

# ECONOMY OF FORCE

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For those of you familiar with my writing, you know that I am skeptical of the classical principles of war. Far from being valid principles of *war*, they are really guidelines for *battle*, and specifically for Napoleonic battle. While they express some measure of common sense, they are next to useless as guiding principles for modern war...with one major exception. John Frederick Charles Fuller and others who helped to codify the venerable principles, hit upon one idea that is truly a universal precept, as applicable today as it was in the ancient past. The principle of economy of force is profound and underlies every dimension of warfare, from technology to training, from tactics to strategy.

The principle of economy of force advises us to “employ all combat power available in the most effective way possible; allocate minimum essential combat power to secondary effects.” Simple words, but deep truth.

What makes warfare so hard? Why is history replete with great generals and poor ones? Why do some methods of warfare seem so efficient and exciting, while others seem plodding and inept? Why is there both an art and a science of war?

The answer is *scarcity*—the single biggest problem facing anyone who has to fight a war. Warfare brings to the surface the incapacity of man. We never have enough men, enough money, enough supplies, enough time, enough political will. If we had all these things in abundance, then warfare would not be an art requiring subtlety and thought and good generalship. It would instead be only a science, rooted in the simple mathematics of violence—a fit profession for any competent technician.

The war in Iraq showed the pervasive nature of scarcity and the necessity for economy of force. In an effort to reduce the size and cost of the military

establishment, the Department of Defense chose to deploy a relatively small joint force to take down Saddam Hussein's regime. Through spectacular leadership, training, and technical prowess, the American-led coalition demonstrated a highly economical form of modern joint warfare. Capitalizing on air dominance, advanced command and control, and state-of-the-art weaponry, the Americans sliced through ranks of conventional Iraqi forces with ease. But then the enemy strategy changed, and they turned to another form of economical warfare: insurgency and terror. With relatively few forces and almost no modern technology, the insurgents pinned down and damaged much more numerous forces. As the campaign continues, it will turn on which side will be able to achieve sustained economy while pressing for victory.

Much of military history touches upon technological development. Here again, the principle of economy of force plays out. The entire purpose of developing military technology is to achieve ever higher levels of economy. The bow was created to kill enemy at a higher rate while keeping friendly soldiers out of harm's way. The same was true of the bullet and the bomb. Armor preserves lives and equipment. Even command and control technology aims at economizing time. With modern force tracking technology and advanced sensors, commanders can communicate faster and implement battlefield decisions quickly, thus saving precious minutes and hours. Since the end of the Cold War, American defense planners have focused on increasing strategic deployability through the acquisition of fast transport aircraft and sealift. Again the goal is to achieve economy of force. The idea is that by providing the ability to intervene decisively within days or weeks (instead of months), we could resolve a crisis with minimal loss in lives, treasure, and political will.

The recent discussions in the media concerning the possibility of conscription point to the stress that scarcity inflicts on the business of war. While there are numerous reasons why a draft would be inappropriate for the United States military, there is every reason to think instead about how to economize the resources we have. What are the appropriate and effective methods that modern commanders can use to achieve this elusive economy?

One of the major innovations in American warfighting over the past several decades has been the emphasis upon intelligence and information. At sea, in the air, and on land, we bend our efforts toward understanding the battlespace thoroughly. Why? Because information equals economy. When the commander understands where the enemy is and where he is not, he does not waste troops or other assets where they are not needed, but he can instead focus them where they will do the most good. This is the major theory behind the modern American way of war. The precision that comes with advanced information and intelligence systems ultimately saves lives, bullets, and time.

Training is another key to achieving economy. It hardly needs said that one well trained soldier can do the job of many who are untrained. A soldier who is fit, resolute, disciplined, and skilled can act without supervision, adapt to enemy innovation, and deliver discriminating, controlled violence in an efficient manner. The Defense Department has invested huge amounts of money into achieving overmatching levels of training throughout the force, and this is one key reason why since the late 1980s Americans have consistently prevailed in war.

Finally, we move toward greater economy in action when we develop new and better mobility within the battlespace. If my only way of taking your capital city is by advancing directly up the main highway, your task of defending is easy, and I will pay a heavy price in blood for every mile of the advance. But if, on the other hand, I can approach your capital from many different positions, your task is much more complicated, and I may be able to outflank and defeat you relatively cheaply. The key is that I have many mobility options.

The Navy continues to develop cargo and amphibious assault ships that can operate out of shallow waters and immature port facilities. These ships are therefore able to enter a theater of war through many potential locations, and they are not confined to the most obvious and most defensible ports. In a similar way, vertical takeoff and landing aircraft open up myriad possible air routes into an operation, because they do not require developed airfields. An armored force

consisting of light or medium weight vehicles can traverse roads and bridges that a heavy force cannot, again complicating the enemy's plans and defenses.

In this way—through advanced intelligence/information, high levels of training, and the creation of mobility options—American joint force commanders aim at the goal of economy. They strive to accomplish the mission, but at the lowest possible cost in time, treasure, and especially lives.