



Battle of Wilson's Creek, 1893. Chromolithograph by Louis Kurz and Alexander Allison, Chicago. This chromolithograph depicts the Battle of Wilson's Creek, fought on 10 August 1861, as part of the larger struggle over control of the state of Missouri. Gen. Nathaniel Lyon leads the men of the First Iowa out of a forest to engage the Confederate army in a clearing. At center, Lyon's horse rears as Lyon falls back mortally wounded from a gunshot to the heart. (Photo courtesy of Harry T. Peters "America on Stone" Lithography Collection, Smithsonian)

What's the Big Idea?

Major General Fremont and the Foundation of an Operational Approach

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In his centenary trilogy on the Civil War, Bruce Catton describes Maj. Gen. John C. Fremont's thinking in 1861 for defending Missouri and preparing for a Mississippi River offensive as having "an idea, rather than a plan."¹ This critique may be harsh, but at this point in the war, Union (Federal) and Confederate leadership alike were probing for ideas, much less plans. Catton's assessment overlooks how important, fundamental, and difficult having "an idea" is for creating a plan. Formulating a coherent concept of how you will achieve your designated strategic objectives—in other words, having an idea—is a necessary foundation upon which all following aspects

of planning are built. An idea provides the unifying thread that informs the development of the operational approach, the commander's broad description of how to solve the military problem at hand, which can then be translated into an executable plan. To evaluate Fremont's thinking in 1861, we must first understand the differences between an idea, an operational approach, and a plan.

Planning underpins almost everything that the military does. Planning normally, and optimally, results in a plan. As Catton observed, however, an idea is not a plan. A plan, and more specifically a military plan, arrays forces geographically and provides authority and direction to



A painting of Maj. Gen. John C. Fremont. (Image courtesy of the Library of Congress)

those forces through subordinate headquarters. It includes things like command relationships, task organization, key tasks to be accomplished, objectives to be attained, and timing for all the activities. A plan outlines who is doing what, when they are doing it, where they are doing it, and why it is being done. A plan is the final transformation of an idea into something that can be executed.

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This is hardly insightful and is likely seen by most to be obvious. What is often lost is the point that a plan is the translation of an *idea*. An idea precedes, or should precede, a plan. An idea allows all subsequent aspects of planning to be coherent and consistent. One can theoretically have a plan without an idea, but without a central, unifying concept to tie and guide the actions, the plan is likely to be a

collection of disjointed, unfocused, ineffective, and possibly counterproductive activities.

After reading joint doctrine, one may infer that an operational approach is the idea that precedes a plan. However, an operational approach is not necessarily an idea. Doctrinally, an operational approach is the “commander’s description of the broad actions the force can take to achieve an objective.”² An operational approach is normally built using multiple elements of operational design (see figure 1).³ The elements of operational design are doctrinal tools meant to help the commander understand the environment, define the problem, and to ultimately describe the broad actions the force can take to achieve its objective.

What is the operational approach describing? Doctrinally, it describes the broad actions the force can take. How does one determine what actions need to be described? What informs the overall description, and how does one identify the specific actions? What guides the description and selection of actions? An idea is, or should be, the foundation upon which an operational approach is built and should therefore be the basis of the description. It also serves as the guiding concept that informs what broad actions are included in the operational approach. Optimally then, the operational approach is the *manifestation* of an idea—more specifically, an operational idea. Operational artists must have a sense of *what* you are trying to describe before beginning to develop an operational approach. With an operational idea as the foundation upon which to build the operational approach, one should easily be able to answer the question, “What needs to be done and why?” and the more important question, “Why will this work?”

New practitioners of operational design and novice operational artists often view things differently. This is probably because of the uncertainty associated with tackling novel, difficult problems as well as their unfamiliarity with doctrine in general and with planning doctrine specifically. To deal with the uncertainty and unfamiliarity, they often seek a reproducible formula that is simple and easily followed. The formula sought is found in the nine steps of operational design methodology outlined in the current Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Planning* (see figure 2).⁴ New practitioners follow joint doctrine by identifying various selected elements of operational design during the initial steps of

Elements of Operational Design

- Objectives
- Military End State
- Center of Gravity
- Effects
- Culmination
- Lines of Operation
- Lines of Effort
- Decisive Points
- Direct and Indirect Approach
- Operational Reach
- Arranging Operations
- Anticipation
- Forces and Functions

