

The Myth of Offensive

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What would you do with a financial advisor that was right only half the time? Or a weatherman who got it right only every other day? Would you keep a calculator that gave you the correct answer only fifty percent of the time? Obviously, this under-performance would be unacceptable. But in the military sphere, we are only too ready to accept a principle of war that is right only half the time!

The principle in view is offensive. From Frederick's cry of "Toujours l'audace!" to Foch's defiant insistence on attacking at the Battle of the Marne, the offensive has always been hailed as the glorious, decisive, and, well, *manly* form of warfare. Those who espouse the principle have in view a dynamic commander who has the strength of will to attack against the odds and wrest the initiative from the enemy. But the problem is that as often as the attack leads to such glorious outcomes, it also leads to disaster and death. For every unconditional surrender at Fort Donelson, there's a Fredericksburg, where 12,000 attackers lay bleeding and moaning on the freezing fields. The record of failed attacks throughout history leaves a bloody indictment of the principle that attaches to the attack some mysterious, powerful virtue. The principle of offensive works about half of the time, and that fact alone invalidates it as a principle of war.

Part of the problem with this erroneous idea is that in its verbiage it does not distinguish among the levels of war—tactical, operational, strategic. Are we to conclude that the only proper form of warfare is when we are on the attack at all three levels? Obviously, this is nonsense. History is replete with armies that are strategically on the attack, but which assume a tactical defense, or vice-

versa. To which level of war, then, does this principle apply? The answer is: none of the three.

One of the most powerful tools a tactical commander has at his disposal is the tactical defense—a form of warfare that Clausewitz rightly noted was the strongest. The defense has many advantages, including optimum use of terrain, the option of field fortifications, and time to prepare. An imaginative use of the tactical defense can yield to the commander disproportionate advantages over the enemy. Nor does the tactical defense relegate the commander to passivity. An army can prosecute a vigorous offensive at the operational level of war, and yet use the tactical defense for battles and engagements.

A glorification of the offense in 1914 led to horrendous defeat for the French armies that attacked into Alsace and Lorraine. Prior to the war French military theory included an emphasis upon the attack—as if this form of warfare were invested with divine virtue. Three hundred thousand casualties later, the French learned that there is nothing magical about attacking. The realities of modern combat would repeatedly frustrate offensives on the Western Front for the next three years.

There is a certain logic to a principle of war that urges the commander to action. The problem is that past pundits, turning a blind eye to the statistics of military history, decided that the only proper action was attacking. In reality, the art of command is all about *creating and exploiting opportunity*. This is the truth behind the myth of offensive. The army (or navy or air force) that consistently creates opportunity for action will be the one who wins.

At times, a vigorous attack can be the tool of choice for creating opportunity. But there are many other ways as well. When Washington collected boats along the Delaware River in December, 1776, he was creating opportunity for future action. Those boats transported his army to safety, and then later carried the army back across the river where Washington surprised and overran the Hessian garrison at Trenton. By dominating the Delaware and converting it from an obstacle into a mobility route, Washington created and exploited opportunity.

Consider a modern scenario in which the commander has a combat brigade in an assembly area awaiting action. How could this commander create future opportunities for himself? First, he can dominate the terrain around him by emplacing weapons along avenues of approach. He can send out reconnaissance parties that could prepare and time various routes of advance. He can train his forces, increasing their efficiency at working together. He can rest and refit. He can position fuel and ammunition for future resupply operations. Without attacking or even moving from his position, he has created opportunities for future success.

At the same time, commanders in war must divest the enemy of opportunity. Often this involves attacking the enemy, but again there are other methods. When the friendly force conducts screening operations, it nullifies the enemy's reconnaissance efforts. By seizing bridges, the friendly force can deny mobility corridors to the enemy. Air defenses can deny opportunities for enemy air operations. The bottom line is that modern combat is a deadly contest in which both sides seek to garner options for action, while denying them to the enemy.

Modern counterinsurgency operations point to the growing irrelevance of the myth of offensive. The commander who seeks relentless attack will find himself in want of a target. Rather, successful military forces are those that dominate the enemy through intelligence operations. Israeli forces over the past year have increased their intelligence infiltration of Hamas and other groups in Gaza and the West Bank, to the point that the insurgents have few opportunities for suicide attacks. The newly constructed walls are likewise denying mobility routes for the would-be terrorists. As the Israelis continue to develop their intelligence, they also create opportunities for targeting selected enemy leaders and thwarting preparations for enemy attacks.

The principle of offensive and the myth-based ideology behind it are responsible for hundreds of thousands of needless casualties, and are the authors of repeated failures throughout history. For every successful attack, there is another that ends in disaster and surrenders the initiative to the enemy.

Rather than embracing an amateurish approach to combat that glorifies the attack, the successful commander today builds, protects, and exploits opportunity.