Objective

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There's nothing like getting a huge bill to make you wonder whether you're getting your money's worth. And the same is true in war. Throughout history men and nations have gone to war readily enough. But after the blood starts to flow and the specter of destruction, horror, and loss of life begins to overcome the initial enthusiasm, people begin to ask the question: what are we trying to accomplish, and is it worth the cost?

It is this weighty question that gives rise to the principle of objective—one of the vaunted classical principles of war. In current doctrine, the principle of objective counsels that we should "direct all efforts toward a decisive, obtainable goal." Sound advice, especially since our operations will involve the loss of life, not to mention treasure, time, and political will. America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have cost the nation few casualties (when viewed in the light of contemporary military history), but excessive media coverage of every setback serves to exaggerate the costs, and the result is that the American public wants to know what we are fighting for. What do we hope to accomplish? What, in short, is our objective?

The principle of objective—an idea rarely mentioned in ancient warfare—rose to prominence only with the development of modern warfare in the late 19th century. As the myth of the Napoleonic "decisive battle" began to recede in the face of numerous, bloody, indecisive battles leading up to the morass of World War I, pundits in and out of uniform became frustrated with the seeming lack of connection between tactical efforts—whether won, lost, or tied—and the overall strategy of the war. The more frequent, the more bloody battles became, the less impact they seemed to have on the overall success of the war effort. We were paying more on the battlefield and getting less for our investment strategically.

The combination of military experience and popular frustration at this phenomenon gave rise to a principle of warfare that is as relevant today as it ever was. The principle of objective demands that before we embark on a war, we figure out and explain fully what we aim to accomplish. And once those aims are enumerated, the principle further counsels us to ensure that our military operations actually contribute to those aims, rather than being dissipated toward other short-term or irrelevant goals. The American experience in the Vietnam War reinforced the urgency of this most basic strategic calculation.

Nevertheless, there are two problems with the principle of objective. One has to do with the operational implications of the principle, and the other has to do with the evolution of warfare in the information age.

In the Western tradition of civilian control of the military, the responsibility for deriving strategic objectives in war lies with the government—in our case, the president. Although he often consults with military and policy advisors, ultimately it is the commander-in-chief who sets the objectives for a conflict. This is a critical step for any subsequent war planning. However, there is an age-old, often tacit implication to this process that once the government assigns an objective to the military, *the government should not interfere with operations until the objective is attained.*

Sun Tzu said it this way when the King of Wu tried to interfere with him: "Your servant has already received your appointment as commander, and when the commander is at the head of the army, he need not accept all the sovereign's orders." The legendary theorist was describing a sort of contractual arrangement that influences the principle of objective today—i.e., once the government has assigned a task to the military commander, that commander is autonomous until the task is completed.

A few millennia later, another great soldier/theorist, Helmuth von Moltke the Elder put it this way: "At the moment of mobilization the political advisor should fall silent, and should take the lead again only when the strategist has informed the King, after the complete defeat of the enemy, that his task has been fulfilled."

Although modern commanders refrain from stating such sentiments, part of their insistence on clear, unchanging objectives in war derive from the hope that once they have those objectives, the government will give them a free hand in attaining them. In fact, modern warfare precludes such a possibility, and generals today have to take into consideration the almost constant impact of government and civilian influences on the war.

The other problem with the principle of objective is the nature of information age conflict. In the past, when global communications proceeded at the pace of the sailing ship and the horse, a sovereign could not keep abreast of developments either on the battlefield or in the global community of nations. He tended, therefore, to assign a task to his field commander and then give that commander relative autonomy. But today the president, prime minister, or chancellor has instantaneous access both to tactical details of the battle and to the ever-changing strategic situation. While most government officials have enough sense not to interfere with tactical matters, they will certainly send frequent orders—and sometimes counter-orders—regarding the mission and objectives in a war.

Our recent experience in fighting the Shiite insurgency in Najaf, Iraq is illustrative of this point. In the 19th century, the local commanding general would likely have considered the matter from the tactical perspective and acted accordingly. But today that general has to clear such matters with officials in Washington and Baghdad, and the directions given him will likely change from hour to hour. There's no use complaining about this phenomenon—this is real war in the 21st century.

For this reason I believe that the old principle of objective should be reformed into the "principle of option acceleration and objective." While the old logic expressed in the principle of objective should not be discarded, it must be balanced with the realities of modern conflict. There are times when a field commander will have to go beyond pursuing a single military objective, and instead will have to accelerate the creation of multiple political options for the government. When our forces took Baghdad during Operation Iraqi Freedom, it

was unclear as to what form of government would follow Saddam Hussein's downfall, and what role the US military would play in the creation and protection of that government. The field commanders had to be flexible and anticipate change on a daily basis.

An excessive devotion to a partially out-dated principle of objective will get in the way of creating a flexible officer corps, and it will serve to obscure the true nature of modern military conflict. While we must continue to develop and use objectives to guide our deployment and employment of military forces, we must balance those objectives with an ability to rapidly generate future options for policymakers. The chaos, multi-dimensionality, and almost unceasing change found on the modern battlefield will demand a new understanding of an old principle.