(Figure from Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Planning*)

Figure 1. Elements of Operational Design

operational design methodology and then arrange the elements together to develop an operational approach in step 6. By strictly adhering to the steps, they normally give little thought to developing or articulating a unifying idea prior to labeling lines of operation/lines of effort and linking these lines to decisive points, objectives, and centers of gravity, etc. An operational approach done in this way tends to be superficial, disjointed, and difficult to explain because it lacks a unifying idea, resulting in a random conglomeration of various elements of operational design. A unifying operational idea may emerge after the operational approach is complete, but its presence would be serendipitous instead of deliberate.

Since an operational approach is an operational artist's work of art, the art world can provide an analogy to illustrate why an operational idea that informs the development of an operational approach increases coherency. There are many different painting styles and movements; however, the majority use representational forms. In other words, the painting *represents* objects or events in the real world, and it is therefore easy to recognize what the artist is trying to convey. In these painting styles, it is likely that the artist has an *idea* of what they want to paint before beginning to paint, and that idea is transformed into a work of art. If the painter is even an average artist, it is also likely that what that artist is trying to depict can then be easily discerned by viewing the completed painting. Just

as a painting represents an artist's idea, an operational approach should represent an operational artist's idea.

Several art styles, including abstract art, use nonrepresentational forms, shapes, and colors. These art styles purposely do not represent the physical environment. There are multiple ways to view or interpret abstract art, including intentionalism, anti-intentionalism, and hypothetical intentionalism. As their names imply, they all involve weighing the artist's *intention* in interpreting

- (1) Understand the strategic direction and guidance
- (2) Understand the strategic environment (e.g., policies, diplomacy, and politics) and the related contested environments
- (3) Understand the operational environment and relevant contested environments
- (4) Define the problem (create shared understanding; planning with uncertainty)
- (5) Identify assumptions needed to continue planning (strategic and operational assumptions)
- (6) Develop options (the operational approach)
- (7) Identify decisions and decision points (external to the organization)
- (8) Refine the operational approach(es)
- (9) Develop planning and assessment guidance

(Figure by author, adapted from Joint Planning 5-0, *Joint Planning*)

Figure 2. Operational Design Methodology



Example of Neoclassical art: *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*, Jacques-Louis David, 1801, oil on canvas, 261 x 221 cm, Château de Malmaison, Rueil-Malmaison. (Painting courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

the work of art. Because abstract art is open to interpretation, it is incumbent upon the viewer to give the piece of art meaning. This requires viewers to retrospectively attempt to discern what the artist was endeavoring to

convey or portray in the work of art. Similarly, identifying a unifying idea retroactively by viewing a completed operational approach is like viewing abstract art. One is left to interpret the approach to ascertain the underlying

or hidden unifying operational idea behind it. Like some abstract art, the operational artist might even have difficulty in explaining the completed work of art or operational approach. An operational approach without an underlying operational idea and a piece of abstract art may both be masterpieces, but it would be challenging to explain why (apologies to abstract art and artists). An operational idea allows an operational artist to create an operational approach that is a representation of that idea. Just as important, it allows others to appreciate (understand) that operational approach and judge whether it is a masterpiece or not.

Realizing its importance, what exactly is an operational idea in the context of military planning? The current Joint Publication 5-0 includes the word “idea” only a handful of times, most notably in defining strategy as “a prudent idea or set of ideas.”⁵ A nonmilitary, albeit useful, definition of “idea” is “a formulated thought.”⁶ The word “formulated” implies a systematic expression of the thought versus a simple statement. At its essence then, an idea is an argument for how available military assets can effectively achieve the directed strategic objectives. An argument should be logical and coherent. It is an explanation of how you will accomplish your objectives along with the supporting rationale of why it will work. Because it is future oriented, it is a hypothesis of “what will work” that may be tested through wargaming but is ultimately tested in actual conflict. It is a logical explanation of how a campaign or major operation—or distributed, simultaneous and sequential campaigns or major operations—will succeed in achieving national strategic objectives. As a rational argument, an operational idea informs the



Example of abstract art: *Painting with Green Center*, Wassily Kandinsky, 1913, oil on canvas, 108.9 x 118.4 cm, Art Institute of Chicago. (Painting courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

development of an operational approach by providing an intellectual foundation.

