

# Crowds, Mobs and Nonlethal Weapons

CWO-5 Sid Heal, US Marine Corps Reserve

**P**EACEMAKING is neither painless nor easy but fraught with danger, misperceptions and criticism. According to one political leader, "Making peace, I have found, is much harder than making war."<sup>1</sup> To accomplish those difficult peacekeeping missions, being considered just is more important than being considered powerful. The payoff can be substantial, for "the greatest honor history can bestow is that of peacemaker."<sup>2</sup>

## **Peacekeeping as Warfighting**

An examination of peacekeeping and warfighting, despite their similarities, is a study of contrasts. First, peacekeeping operations are highly sensitive to political objectives and tend to cast the military in a supporting, rather than a leading role. The military has developed doctrine and honed procedures to prepare for and execute war. Peacekeeping operations, however, present new problems for which there are few readily apparent solutions.

Second, adversaries during peacekeeping operations are often amorphous and difficult to identify. Factions with shifting loyalties and alliances can be friend one day and foe the next—and then friend again the day after. These factions often seek to further their cause not by winning but by provoking a situation in which they can be seen as victims. While enemies can be conquered, this mercurial aspect of peacekeeping adversaries makes the application of *any* force difficult.

Third, while force is the predominate means of imposing the commander's will in war, it can actually be counter-productive in peacekeeping missions. Peace imposed at any cost can be viewed as tyranny. Roman historian Publius Cornelius Tacitus noted, "A bad peace is even worse than war."

Fourth, destructive influences in a community always compete with society's legitimate right to restrain them. Citizens either comply with legitimate

---

*While a violent mob is as formidable as an army, it lacks conventional attributes such as formal command and control architecture, definable objectives or a unified focus of effort. There is no independent will, but rather a loose and temporary coalition of intentions. . . . Furthermore, unlike armies, mobs can win by losing, because an issue is frequently decided by how the mob was treated, not whether their actions were successful.*

---

mandates or defy laws and even efforts to enforce them. That tension does not disappear when stability is restored; civilian law enforcement merely replaces the military peacekeeping force.

## **Citizens as Warriors**

The change from law-abiding community members to dangerous and menacing antagonists has been studied for centuries. In 408 BC, Greek dramatist Euripides noted that "mobs in their emotions are much like children, subject to the same tantrums and fits of fury."<sup>3</sup> Millennia later, mob members, like children, still tend to be emotional, unreasoning and immature. They are inclined to act out their frustrations rather than attempt a meaningful resolution. Fortunately, mobs do not simply spring forth, but grow and escalate.

The US demonstrations concerning civil rights and the Vietnam War during the 1960s and early 1970s generated a large amount of research on mob characteristics. Based upon this work, some generalizations provide a snapshot view of the process.

The accepted traditional customs, attitudes and manners in society, collectively called mores, set the standards for acceptable conduct. When a person is caught up in the emotional sway of a mob, a

number of psychological influences tend to reduce the impact of our mores or, in some cases, completely negate them. Eight distinct psychological factors have been identified:

- Novelty. Individuals may subconsciously welcome a break from the routine and react enthusiastically to new circumstances.
- Mobs provide a release for pent up frustration and anger, even if a person is only marginally committed to the issue at hand. For example, during the latter stages of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, interviews of looters by the media revealed that many

---

*Anyone who has ever been in both riots and battles can attest to similar emotional reactions. Both foster widespread feelings of rage, fear, confusion, anguish, indignation and excitement. Both give rise to the best and worst of human behaviors. Feats of extraordinary heroism are as commonplace as despicable acts of cowardice and selfishness.*

---

had never heard of Rodney King nor were even aware of the jury verdict.

- Members of mobs feel a sense of power. In fact, if authorities are unable or unwilling to intervene, this sense of power increases.
- With this sense of power are feelings of irresponsibility, and even a sense of righteousness. The single-mindedness of the mob causes individuals to rationalize their actions until they become convinced the mob is morally justified.<sup>4</sup>
- The individual is prone to accept suggestions from anyone who appears to have a better grasp of the situation. Many in the mob are not even aware of the real causes of their problems and readily accept the suggestions of others without considering the consequences.
- People become emotionally stimulated, and even if they do not share the same indignation or resentment as others, they feel sympathetic. This shared emotion produces contagion—people imagine themselves in the same difficulties and experience similar feelings of frustration and resentment. Thus, the mob “feeds itself” with emotional excitement. This spiral of emotions continues until it exhausts itself or is stopped by intervention.
- The contagion increases the urge to conform and people are galvanized to imitate others. Because mobs often attack anyone who resists, the urge to conform is enormous.

