

## Saving Our Own: The Powell Doctrine and Interior Fire Operations

### **Vietnam, Lebanon and Iraq**

Colin Powell, former US Secretary of State and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is widely credited as the principal architect of the 1991 Gulf War during which Iraqi forces were driven from their occupation of Kuwait.<sup>1</sup> In the Allied drive, key elements of the Iraqi military, including the Republican Guard, were destroyed as they fled toward Baghdad.<sup>2</sup> The operation was viewed as a decisive victory and resulted in relatively low casualties for the Allies.<sup>3</sup>

Powell, with 35 years of military service is a seasoned veteran. He served as an infantry major in Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> In preparing for the Gulf War, he articulated a series of requirements that he felt must be met in order to ensure success on the battlefield: use force only as a last resort and only if there is a clear risk in not acting; if force is used it must be overwhelming; and an exit strategy must be determined in advance.<sup>5</sup> Doug DuBrin, writing on what influenced Powell in the development of his doctrine, suggests that Vietnam is a core reason. According to DuBrin, in Vietnam, the objectives were fuzzy, force was not applied in a uniform way and the strategy was unclear.<sup>6</sup> Defeat was the outcome.

Colin Powell was influenced, in part, by his former boss, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, who set forth similar principles in the aftermath of a 1983 truck bombing in which 241 US military personnel were killed during a peacekeeping mission in Beirut, Lebanon.<sup>7</sup> In a speech before the National Press Club, Weinberger made these points: the commitment of force must be because vital interests are served; we must have clearly defined objectives; and we must have the resources to accomplish those objectives.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Battleground**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century battleground is dynamic, chaotic and complex, and so is the fireground. As with the military, we have gone to great lengths to employ organizational systems and technology to instill a degree of order and predictability to the working fire environment. Both line fire fighters and infantry soldiers now have an array of modern protective gear, surveillance equipment and offensive tools to achieve rapid victory. The uniform application of command and control systems is designed to ensure coordinated and effective action and to strictly limit casualties. In reality, our systems, protocols and technology often fail us with disastrous results. Why?

In a speech entitled “US Forces: The Challenges Ahead,” Powell said, in part, “We owe it to the men and women who go in harm’s way to make sure that...their lives are not squandered for unclear purposes.”<sup>9</sup> He was challenging leaders to make strategic decisions based on a core ethic: don’t waste human life. Implicit in his speech and in the

Powell Doctrine is that committing troops to combat should be neither an easy nor automatic decision. In fact, such a decision should be made only if there is a significant advantage to be gained.

### **On the Inside**

Almost without exception, our firefighting forces are most vulnerable during interior structural firefighting. This operational environment most closely resembles the combat setting to which Powell refers in the Doctrine. In his view, committing forces requires four imperative strategic considerations:

- Committing troops must be an absolute necessity;
- There must be a compelling risk posed by not acting;
- Overwhelming resources must be applied;
- A clear exit strategy must be in place.<sup>10</sup>

Do fire officers and fire fighters routinely commit to interior operations where the objectives are fuzzy and the strategy is unclear? Are fire fighters routinely killed in interior environments where the responses to these four considerations should suggest completely different tactics?

### **Committing Troops Must be an Absolute Necessity**

The commission of fire fighting forces to interior operations has become an automatic reflexive tactical act that often occurs without any strategic thought. Fire fighting teams engage in aggressive interior tactics in positions where they are extremely exposed and where the only life safety concerns are to fire fighters themselves. Fire fighters enter these environments when there is no credible evidence that a search or rescue is necessary, possible or appropriate. It is an unconscious tactical act committed with little regard for its necessity. The result is that fire fighters are continually killed in highly exposed conditions under very questionable circumstances.

### **There Must be a Compelling Risk Posed by Not Acting**

First, do no harm. All too often the harm that occurs at a fire event is the serious injury or death of one or more fire fighters as the result of aggressive actions that are inconsistent with readily apparent facts or logical assumptions. Failing to reasonably ascertain the whereabouts of occupants or to accept a legitimate “all clear” results in fire fighters conducting an aggressive entry for the ostensible purposes of search and rescue. This often occurs in an environment where the likelihood of a successful rescue is nil. In the midst of a search, members become lost or interior conditions rapidly deteriorate and they are severely injured or killed. A subsequent investigation reveals that the building was all clear and that there was little if any credible indication of a civilian life safety

hazard. All of the risk borne by fire fighters was by acting; there was little if any risk in foregoing the overly aggressive interior attack that placed fire fighters in very exposed conditions. In fact, the compelling risk was created by the choice to act.

### **Overwhelming Resources Must be Applied**

It says much about our profession that NFPA 1710<sup>11</sup> is considered by some to be outrageously controversial because it quantifies, in writing, the minimum number of personnel necessary to safely initiate interior operations. And, only a distinct minority of departments commit the initial resources necessary to deal effectively with an uncontrolled fire environment.

The US has a long and sordid history of the under-funding of fire protection resources by elected and appointed leaders. Coupled with fire ground commanders who are illogically stingy when it comes to calling for additional resources at a working incident, many serious fires are chronically starved for fire fighting resources in every operational sector. Most fire departments consider themselves to be very fortunate if they have a single four-person company in ready reserve if an emergency occurs.

Few fire departments can seriously assert that they ensure an adequate number of fire fighters are on-scene or enroute before significant interior operations are under way. Fewer still can claim that they provide adequate relief resources in a timely fashion. The un-written epitaph for many fatal fireground incidents is “too little, too late.”

### **A Clear Exit Strategy Must be in Place**

Our accepted deployment model is the aggressive interior fire attack, often conducted without the possibility of a successful rescue and almost always for the sole objective of fire extinguishment.

Be that as it may, Secretary Powell illustrates the lack of wisdom inherent in making an entry without knowing exactly how to exit. Far too often our entry strategy (which is our de facto exit strategy) fails to include rapid and coordinated ventilation, the use of extensive laddering, effective command/communication and the presence of ready reserves that are instantly deployable.

The inevitable result is that any deterioration in conditions can set in motion a series of events that will lead to fire fighters being caught in positions that can be characterized as overly exposed. No safety margin exists and the result is an exit that will be chaotic, very risky and often unsuccessful.

### **The Intersection of Ethics and Behavior**

The four points of Powell's Doctrine and his comments regarding it, clearly suggest there can (and should) be an ethical approach to deploying fire fighters in a combat setting. How leaders behave on the fireground should mandate that we deploy into very

exposed environments only after ensuring that it is the correct action to take. Often it is not. The contemporary history of modern war-making proves that when we act in a manner that values our troops, we win all around. When we don't, we lose. The choice is ours to make.

Eric Lamar  
ericslamar@gmail.com

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