How do you generate an operational idea? Put simply, it involves thinking, not just mechanistically following steps in a process or methodology. The Joint Chiefs of Staff vision for professional military education calls for joint warfighters with the cognitive capacities to conceive and design strategies and campaigns to defeat competitors in contests we have not yet imagined.⁷ A basic requirement to meet this guidance is the ability to think through a military challenge and develop an operational idea that is intended to achieve all objectives.

Developing an idea requires critical and creative thinking and a holistic understanding of all aspects of the operational environment, like the geographic area of operations, infrastructure, friendly and enemy force structure, capabilities, dispositions, strategic guidance, etc. In joint doctrine, operational design is the methodology that provides for

this holistic understanding. After developing a good understanding of the strategic direction and guidance (step 1) and the strategic and operational environments (steps 2 and 3), defining the problem (step 4), and identifying assumptions (step 5), operational artists will benefit greatly by taking some time to simply brainstorm how to achieve the strategic objectives. This should be done prior to developing the operational approach (step 6).⁸ Continue the discourse and dialogue, which is necessary and important in developing a level of understanding about the environment and the problem, to develop draft operational ideas of how the military problem might be addressed. Take time for a competition of ideas to play out, where some ideas will be expanded, others will be discarded, and possibly a combination of ideas will emerge to ultimately become the central, unifying hypothesis that outlines a logical argument for how forces and assets can be used to achieve the strategic objective.

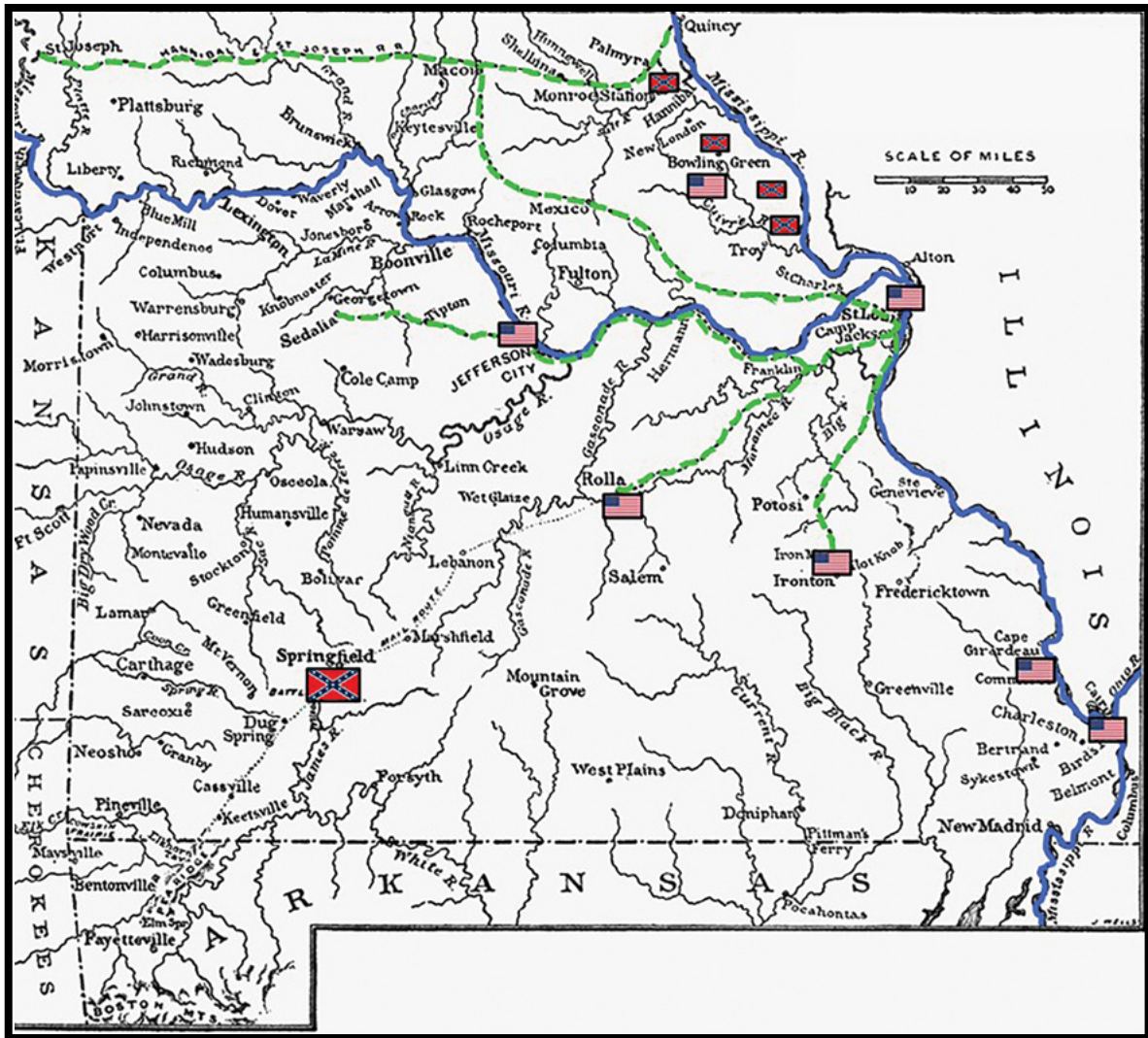
To better understand the distinction between an operational idea and an operational approach, let us return to John Fremont in the summer of 1861 to see what his idea was and how he may have formulated his argument. In terms of strategic direction and guidance (step 1), he was tasked with securing the border state of Missouri, ensuring that it did not fall into the hands of the Confederates. He was also tasked with seizing the Mississippi River from the Confederates, thus breaking the Confederacy in two and reopening the river to Northern commerce. A broad paraphrasing of his understanding of the strategic and operational environment would be as follows:

- There aren't enough trained Union forces to do everything. (Step 3. Understand the OE)
- During the time it will take to organize, train, and equip more units, something can and should be done to defend Missouri and take action that will ultimately lead to the defeat of the Confederacy. (Step 1. Understand the strategic direction and guidance; Step 2. Understand the strategic environment)
- Although there are secessionist sentiments throughout the state, the primary threats to the security of Missouri in the summer of 1861 are
 - a Confederate army operating in the southwest portion of the state,

- large Confederate guerilla bands operating in the northeast portion of the state (along the Mississippi River),
- and a segment of the population in Saint Louis, which is sympathetic to the Confederate cause. (Step 3. Understand the OE)
- In terms of geography and infrastructure, the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers, as well as the four main railroad lines in the state, serve as key lines of communication, both militarily and for civil commerce. (Step 3. Understand the OE)
- The Missouri/Mississippi Rivers and the four rail lines converge at or near Saint Louis, making this city key, and possibly even decisive, terrain. (Step 3. Understand the OE)
- Any serious Confederate threat to control the Mississippi and the Missouri Rivers would come from the South. (Step 2. Understand the strategic environment; Step 3. Understand the OE)⁹

This basic understanding of the strategic guidance/direction and the strategic/operational environment led him to develop the following operational idea:

- While additional forces are generated, Union forces should do something. What that "something" is should be the most important and impactful activities.
- Due to its geographic importance and because there is a portion of the population with Confederate sympathies, Union forces must secure Saint Louis.
- Defending the rail lines and the rivers will allow Union forces to retain the most important aspects of the state of Missouri.
- There aren't enough Union troops available to defend all the rail lines and rivers in Missouri.
- Positioning Union forces at the terminus for each rail line will secure the entire rail line and will deny their use by Confederate forces. Therefore, Jefferson City (western rail line), Rolla (southwestern rail line), and Ironton (southern rail line) need to be secured by Union forces.
- Retention of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers can be accomplished by controlling key terrain along the river. Therefore, Union forces need to be positioned at Cape Girardeau and need to be strengthened at Cairo, Illinois.
- In order to protect the Mississippi River north of Saint Louis, the few mobile Union forces need to



Map of Missouri with Fremont's Vision of Union Force Disposition, 1861 (Map by author)

suppress the Confederate guerillas in the northeast portion of the state.

- While all of these security measures are undertaken, an army of maneuver can be formed (recruited, equipped, trained) in order to conduct subsequent operations along the Mississippi River deeper into the South.