- As individuals accept the group’s ideas and actions, their sense of identity tends to blur and they feel even stronger affiliations for the mob. This, in turn, encourages a release of social restraints because the individual feels that because he can not be identified, he will not be blamed or held responsible, no matter what he does.

### **Mobs as Adversaries**

The lack of an enemy in peacekeeping operations should not be confused with a lack of adversaries. Factions of the community may be aligned along family or ethnic ties, religious, economic or political beliefs—or any combination. To further complicate matters, when circumstances dictate, these factions often ally temporarily with other factions. With these dynamic relationships, the only thing certain is that intervention of any type will appease some, while infuriating others.

Mobs do not fit the customary understanding of an enemy. While a violent mob is every bit as formidable as an army, it lacks conventional attributes such as formal command and control architecture, definable objectives or a unified focus of effort. There is no independent will, but rather a loose and temporary coalition of intentions. Members are driven by emotion rather than ideology or a sense of duty. Leaders are more likely to be charismatic than competent, so “operations” that are just as likely to be spontaneous as preplanned. Furthermore, unlike armies, mobs can win by losing, because an issue is frequently decided by how the mob was treated, not whether their actions were successful.

The simplest grouping of people is called a *casual crowd*. Members have no common interest or purpose and simply happen to be in the same place at the same time. Their emotional level is extremely low and people see themselves as individuals rather than members of a group. It takes substantial provocation to motivate this type of crowd to violence.

A *cohesive crowd* assembles for a specific purpose. While members still see themselves as individuals, they may have intense internal discipline. For example, spectators at a sporting event are often highly emotional and charged with energy. This kind of crowd can erupt into violence, though it occurs infrequently.

The *expressive crowd* is characterized by a unified expression of sentiment and frustrations. Members are held together by a common purpose and are looking for leadership. Their emotional level can range from resigned to highly agitated. When

agitated, they can be quickly aroused to action if they become frustrated at making their dissatisfactions known.

The *aggressive crowd* has very strong feelings. Members of this group have a definite, often expressed, unity of purpose. The individual's identity is almost completely lost as he or she embraces the feelings of the group. Members seethe with emotion and are impulsive, willing to be led into lawless or destructive behavior. Of all the crowds, this is the most dangerous and can be quickly incited to become a mob.

The *aggressive mob* is the next step in the progression, distinguished from its less-harmful namesake crowd only by some type of violent or lawless behavior. The object of the violence can be a person or property or both. A riot often erupts by providing a means of release for pent-up anger and emotion. Primarily motivated by emotion, this mob's actions tend to be short-lived.

*Expressive mobs* seek release of pent-up emotions and view violence as a legitimate means of making their cause known. Because of their frustration and demand for a forum, members are unreasonable and often make outrageous demands.

The *acquisitive mob* is motivated by a desire to acquire something. Looters exploit the chaos and confusion resulting from an existing riot. Because members are primarily motivated by greed, the resulting riots tend to last much longer. However, because the emotional level is usually lower than other types of mobs, they tend to be more easily controlled.

*Escape mobs* are characterized by panic and are especially dangerous. Usually, only this type of mob can instantaneously escalate beyond the control of the authorities.

### **The City as a Battlespace**

It is important to understand some general characteristics of riots. They almost never occur in the morning or during inclement weather, rarely occur in rural areas and almost always last less than one day. Rioters are mostly unarmed males in their late teens through late twenties. When they do arm themselves, it is with rocks and bottles or primitive weapons such as clubs and slingshots.<sup>5</sup> Riot leaders emerge from the mob rather than being chosen by it. Because the city is their battlespace, authorities must recognize seven characteristics that distinguish it from rural terrain.

- Urban terrain provides a defensive advantage. Easily fortified positions offer cover and concealment. Authorities must maneuver over channelized and

compartmentalized terrain, vulnerable to missiles thrown from upper stories and behind buildings.

