

Is it Time to Abandon the Military Decisionmaking Process?

Major Joseph S. McLamb, U.S. Army

MANY OFFICERS and noncommissioned officers describe the military decisionmaking process (MDMP) with phrases such as “too complex,” “too burdensome,” or simply “too slow.” Frustration with the process is evidenced by late-night monologues delivered by executive officers (XOs) in their tactical operations centers, tools designed to bypass or shorten the MDMP, and arguments for a streamlined process. The debate surfaces occasionally in professional journals and even more frequently in Army e-mail circles.¹

Is the MDMP a viable method by which to solve today’s staff problems, or is it time to find some other process? What is the MDMP supposed to provide? Why are units having such difficulty with it? What other options have been offered, and are they workable? Answers to these questions can offer insight into the value of the current MDMP.

A Thinking Man’s Game

The smoke of battle was still drifting away as the observer/controller sat with the platoon leader on a fallen log to discuss the platoon’s encounter with the enemy. The conversation ranged over a number of aspects of the firefight but invariably returned to the question of how the leader made his decisions. What information did he have? Was all of it useful? What information did he need? After about 15 minutes of this, the young lieutenant shook his head and pronounced, “You know, combat really is a thinking man’s game.”

That platoon leader made an important discovery. Reduced to its lowest common denominator, combat is about problemsolving. The problems are complex, often difficult to see in their entirety, and always complicated by innumerable factors like terrain, weather, technology, and morale. Regardless of the complexity, however, combat is simply a problem, and the MDMP is a method

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In considering the value of the MDMP, it is important to recognize this central truth. Military decisionmaking is nothing more than problemsolving. Doctrinal terms and a host of overlays, matrixes, and charts sometimes obscure this, but the goal of any MDMP effort is to solve the problem. Any replacement process must solve a broad array of problems, not a particular problem or set of problems. A problemsolving methodology must be general in its applicability, or its value is extremely limited. This is true enough under any circumstances, but it is even more important in an Army in which staffs find themselves in scenarios ranging from humanitarian relief to mid-intensity conflict. The process staffs use to solve problems must function under a limitless number of possible situations.

The MDMP is designed to meet that requirement. Indeed, it is the MDMP’s universal applicability that often generates frustration among those trying to apply it. The MDMP contains no special insights into the problem; it provides only a methodology for

identifying the problem, generating possible solutions, analyzing those solutions, comparing the solutions, and determining the best solution. The commander and staff must do all the requisite brainwork. At the heart of the frustration with the MDMP lies a desire to lighten the burden of mental activity that the staff must bear.

Defining the Problem

It is not surprising that battalion and brigade staffs want help. Two major factors cause staffs to experience difficulty with the MDMP: a lack of experience and limited training time on the MDMP. The lack of experience among commanders and staffs is widely recognized as an important problem in the U.S. Army, and the design of its officer management system was influenced, at least in part, by a desire to increase the officers' experience.² In the short term, we can expect inexperience to persist at battalion and brigade levels. An infantry functional area assessment, for example, determined that the shortage of infantry captains available for assignment in tactical units remains a major concern for senior leaders.³

That shortage, and similar shortages throughout the Army, translate directly into staff inexperience. In many maneuver battalions, two of the four primary staff officers are senior lieutenants waiting for the advanced course. At best, captains who have not yet commanded a company fill the S1, S4, and assistant S3 positions. At brigade level, captains in the S3 section are frequently precommand officers. The same holds true for either the S1 or S4 positions. That these officers, whose primary experience is at the platoon level, find the MDMP burdensome should surprise no one, but the lack of experience is not limited to company grade officers. Most field grade officers have been away from battalion and brigade operations since completing their company commands. Most have not been on a battalion or brigade staff since before they assumed company command. Among field grade officers assigned to maneuver battalions, MDMP experience comes more from the classroom than from field exercises.

The general lack of experience is compounded by the lack of dedicated staff training time. The demands of day-to-day administrative activities, the unpredictability of operational requirements, and the much discussed increase in operating tempo (OPTEMPO) make it difficult for a staff to train on the MDMP using the Army's doctrinal crawl, walk, run methodology. As new members join the staff, the pace of operations precludes a transitional train-

ing period, and even the youngest, least experienced staff officer is expected to function adequately under a training methodology of run, dash, sprint. When untrained staff officers produce unsatisfactory

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results, options are generally limited to accepting the results or firing the officer; retraining is simply too time-consuming. The frantic pace of operations makes training the staff a requirement that limited resources are rarely able to fulfill.

Taken in combination, the lack of staff experience and the limited available training time make it difficult for staffs to conduct the MDMP quickly and efficiently. True, both factors have always existed in the U.S. Army, but they appear to be more pronounced now than at any time in the recent past. Both factors present a difficult problem for today's battalion and brigade commanders: how to get an untrained staff through the complex MDMP under the stresses of combat or even less stressful but more frequent combat training center rotation.

