



# SMALL WARS (/index.php/)

## JOURNAL

### WHY DOCTRINE MATTERS

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Articles

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#### Why Doctrine Matters

George Fust

Anyone who has ever purchased furniture from Ikea knows the value of well written instructions. Entire sub-markets have developed to help people put Ikea furniture together. These experts have figured out the patterns and nuances of the company's model. They have experience and knowledge of their respective task and can therefore perform it efficiently. Even when faced with a chair or table they haven't assembled before, they understand the principles and style of manufacturing and can leverage those skills to accomplish their objective. Military doctrine serves a similar function. It is critical for junior officers to have a solid foundation in doctrine. They must read it and apply it during training. They must commit to memory the most critical components. They must return to it if time permits to guide and shape courses of action (COA).

Unlike the notoriously vague Ikea instruction manual, Army doctrine is as specific as it needs to be without being overly directive. It allows flexibility when circumstances change, which they always will. Army doctrine has also evolved for generations. Hard fought lessons have been inculcated into each iteration. The material builds on previous knowledge and is now synchronized across war fighting functions. Army doctrine is a guidebook for accomplishing your mission. Those who attempt to build the latest Ikea desk without the

instruction book may have similar results to those who ignore doctrine. At best, you may have a place to work. But how sturdy is it? Can you replicate the task the same way and achieve the same results in the future? At worst, you are unable to complete the build or mission.

Just like good policy is informed by theory, good COAs are informed by doctrine. Again, one must leverage the existing framework to maximize effects. The beauty of this method is that you can understand the goals and techniques of adjacent units and supporting enablers without ever having to coordinate with them. Yes, direct coordination and planning is optimal, however, by understanding doctrine this can be achieved when time or the fog of war doesn't allow the luxury of perfect planning cycles.

So, when is the best time to study doctrine? Now. Reference it when crafting an OPORD. Scan through it when drafting a range CONOP. Read it cover to cover while at BOLC or the Career Course. While attending your Professional Military Education (PME) schools you will be provided the opportunity and resources to reflect on doctrine and how best to employ it. Commit yourself to learning it. Be disciplined to follow through on that commitment. There is no shame in being the best at your occupational specialty. Doctrine can help get you there. Ask any graduate of Pathfinder School or Ranger School or the Infantry Mortar Leader Course if the handbook or applicable Field Manual was helpful. Most will suggest you can't pass without a deep understanding of those books. The only way to understand them is to read them and incorporate them during training. Later, when the mission really counts, doctrine will help inform your intuition and improve the outcome.

Critics will argue that furniture instructions are a poor analogy for doctrine. And yes, they are correct. Doctrine is not meant to be a step-by-step guide. It is meant to allow flexibility and adaptability as conditions change. Doctrine, however, should not be shunned. It should not sit idle on a shelf or the Army Publishing Directorate (APD) website. It should be embraced by junior officers. It should be discussed during After Action Reviews (AARs). It should be debated while waiting for your firing line to shoot at the range. Doctrine can only be a living and breathing concept when we are vigilant about its employment. It can change to meet evolving threats only when we make a conscious effort to do so. Future generations will appreciate your efforts when they don't have to learn the same difficult lessons you did. Building furniture can be difficult but the stakes are low. The Army is tasked to fight and win our nation's wars. We must leverage all the advantages we have, doctrine is one them.

*The views expressed here are the author's and not necessarily those of the U.S. Department of Defense or U.S. Army.*

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