it was said, no longer were inevitable. US forces could win, in some cases, by creating highly targeted battlefield "effects."

The idea was to bypass a foe's main strength and attack pressure points that would influence his power or willingness to keep fighting.

The concept is, to put it mildly, still very much in dispute. While the Air Force and much of the Joint establishment embraces these so-called "effects-based operations" or "EBO," others—mostly advocates of land forces—still vigorously oppose the idea.

Retired Army Col. Ralph Peters, a prominent critic, warns that EBO is just "a sales pitch" and that the only effects that matter "are those that destroy the enemy's military, the opposing leadership, and the population's collective will." Lt. Gen. Paul K. Van Riper, retired former head of Marine Corps Combat Development Command, calls EBO confusing and overly restrictive. "It's a damn virus," he told reporter Elaine Grossman of *Inside the Pentagon*.

To be sure, the EBO concept was largely shaped by Air Force officers and is seen by many as favoring airpower. USAF leaders, in fact, are often called on to defend or explain the effects-based approach to wider audiences.

As it happens, the Air Force recently produced its fullest thinking yet about the subject, a 12,000-word exposition contained in the new Air Force Doctrine Document 2, Operations and Organization. The service uses it to lay out its EBO principles and planning considerations.

It is a strong presentation. The document shows that Air Force thinking about the concept has deepened and matured in the past few years, and it makes several key doctrinal points.

Among the most important, AFDD 2 declares the "ultimate aim in war" is not

to destroy a foe, but to make him bend to our will. As a result, EBOs "focus on [enemy] behavior, not just physical changes." USAF does not rule out the use of attrition warfare, which it says "can still be valuable," but it emphasizes that better and less costly routes to victory usually can be found.

In the Air Force view, mission success comes first, and considerations of

### **The "ultimate aim in war" is not to destroy a foe, but to make him bend to our will.**

efficiency come second. Commanders should plan operations at the lowest possible cost—in lives, money, time, or opportunities—but these commanders "must accomplish their assigned missions," period.

Far from being inflexibly mechanistic, EBO doctrine sees war as "a clash of complex adaptive systems"—that is, "a collision of living forces that creatively adapt" to new situations. Planners must be flexible and seek to know how the enemy will respond to planned actions, and incorporate this information in operations.

A corollary, says the doctrine paper, is that success comes "at a price," which is a need for "comprehensive knowledge" of the battle space and its actors. US knowledge must go "well beyond" just the enemy order of battle and include enemy thinking, influences, and tendencies. USAF notes that, in Vietnam, the US failed to detect the "implacability" of Hanoi's leaders, with lamentable results.

While new analytical tools can help, warfare "can never be a perfect science in a world of complex systems," and planners need to prepare for the unexpected.

Under EBO, says the Air Force, planning, execution, and assessment of operations must be integrated, because "doing one inevitably involves the others." Remove one of the three pieces and military forces will start "blindly servicing a list of targets." With integration, however, each combat action will have a purpose.

According to AFDD 2, planners must

take into consideration "all possible types of effects"—unintended as well as intended, indirect as well as direct, negative as well as positive. Bombing a bridge might inhibit movement of an enemy force, but it could also enrage local citizens, with unpredictable consequences. A commander must weigh the competing courses of action.

Effects-based planning is not prescriptive when it comes to weaponizing or tactical planning. It produces standard mission-type orders, and leaves choices of platforms and weapons to the lowest appropriate level.

According to the document, operators must not forget that "the law of unintended consequences is always in effect." Long-term consequences of certain actions cannot be reliably predicted, and "effects cannot be easily anticipated or quantified." Planning and execution, as a result, "must be flexible and adaptive."

In truth, says the Air Force, the effects-based approach is not really new; figures as different as Sun Tzu and Napoleon have thought in similar terms. However, modern military systems—especially those of air and space power—produce an unprecedented array of effects, with utility greater than mere attrition.

What emerges from a review of the new document is a sense of greater realism about the possibilities and problems of effects-based operations.

No one presents EBO as a magic-bullet solution for all US military challenges. Nor does anyone contend that we have seen the end of major conventional war, with its bloody, force-on-force clashes.

Moreover, the document clearly evinces a healthy regard for the sheer unpredictability of events and of the actions of potential military foes.

In the end, its major contribution may be to draw attention to the obvious.

In Bill Clinton's 1992 Presidential race, campaign aide James Carville posted in his office a written note, usually phrased as, "It's the economy, stupid." It was a constant spur to Carville to focus on what was truly important. Defense planners occasionally could use such a reminder, because, in most cases, the important thing about any military action isn't its degree of destructiveness. The important thing is its effect on the enemy. ■