Common Courses of Action

Three common solutions to the MDMP dilemma are to ignore the problem, ignore the process, and ignore the staff. The most frequently used solution is to ignore the problem altogether. Units that adopt this solution simply refuse to acknowledge that the staff is not trained to perform the MDMP. In such units, the commander generally exercises broad guidance and little involvement, the XO drives the staff to stay within time lines, and staff officers dutifully provide timely products that lack analytic depth. The XO charged with overseeing the process is forever frustrated with the poor quality of staff work but finds himself compelled by time lines to move on to the next MDMP step without waiting for the staff to redo an earlier task.

"The important thing is that we use the process" quickly becomes the standard response to poor analysis, and the staff offers a recommendation to

the commander that is based on faulty assumptions, vague analysis, and wishful thinking. When the commander approves a course of action (COA), the staff finds that its ability to produce an order is now hampered by the many tasks that must be redone

The unavoidable truth is that no matrix, chart, or preformatted slide can sidestep the need for clear, analytic thinking to solve tactical problems. Matrixes and other tools can greatly assist staffs in managing, visualizing, and presenting information, but they cannot solve tactical problems. Only applied brainpower can do that, and shortcuts often cause more problems than they solve. Tactical problemsolving is a thinking man's game.

to provide detailed guidance to subordinate units. Such orders do little to synchronize a unit's combat power. The staff learns little from its experience and will repeat the performance during the next decisionmaking cycle unless it undergoes dedicated training. Ignoring the problem does not appear to be the answer.

A second solution is ignoring the doctrinal MDMP in favor of bypassing or replacing the MDMP using fill-in-the-blank operation orders, various synchronization matrixes, or others that have won early acclaim. These tools are discarded when their limitations become apparent. Each such tool has genuine value as a supplement to the MDMP but falls short as a replacement.

An example is the expanded role of the targeting process used to conduct search and attack operations at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC). A doctrinally based process, targeting is a methodology that determines the best use of a battalion's combat multipliers in a particular operation. Because the process involves filling in a matrix, it is generally deemed a task that can be performed quickly. Some advocates have argued for expanding the goal of the targeting process to include developing the friendly COA for the next day's operation.⁴ The latter determination is more properly answered using the MDMP, but the matrix is far more appealing than the laborious MDMP. By using the targeting matrix to identify enemy targets and apply combat power against them, the staff can take a relatively easy shortcut to a fragmentary order for tomorrow's operations.

This shortcut avoids several elements that are important to the MDMP. Perhaps the most critical is identifying the decisive point. The decisive point is where the unit will mass the effects of overwhelming combat power to achieve a result and is the first step in generating options during COA development.⁵ The targeting process, used as a replacement for the MDMP, replaces identifying the decisive point with selecting one or more high-payoff targets. The targeting process leads to seeing the enemy as a series of targets and to synchronizing the forces assigned to a specific target. Little attention is paid to synchronizing the overall effort against the enemy. Attrition becomes the default solution to the problem posed by the enemy. The targeting process, when used in lieu of the MDMP, tends to cause units to focus on wearing the enemy down rather than knocking him out.

This does not mean that the targeting process has no value or is flawed. Rather, it indicates that the targeting process was designed to work within the MDMP, not in place of the MDMP. Units should use the targeting process in synchronizing their combat multipliers, but to select and develop a COA, the targeting process is out of its league.

The real problem with using targeting to replace the MDMP, however, is the most common shortcoming of all the magic bullets of the past. Although the targeting meeting has become a staple of planning for units in the movement to contact phase of a JRTC rotation, few people have argued a more general applicability. Units that are devoted to the targeting process as the centerpiece of their planning during the movement to contact phase are quick to push the process back to its original purpose when they transition to a deliberate attack or defense. Whatever the value of the targeting process in selecting and developing a COA, it is limited to a relatively small number of operations.

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A third solution, and one an increasing number of commanders are adopting, is to ignore the staff. While the staff goes through the mental gyrations of the MDMP under the XO's direction, the com-



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mander moves to a quiet place and conducts his own analysis. By the time of the COA decision brief, the commander has formulated his own detailed COA, which he often reveals to the staff only at the completion of the brief. Lamentably, this may cause the staff to clear any work they may have accomplished up to that point from the table and start over.

This is a variation of the much discussed “single COA” approach to the MDMP. A number of authors have argued in favor of commanders directing a single COA that the staff then wargames.⁶ As most advocates have visualized, this version of the MDMP requires the commander to develop his COA and present it to the staff as guidance immediately following the mission analysis brief. Although this is not as far removed from doctrine as some think, it tends to get twisted during execution. It is unusual for the commander to reveal his COA until very late in the planning phase.