- Rioters frequently move up and down multiple-story buildings or even through basements, sewers and crawl spaces. This three-dimensional quality

---

*Riots are caused by deep-seated social problems such as bigotry, economic disparity, perceived injustice or discrimination. These entrenched and convoluted influences may have existed for centuries and are well beyond the abilities of any peacekeeping force to reconcile. However, the spark which ignites these emotion-laden issues frequently results from an act of authority.*

---

makes for difficult tactics, command, control and communication.

- Adversaries are engaged at extremely close ranges, often less than 20 feet. Targets appear fleeting and along restricted lines of sight.<sup>6</sup> Snipers are just as likely to be armed with handguns and take shots of opportunity as they are to use a long rifle from an established position.

- Communications are often restricted and sporadic. Coupled with spontaneous and brief encounters at close ranges, small units must operate independently, yet rely upon adjacent units for reinforcements and higher headquarters for logistical support and sustainment. Consequently, centralized planning and decentralized control are critical.

- Effects of the civilian population are everywhere. It is virtually impossible to move through a populated area without being detected. Likewise, people may become involved in tactical operations simply because they are present.

- Unlike the rural environment, which has few reflective surfaces and no direct lighting, the urban environment has both. A city is characterized by harsh shadows and glaring, often dazzling lights. This uneven ambient light interferes with night vision.<sup>7</sup>

- More than terrain features, buildings have value. Besides having tactical significance, buildings may have cultural, historical, religious or political importance.

### **Riots as Battles**

Anyone who has ever been in both riots and battles can attest to similar emotional reactions. Both foster widespread feelings of rage, fear, confusion, anguish, indignation and excitement. Both

give rise to the best and worst of human motives and actions. Feats of extraordinary heroism are as commonplace as despicable acts of cowardice and selfishness. However, there are two fundamental differences. The first is that while battles are joined by deliberate and conscious effort, riots erupt from a unique and temporary set of circumstances. This is because what *starts* riots and what *causes* riots differ distinctly and fundamentally.

Riots are caused by deep-seated social problems such as bigotry, economic disparity, perceived injustice or discrimination. These entrenched and convoluted influences may have existed for centuries and are well beyond the abilities of any peacekeeping force to reconcile. However, the spark which ignites these emotion-laden issues frequently results from an act of authority. Even an unintentional or benign action can unleash emotional and aggressive responses. Even a lack of intervention can become a catalyst because members of a mob feel empowered when authorities seem unable or unwilling to stop them.

The second difference between riots and battles has to do with preparation. While battles are fought after careful deliberation and planning, riots follow a more impulsive and unconstrained path. Battles are joined; riots evolve.<sup>8</sup> The progression from a law-abiding crowd to an unreasoning mob can occur very quickly but follows some identifiable steps which not only provide early warnings, but frequently offer opportunities to intervene at earlier and less dangerous stages. The most essential factor in understanding this progression is recognizing the difference between a crowd and a mob. This distinction is especially critical in countries such as the United States where crowds are constitutionally protected. Unnecessarily interfering with a crowd will produce legal—as well as tactical—problems.

Crowds are simply gatherings of people. They are lawful and perhaps vocal and expressive, but they will generally follow instructions from legitimate authorities. Tactical crowd-control actions are usually limited to traffic and pedestrian flow or resolving minor disputes over issues such as seating at a parade, blocking traffic or trespassing. Mobs, on the other hand, are belligerent, provocative and violent. They represent a formidable threat and are almost impossible to control. Tactical actions are usually defensive and protective in nature and include efforts to defend buildings, prevent looting and arson, and avoid injuries. Crowds require control; mobs require intervention. The importance of preventing a crowd from evolving into a mob needs no further justification.

## **Rules of Engagement as Laws of War**

Precise, appropriate rules of engagement (ROE) are the linchpin in peacekeeping operations. If a government loses or abandons power, US ROE can help provide a framework for civil control. Without them, a peacekeeping force has only impromptu and arbitrary rules. While other duties are important, the predominant peace-keeper's roles are restoring and keeping the peace.

