



USAF DOCTRINE UPDATE

on

Commanders and Doctrine



In a debate over adopting an unorthodox proposal, how does a commander know that the proposal should be considered? One clue is when the rebuttal to the proposal lacks supporting reasoning except for a dogmatic declaration that it is “*not doctrinal!*” Rigid adherence to doctrine runs counter to guidance *in our doctrine* that commanders are expected to exercise judgment regarding the application of doctrine. This is implicit in the joint definition of doctrine: “fundamental principles by which the military forces... guide their actions in support of national objectives. It is authoritative but requires judgment in application.”¹ This Doctrine Update reviews the consistent Service and joint doctrine positions on how a commander uses doctrine and closes with a caution on the need for Air Force doctrine to present the best operating practices suitable for the entire Service.

Service Positions

- For the Air Force, doctrine “should be used with judgment. It should never be dismissed out of hand or through ignorance of its principles, nor should it be employed blindly without due regard for the mission and situation at hand.”
 - “Rather, good doctrine is somewhat akin to good commander’s intent: it provides sufficient information on what to do, but does not specifically say how to do it.”
 - “Airmen should strive above all else to be doctrinally sound, not doctrinally bound.”²



General Kenney’s decision to split his headquarters between New Guinea and Brisbane, Australia, ensured he was the trusted Airman at higher headquarters while allowing a trusted subordinate to oversee daily operations:

“After viewing the problems in New Guinea, [General] Kenney told [General] Whitehead to stay in Port Moresby and take over control of the operation. Whitehead established a combat headquarters, later named 5th [AF] Advanced Echelon, and served as Kenney’s commander in the forward area. Forming this headquarters was an unusual step and had no precedent in prewar American air doctrine...”

Thomas Griffith, *MacArthur’s Airman* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1998), 84.

- “Army doctrine is a body of thought on how Army forces operate as an integral part of a joint force.” Army doctrine’s primary audience is “Army leaders who employ forces...under the guidance suggested by the doctrine.” Army doctrine “acts as a guide to action rather than a set of fixed rules.”³

- “The Marine Corps Doctrine Publications [MCDP] provide an overarching philosophy of warfighting with the expectation that readers will consider, discuss, and creatively apply the ideas contained therein.”⁴
- “Naval doctrine represents the fundamental principles by which [Naval Forces] guide their actions.... It is authoritative but requires judgment in application.”
 - “[Doctrine] is a starting point from which we develop solutions and options to address specific demands and challenges. ... By providing the *how* in general terms, we gain a degree of standardization without relinquishing freedom of judgment and the commander’s requirement to exercise initiative.”⁵

Joint Position

- “Joint doctrine is authoritative guidance and will be followed except when, in the judgment of the commander, exceptional circumstances dictate otherwise.”
 - “Doctrine does not replace or alter a commander’s authority and obligation to determine the proper COA [course of action] under the circumstances prevailing at the time of decision; such judgments are the responsibility of the commander.”
 - “Joint doctrine is not dogmatic—the focus is on how to think about operations, not what to think about operations. It is definitive enough to guide operations while versatile enough to accommodate a wide variety of situations.”
 - “Joint doctrine should foster initiative, creativity, and conditions that allow commanders the freedom to adapt to varying circumstances. The judgment of the commander based upon the situation is always paramount.”⁶

“I realize that doctrine is by design authoritative but not directive; however, if we haven’t read it, it is neither. In the normal circumstance doctrine is the best way to proceed and if we must deviate, there should be a clear and compelling operational reason.”⁷ ~ General John Jumper

Caution

- If a deviation from doctrine results in success, there is a natural tendency for Airmen to insist what worked in that particular situation and region is applicable throughout the Air Force. This may or may not be true. The challenge is ensure any revision to doctrine is “written broadly, allowing decision makers latitude in interpretation and flexibility in application, yet be specific enough to provide informed guidance.”⁸

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¹ Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 8 November 2010 (As amended through 15 October 2013), 86.

² LeMay Center, “Doctrine Defined,” <https://doctrine.af.mil/download.jsp?filename=V1-D02-Doctrine-Defined.pdf>.

³ Army Doctrine Publication 3-0, *Unified Land Operations*, 10 October 2011, 1.

⁴ Marine Corps Doctrine Publication 1-0, *Marine Corps Operations*, November 2008, 1-3.

⁵ Naval Doctrine Publication 1, *Naval Warfare*, March 2010, iii-iv.

⁶ Joint Publication 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, VI-3.

⁷ Gen John Jumper, *Chief’s Sight Picture*, August 2002.

⁸ LeMay Center, “Uses of Doctrine,” <https://doctrine.af.mil/download.jsp?filename=V1-D04-Uses-of-Doctrine.pdf>.

