

Surprise

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In the last issue I introduced the subject of the principles of war and made the case for changing these out-dated ideas about warfare. But when we come to the principle of surprise, we find an enduring truth that is as relevant today as it ever was. Surprise is a viable principle of war, but to get the most out of this principle, we must dissect it and learn its true nature.

Surprise results from the combination of two elements. The first is *time*. Surprise is a temporal phenomenon, and it makes no sense to think about surprise unless we keep it in its context of time. In my book, *Fighting by Minutes: time and the art of war*, I show how successful commanders throughout history have manipulated time to their advantage. Surprise occurs when one side “turns the time flank” of the other side. Just as sailing ships tried to gain and retain the weather gage in sea battles of long ago, so modern opponents must take every opportunity to use the time advantage.

The other element of surprise is *perpetual unreadiness*. Military organizations are perpetually unready for combat. Unreadiness is the normal condition of all combatants. An army, for example, has to perform many functions other than maintaining a fighting disposition. It has to move, subsist, rest, train, prepare defenses, conduct reconnaissance, and so on. While it is performing these other activities, it is not well disposed to fight. Instead, a military organization will come to full battle readiness only when it perceives or anticipates a threat. Once the threat is apparent, the organization will try to prepare itself for battle as quickly as possible. It will maintain battle readiness only as long as the threat is there, whereupon, the organization lapses back into unreadiness.

It is this phenomenon of unreadiness that underlies both surprise and security operations. When an army is in the field, or a ship is at sea, they take pains to secure themselves by posting sentries on land, or employing aircraft, radar, or other sensors at sea. The intent is to detect any incoming threats early enough to allow the

organization to dispose itself for battle. Surprise occurs when time runs out, and the organization is not fully prepared to fight. Although the surprise phenomenon is evident in virtually all military operations, certain forms of

warfare absolutely depend upon it. Raids and ambushes, for example, rely fully upon the power of surprise for success. If the enemy instead detects the raid or ambush too early, the tables are turned and disaster ensues.

How then does a commander create surprise? To understand that, we must first view the problem from the enemy's perspective. Because an enemy is perpetually unready, he will attempt to detect an attack as early as possible, in order to gain more time to bring himself to full battle readiness. Logically, then, if the enemy is trying to hasten his detection of the attack, then one of the friendly commander's goals is to *delay detection* as long as possible, in order to rob the enemy of the time he needs to ready himself for battle. Techniques for delaying the enemy's detection include using stealth, camouflage, deception, operational security measure, and the indirect approach.

But what else is the enemy trying to do in order to avoid getting surprised? Because he wants to have the maximum amount of time to prepare himself for battle, he will try to delay contact until he is ready. Hence, the friendly commander's other objective is to *hasten contact*, once again with the intent of taking time away from the enemy. Hastening contact often involves rapid, preemptive movement to achieve sudden and overwhelming violence. An



ambush, for example, aims to overwhelm the enemy not just with weapons fire, but also with confusion, noise, and fear.

These two goals of *delaying detection* and *hastening contact* are fundamental to achieving surprise in war. George Washington demonstrated his mastery of surprise dynamics at Trenton. His bold concept of operation began with an understanding of the Hessian commander's unreadiness for battle on Christmas. He then took care to keep his plan secret and managed to cross the Delaware River without detection at night. When he finally engaged the unready enemy force, he moved rapidly to overwhelm the enemy before they could bring themselves to battle readiness.

A commander in war has another method available to him for achieving surprise, and once again, the key is understanding perpetual unreadiness. Suppose that the enemy knows that an attack is imminent. He therefore takes extreme measures to ready his forces for battle. The problem is that he can prepare only for what he can anticipate. If his forces are ready, they are ready for a specific range of threats. Hence, the friendly commander can achieve surprise—even against a prepared enemy—by *varying the method of attack*. At Cowpens, General Daniel Morgan determined to thwart British strength by changing his tactics. Rather than exposing the militia to a British bayonet charge that would rout them, he urged the militia to fire two volleys at the advancing grenadiers, and then retreat to the relative safety of the woods behind the Continental line. Then after letting the British tire themselves in the advance, Morgan launched a series of devastating counterattacks that eventually overwhelmed the British. The enemy commander, Tarleton, was ready for a fight that morning...but he was ready for the *wrong* fight. Morgan's genius was in varying the method of fighting and using tactics for which Tarleton was unready.

Some pundits have suggested that with the advent of information age warfare with its ubiquitous sensors and computer networks, that surprise will no longer be possible. As we have seen in recent operations, exactly the reverse is true. US forces in Afghanistan were able to topple the Taliban regime by attacking in a way that the enemy was unprepared for. Taliban commanders

hoped that the Americans would conduct a traditional land campaign from a base of operations through the difficult mountain country toward Kandahar and Kabul. They were thoroughly prepared for such an attack, but they were not prepared for a campaign that employed relentless air attack in combination with special forces working with indigenous militias. By varying the method of attack, the American commanders were able to achieve sustained surprise and win the fight. The ongoing campaign of ambush and counter-ambush illustrates that the enemy is also able to achieve surprise, even against a modern and well-equipped digital force.

The insurgency in Iraq also capitalizes on surprise. American forces are the indisputable masters of modern battle. Soldiers, airmen, sailors, and Marines train hard to become experts in tactics. But they can ready themselves only for a type of fighting that they anticipate. Hence, we saw an American combined arms force tear through Saddam Hussein's thoroughly out-classed conventional forces with relative ease and overwhelming velocity. But after the major combat operations were over, the enemy adapted their tactics and pursued methods of attack that would expose the Americans' unreadiness. Car bombs, urban ambushes, sniping, and using noncombatants and culturally sensitive buildings as shields introduced a type of warfare for which the American-led coalition was not prepared. As such campaigns continue to develop, the Americans in turn will learn to adapt, so as to avoid that form of surprise.

Surprise, then, is a principle of war that is alive and well. It is an enduring feature of warfare, because its components—time and perpetual unreadiness—are immutable. Just as they have done throughout history, commanders will continue to seek ways to delay detection, hasten contact, and vary the method of attack in order to expose the enemy's unreadiness, turn the enemy's time flank, and win. Mastery of the art of war is based upon expertise in the fundamentals of surprise. The successful commander of the future will be the one who, like Washington at Trenton, can envision unreadiness and figure out a way to attack it.