However a predicament materializes because “keeping the peace” and “fighting for peace” are distinctly different missions and require different rules of engagement. Peacekeeping operations are typically constrained to use the minimum force necessary to accomplish the mission. Rules of engagement in these circumstances are designed to prevent the start or escalation of a conflict. Hence, defensive ROE require demonstrated hostile intent before deadly force is justified. Such force policies more closely resemble those for law enforcement agencies than military units. Accordingly, missions encountered by peacekeeping forces require adapting and using force proactively.

While this concept sounds easy, difficulties arise in application. Historically, ROE have only been required to address issues involving lethal force. With the advent of nonlethal devices, commanders are gaining an increasing ability to impose their will at an earlier stage in a conflict. However, because the effects of nonlethal options are temporary, adversaries quickly become more resilient—requiring the repeated use of force. When describing this phenomenon, one frustrated commander related that his efforts were the equivalent to “plowing water.”

Second, doctrine has supported lethal options for thousands of years but is virtually nonexistent for nonlethal use. Tactical remedies tend to be improvised and temporary.

Successful peacekeeping operations depend on proper ROE. In societies so bereft of meaningful government that military intervention is necessary to restore or maintain peace, ROE become the de facto “law of the land.” In this role they personify the minimum standards of civilized conduct. Consequently, ROE become the measuring standard for just and humane peacekeeping forces. Crafting these rules is therefore critical for forces assigned to peacekeeping missions. International laws, treaties, national policies and customs may serve as guidelines, but completely adequate criteria have never been crafted.

## **Weapons of Peace**

When dealing with riots and mobs, success more likely depends on not the *amount* of force but rather



A confrontation-management team echelons at Rhein-Main Air Base as German police confront demonstrators beyond the perimeter fence, 12 December 1982.

***Trauma-inflicting munitions are high on the force continuum. Examples might include batons, saps, stingballs, bean bags, foam and pellet munitions. They are generally the point on the force continuum which separates nonlethal from deadly force. Highest on the spectrum are lethal options. Although the particular conditions that merit deadly force should be identified, lethal options should always be regarded as part of the force continuum and not as a separate option. This avoids ambiguity and confusion as to when they are authorized.***

the type of force and how it is used. Nonlethal weapons may take many forms, including foams, water, lights or even smells.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the “weapons of peace” may not be weapons at all.

Generally speaking, there are four classes of nonlethal technology. The most well known are anti-personnel options designed for restraining individuals. The second class is anti-mobility and includes devices that interfere with transportation. The third is area delay or denial, preventing passage through or access to an area. The fourth class attempts to affect an infrastructure. These devices may gather intelligence, as from computers or communications, or degrade or inhibit their use by an opponent. Power, water, communications and mass transportation are common examples of functions which could be targets for this class.

In peacekeeping operations, a force that employs nonlethal options gains five distinct advantages over one that does not.

First, nonlethal options are more humane.

Second, they allow a commander to exert more control over a situation. Because nonlethal options require substantially less provocation before engagement, a commander can intervene at ear-

lier and less dangerous stages of a situation.

Third, they provide a commander with much more flexibility and freedom of action. A commander can tailor his response to more properly fit the circumstances.

Fourth, they are less likely to escalate violence. Consequently, bystanders are less likely to be sympathetic toward persons who defy a peacekeeping force but are not killed. Further, should it be necessary to resort to lethal force, the fact that nonlethal options had proven ineffective supports the need for escalation.

Finally, these options are less likely to raise public outcry. All peacekeeping operations are controversial and public support may ultimately be decisive.

Fundamental to employing nonlethal alternatives is a thorough understanding of the force continuum. Historically, military objectives have been achieved by killing or destroying an enemy. Force was always deadly; hence, effectiveness was judged by the extent and speed of death or destruction. A huge gap existed between presenting a threat and carrying it out. Viewing force as a continuum allows an array of options. The beginning of this continuum is initiated by a threat, while deadly force takes its

---

*Peace imposed at any cost can be viewed as tyranny: Roman historian Publius Cornelius Tacitus noted, "A bad peace is even worse than war." Destructive influences in a community always compete with society's legitimate right to restrain them. Citizens either comply with legitimate mandates or defy laws and even efforts to enforce them. That tension does not disappear when stability is restored.*

---

proper position at the other end. Nonlethal alternatives allow a commander to increase and *decrease* the amount of force necessary to accomplish a mission. Movement up and down the force continuum is generally continuous and seamless, yet a careful examination reveals five broad categories.