This may appear similar in form to a logical argument or syllogism—multiple premises that lead to a conclusion—and for good reason. Like a good argument, his operational idea organized his thoughts in a clear and ordered way. Like a logical argument, an operational idea should be sound and valid. If any of Fremont's assertions (premises) were untrue, for example, the assertion that retention of the rivers can be accomplished by controlling key terrain, then

his idea would have been unsound. If his operational idea did not ultimately address achieving the directed objective of securing the state against falling into the hands of the Confederacy, then it would also be a bad idea, or invalid.

Building upon Fremont's operational idea to develop an operational approach should be relatively easy. The strategic objectives were given to him: secure the border state of Missouri and seize the entire Mississippi River from Confederate forces. Decisive points would include the terminus for each railroad, Cape Girardeau, Cairo, and of course, Saint Louis. The effect of securing those decisive points was that the Confederate forces would be unable to use the railroads or rivers in any way. It also allowed Union forces to operate on interior lines, with Saint Louis as

the central point. Lines of operation would emanate from Saint Louis along the railroads and Missouri/Mississippi Rivers. Lines of effort would include suppressing Confederate guerillas in northeast Missouri and forming an Army of maneuver. Fremont's idea included arranging operations by sequencing the security of Missouri first and starting an offensive down the Mississippi River after he had the forces available to do so. By sequencing operations, the operational reach of Union forces would be maintained initially by securing the railroads and rivers and would be extended subsequently after additional forces had been built up by attacking down the Mississippi River. Denying the use of the railroads in Missouri ensured that the Confederate army in the southwestern portion of the state had a limited operational reach and that any Confederate offensive toward Saint Louis would culminate because it would not be able to use the railroad to support and sustain that army. The operational approach attacked both Confederate forces and functions by suppressing the guerillas in the northeast (forces) and denied Confederate forces the ability to sustain themselves and conduct movement and maneuver (functions) along any railroad or waterway. Although not mentioned in the previous discussion of Fremont's idea, the center of gravity recognized in 1861 Missouri was legitimacy. The side that physically retained most of the state and the key infrastructure had a decided advantage in maintaining and sustaining its legitimacy. This, in a broad outline,

would be Fremont's operational approach, although additional details could easily be added to make the description much richer.

Maj. Gen. John Fremont had a good idea in 1861. It was a logical hypothesis, or argument, of how he could use the assets available and build the assets necessary to accomplish the stated national strategic objectives. It's important to recognize how fundamental it is to think through a military problem to create an operational idea prior to developing an operational approach. This basic observation is often overlooked, resulting in an unfocused, disjointed, and oftentimes indecipherable operational approach. The point when an operational approach is completed and detailed planning is underway should not be the first time that you think about the rationale for all the actions and activities included in the operational approach. This would be like creating a work of abstract art where both the artist and the audience struggle to interpret the work of art. Since an idea is a necessary foundation upon which all following aspects of planning are built, don't allow future historians to say worse things than Catton wrote of Fremont—that you, as a joint warfighter, didn't even have an idea, much less a plan. ■

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Air Force, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

Notes

1. Bruce Catton, *Terrible Swift Sword* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1963), 28.

2. Joint Publication (JP) 5-0, *Joint Planning* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 1 December 2020 [CAC required]), IV-14.

3. *Ibid.*, III-75. For an overview and discussion on the elements of operational design, see IV-18–IV-44.

4. *Ibid.*, IV-2–IV-3.

5. *Ibid.*, I-3.

6. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (2014), s.v. "idea."

7. The Joint Chiefs of Staff vision for professional military education states, "There is more to sustaining a competitive advantage than acquiring hardware; we must gain and sustain an intellectual overmatch as well. The agility and lethality of the force must be applied appropriately to deter, fight, and win against adversaries who have studied our methods and prepared

themselves to offset our longstanding military superiority. This cannot be achieved without substantially enhancing the cognitive capacities of joint warfighters to conceive, design, and implement strategies and campaigns to integrate our capabilities globally, defeat competitors in contests we have not yet imagined, and respond to activity short of armed conflict in domains already being contested." Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Developing Today's Joint Officers for Tomorrow's Ways of War: The Joint Chiefs of Staff Vision and Guidance for Professional Military Education & Talent Management* (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2020), 2, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/education/jcs_pme_tm_vision.pdf.

8. JP 5-0, *Joint Planning*, IV-2–IV-3.

9. For his description of thinking and events surrounding Maj. Gen. John C. Fremont in Missouri of 1861, see Catton, *Terrible Swift Sword*, 10–32.