Because battalion and brigade commanders are competent, experienced officers, the COAs they

develop are usually tactically sound and feasible. Because the staff becomes aware of the COA only when it is time to produce an order, it has difficulty fleshing out the commander's concept into a written order and then monitoring its execution. In many cases, the commander is the only one who really understands the plan. The dangers of such an arrangement are fairly obvious and become more so as fatigue and battlefield hazards preclude the commander's intimate involvement in the battle. The Army's decision to provide battalion and brigade commanders with staffs is one of necessity—one man simply cannot do it all. Ignoring the staff is not a realistic solution.

A Viable Solution

There are several steps that can relieve much of the staff's suffering while still allowing it to assist the commander. Doctrine writers envisioned all these steps and included them in U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 101-5; unfortunately, units

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that implement these steps are rare. FM 101-5 recognizes that staffs must plan in time-constrained environments. It identifies such an environment as existing "any time there is too little time for its [the MDMP's] thorough and comprehensive application."⁷ By this definition, almost all of today's battalion and brigade staffs' tactical planning is conducted in a time-constrained environment. The training level of the staff means there is rarely enough time to thoroughly and comprehensively apply the MDMP.

U.S. Army doctrine indicates that a commander can assist his staff in three ways when they are constrained by time. He can—

- Increase his direct involvement in the MDMP, thereby providing the staff with immediate feedback from the most experienced tactician in the unit.
- Give more directive guidance, thereby limiting the staff's flexibility and keeping it focused on the issues the commander deems vital.
- Limit the number of COAs to be considered or direct the staff to a specific COA.

By combining these options, the commander can get a timely staff analysis. Direct personal involvement can go a long way toward compensating for a staff that is energetic and devoted but undertrained. In the short term, this may appear to be micromanagement. Over time, however, the staff will become more confident in its ability to predict the commander's intent and solve tactical problems. A commander who invests his time teaching subordinates to solve problems will be rewarded by a staff that can provide solutions quickly and effectively.

Time for a Change

The MDMP has not outlived its usefulness; no other process offers the universal ability to solve problems. Although far from perfect, the MDMP remains the best available resource for tactical decisionmaking. Likewise, today's staffs are also likely to remain harried and undertrained. Staff officers will lack sufficient training; training time for the staff will be a rare and precious commodity.

It is time for a change, however. The commander's personal involvement in the planning process, mentorship, teaching, and coaching can do much to offset the challenges today's battalion and brigade staffs face. Increasing the commander's role in planning does not require any modification to current doctrine; it requires only that commanders exercise the flexibility inherent in doctrine.

The challenge of building an effective staff in today's maneuver battalions is tremendous. Many staff officers are convinced that the MDMP cannot work. Only those capable commanders who are willing to spend time training their staff officers can teach them that combat is about problem-solving and that problemsolving is a thinking man's game. **MR**

NOTES

1. For typical professional discussions on methods for speeding the process, see Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) John F. Antal, "It's Not the Speed of the Computer That Counts! The Case for Rapid Battlefield Decisionmaking," *Armor* (March-April 1998) and LTC Douglas Slater, "Press the Attack: A 5-Step Technique for Offensive Planning," *Armor* (March-April 1998).

2. For a full discussion of this topic, visit the Officer Personnel Management System (OPMS) XXI Task Force briefing, "An Officer Corps for the 21st Century—OPMS XXI," at <www.army.mil/opms/brief1-1.htm>.

3. Major General Carl Ernst, "Infantry: Close, Personal, Brutal—1998 Infantry Functional Area Assessment," briefing prepared January 1998.

4. LTC Paul H. Herbert argues, for example, that the battalion commander who "makes his targeting meeting the centerpiece activity for his battle staff

every day . . . has taken a significant step toward effectiveness." See "Targeting—A Maneuver Concept," *Combat Training Center Quarterly Bulletin*, 4th Quarter, Fiscal Year 1995 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Center for Army Lessons Learned).

5. U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 101-5, *Staff Organization and Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 31 May 1997).

6. You can find variations on this theme in articles by Captain Norbert B. Jocz, "The Accelerated Task Force Decision Making Process," *Infantry* (November-December 1996) and LTC Rich Rees and Major Steve Sorrell, "Techniques to Shorten the Decision-making Process at the Task Force Level," *Armor* (July-August 1997). Also of interest is Mundstock's response to Jocz's article contained in the Letters section of *Infantry* (March-June 1997).

7. FM 101-5.

Major Joseph S. McLamb, U.S. Army, is a student at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He received a B.S. from the United States Military Academy. His assignments include company commander, B Company, 2d Battalion, 502d Infantry Regiment, Fort Campbell, Kentucky; observer/controller, Joint Readiness Training Center, Fort Polk, Louisiana; and small-group instructor, Armor Captains Career Course, Fort Knox, Kentucky.