

Warfighting Functions and the Dependability of Knowledge

■ By Christopher R. Paparone and George L. Topic Jr.

A central precept of military doctrine is the recognition that uncertainty is a fundamental characteristic of military operations. Nonetheless, we have an understandable but dangerous propensity to assume predictable and quantifiable aspects of military science. But when outcomes do not match our planning, we are surprised.

The purpose of this article is to stimulate discussion about our doctrinal frameworks, particularly those vested in incommensurate warfighting functions. We want to draw attention to the risks of treating military operations as if they can be controlled by logic based on hard science. This logic is very seductive, but we should pay more attention to the nebulous, undependable, soft-science structures that call for more subjective judgments.

In *Understanding Military Doctrine: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, Harald Høiback posits that not all doctrine is created equal; some concepts lend themselves to less reliable forms of knowledge. In figure 1, we offer a crude adaptation of Høiback's typology to illustrate and compare the relative commensurability of the Army's warfighting functions.

Fires and many aspects of sustainment are more like the hard sciences than other warfighting functions. This is because they are more amenable to predictive scientific methods that offer reasonably reliable results. For example, an enemy headquarters can be targeted and attacked with carefully engineered precision using computer science, trigonometry, and global-positioning technology. Similarly, calculating and optimizing troop transport and resupply is easily done using hard-science methods.

On the other end of the doctrine

spectrum sit intelligence and engagement (the latter is a proposed warfighting function). They are softer-science warfighting functions that focus on the socio-psychological aspects of military operations. These operations are far less replicable, and their use may have important, unexpected side effects. Soft science, associated with influencing enemy and friendly intentions, is applied under a constantly changing context.

We recognize this portrayal is not perfect because there are multiple variations within each warfighting function. For example, religious and legal support fall under the sustainment warfighting function, which includes the more computational science of logistics. On the other end, geospatial intelligence about enemy firing positions would push the intelligence warfighting function further toward the hard-science end of the spectrum.

However, we believe the typology provides a macro view that is useful for highlighting a potential blind spot: the tendency to treat all warfighting functions equally when it comes to their knowledge dependability. In

particular, warfighting functions are rolled up uncritically into concepts of operation and campaign plans.

The implications of treating all warfighting functions as the same kind of knowledge are significant. As we attempt to assess readiness before operations, the practice can cause us to assume more certainly that things will work as planned. While this feeling of being in control may be satisfying, such reliability is not possible given the Army warfighting functions' hodgepodge of knowledge structures.

Our concern is that our doctrine-based schools and centers do not train and educate with this range of knowledge dependability in mind. If we do not consider this range of dependability, we should not be surprised when we are surprised.

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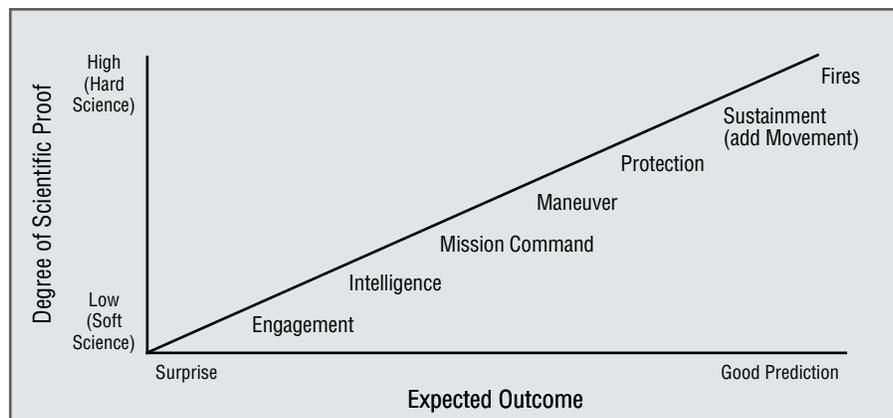


Figure 1. Warfighting functions and the dependability of doctrinal knowledge. (Adapted from work by Harald Høiback)