Entry into the force spectrum begins with a threat of some sort. This may be an "expressed threat," such as a commander's statement about the consequences of defiance, or an "implied threat," which leaves the consequences to the imagination. Of the two, the implied threat is far more powerful, predominantly because what a peacekeeping force *can* do and what it is *willing* to do are often farther apart than an adversary realizes. The next major category involves physical force that is not coercive in nature. Generally, such responses include devices that engage an antagonist without intervention by members of the peacekeeping force. Examples may include concertina or barbed wire, caltrops, sticky foam or aqueous foam enhanced with oleoresin capsicum or covering caltrops, barbed wire or other obstacles. These options place relatively low on the force continuum, not because of the injury they can cause, but because they are benign without the willful de-

fiance of the individual attempting to thwart them.

Higher on the continuum would come munitions that cause physical discomfort but fall short of inflicting trauma. Such options would include flashbangs, tear gas and pepper spray. Although the discomfort or injury may be substantially less than that from caltrops or concertina wire, the employment of these options requires a decision to intervene. Factors such as training, maturity, discipline, prejudice, emotion and judgment affect their use and require them to be viewed more closely than those options that involve only one will.

Still higher on the continuum are trauma-inflicting munitions. Examples might include batons, saps, stingballs, bean bags, foam and pellet munitions. They are generally the point on the force continuum that separates nonlethal from deadly force. Highest on the spectrum are lethal options. Although the particular conditions that merit deadly force should be identified, lethal options should always be regarded as part of the force continuum and not as a separate option. This perspective avoids ambiguity and confusion as to when they are authorized. Many situations rapidly evolve from less dangerous circumstances before requiring deadly force to resolve. Individuals with a variety of options are more likely to be proactive, retain the initiative and quickly recognize situations requiring deadly force than those compelled to examine a situation isolated by "either/or" parameters.

Late in World War II, President Roosevelt stated, "Peace, like war, can succeed only where there is a will to enforce it, and where there is available power to enforce it."<sup>10</sup> Making peace is a noble calling but not an easy pursuit. The road to peace more closely resembles a Mobius strip: twisted, never ending and somewhat mysterious. **MR**

---

#### NOTES

1. Statement made by Gerry Adams, Irish President from Sinn Fein political party, on Charlie Rose WNET television show.
2. President Richard M. Nixon's first inaugural address, 20 January 1969.
3. Euripides, *Euripides*, "Orestes," translated by William Arrowsmith, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 1959.
4. Often identified as the "mob mentality."
5. The nature of their weapons does not imply that mobs are harmless. The oldest form of execution is stoning and hundreds around the world are killed and injured from mob violence each year.
6. Rick Baratta, "Firearms Training," *Law and Order Magazine*, March 1999, 65.
7. Neil McAleer, *The Body Almanac: Mind-Boggling Facts About Today's*

- Human Body and High-Tech Medicine* (Doubleday & Company, Garden City, New York, 1985), 34. There are two reasons for this. When exposed to bright light, the pupil of the eye will constrict in about a half-second. Additionally, night vision is gained largely through a fluid in the eye called rhodopsin. When exposed to bright light, this fluid quickly "bleaches" out, but may take as much as 30 minutes to return to its previous color.
8. The single exception is when something causes a crowd to panic. This type of mob is fleeing from some perceived threat such as a flood, fire or earthquake.
9. In frigid weather, a spray of water can be a strong deterrent. In freezing weather, ice provides anti-traction against both vehicles and pedestrians. Malodorous agents release obnoxious or nauseating odors.
10. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, during a speech at the Foreign Policy Association in New York City, 21 October 1944.

*Charles "Sid" Heal is a Chief Warrant Officer-Five in the US Marine Corps Reserve. Frequently called to active duty, he is assigned to the Joint Nonlethal Weapons Directorate, Quantico, Virginia. When not on active duty, he is a lieutenant on the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department, Los Angeles, California, where he serves as a consultant on nonlethal options for the California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training. He received a B.A. from California State University at Los Angeles, an M.S. from California Polytechnic University at Pomona and an M.P.A. from the University of Southern California. He has over 30 years of combined service to the US Marine Corps and Reserves and has served in more than 20 countries. He also served as a consultant/instructor to the International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program on civil disorders and nonlethal options in Bosnia.*