Action — Reaction — Counteraction

By Steven R. (Randy) Watt

For every move, there's a counter. For every counter to a move, there's a counter. For every counter to a counter, there's a counter. And so on.

— Coach Thresher

When Coach Thresher, my high school wrestling coach, was repeating this mantra, he was thinking tactically in terms of wrestling take-downs and staying one step ahead of your opponent. Little did he or I know that his wrestling advice would become an integral part of my military and police tactical future.

Later, as an Army Special Forces officer, I would see the concept contained in the Military Decision Making Process (MDMP), used to assist in "war gaming" the feasibility of specific courses of action (COAs) for engaging the enemy. The staff intelligence officer, whose job was to know the enemy, played the role of the "red" (enemy) commander and reacted to the initiation of the proposed action. The staff operations officer then determined if the necessary counteraction to the enemy's reaction was well thought out and doable. This process ensured that mission planning looked deep, past the initial contact and into the contingency planning necessary to provide the greatest likelihood of success.

As a SWAT team leader, I adopted this process to my mission planning, including both pre-planned operations and emergent ones. To effectively plan tactical operations, and to evaluate proposed actions on the part of the team, effort was made to see things from the suspect's point of view and attempt to determine what the suspect's options were based on the contemplated action. Understanding the suspect's reaction options and planning an effective counteraction will provide the greatest chance of tactical success in any situation. No plan ever goes exactly right and, no matter how much police try to "control" the suspect, the suspect will always choose his own response. Reviewing the suspect's options and planning to counteract them will also help to identify weaknesses in planning, manpower levels and/or logistical support. It may also save someone's life.

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A tactical team in the Midwest, during a domestic violence hostage situation, decided to place a device into the structure to better gather specific intelligence as to the suspect's intentions and capabilities. The emplacement of the device required the breaking of a window, which the team tried to do as stealthily as possible, but which was very difficult to actually accomplish. When the suspect heard glass breaking, he thought an entry was being initiated and shot the hostages, then himself. What started out being thought of as a good course of action — gathering better intelligence — turned into a terrible course of action as it initiated the very act that the team was attempting to prevent.

Had the commander war-gamed the event, looking at it from an "action — reaction — counteraction" perspective, he would likely have recognized that the potential for a negative reaction on the part of the subject was high and that he did not have personnel in sufficient proximity to the suspect/hostages to effectively interdict the suspect's reaction should the suspect choose to start killing. This in turn may have caused the commander to determine a different course of action to accomplish the goal.

There is no way to know ahead of time exactly how a suspect is going to react to a specific action on the part of the team, but you can be sure that there will be some reaction. For instance, in a case in the West, a barricaded gunman who had already fired an assault rifle on responding police officers ceased fire and barricaded himself alone in a house. The tactical commander decided that, in order to prevent the suspect from reengaging police, the team would deploy flash/sound diversionary devices (FSDDs) through multiple windows in the front of the house and drive the suspect to the back of the house, from where it would be difficult for him to shoot at police. The team had insufficient personnel on the scene to perform both containment and deployment of the multiple FSDDs, so containment personnel were utilized in the front to act as deployment teams. The team commander was confident that the suspect, due to the FSDDs, would literally be driven away from the front and toward the back of the structure.

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The suspect reacted by immediately assaulting the police action at the front of the house, exiting the structure on the run and shooting as he went. Without realizing it, he had chosen the best possible course of action for himself. Within a few seconds of exiting the house, he was past the containment teams, who were at the windows of the front of the house and were unable to react to the speedy departure of the suspect. He crossed the street, went through a yard and entered a rural wooded area on the outskirts of the town. A problem which had been contained had become mobile and significantly more difficult to deal with.

It is likely that had the commander given some thought to the suspect's potential reactions to his plan, he may likely have recognized that the suspect had three main options: 1) retreat to the rear of the house (the best reaction for the team); 2) stand fast and engage (a dangerous reaction for the team as it exposed them to rifle fire through the walls of the structure); or 3) counterattack (a very dangerous reaction for the team as it would precipitate a running gun battle).

During the war gaming of the plan, the team commander would likely have identified that he was fine with the first reaction and that with the second reaction, he was accepting substantial risk by eliciting gunfire from the suspect based on the team's actions. Finally, for the third option, he was accepting extreme risk as he had no way of keeping the suspect contained since his containment personnel were busy with another task and were out of positions necessary for effecting containment.

The team commander could then have refined his plan by obtaining more manpower, adjusting his personnel deployment, utilizing some form of stand-off munitions to attempt the action or choosing to abort the plan as the risks of two of the suspect's options were unacceptable. By thinking through the suspect's options, the commander may very well have arrived at an adjusted, and better, course of action with a greater likelihood of accomplishing the desired objective. After all, as tactical operators like to say, "no plan ever survives the first round fired" and "the suspect always gets his vote on the plan."

War gaming and thinking "action — reaction — counteraction" will give commanders and their teams a greater likelihood of success and will reduce potential risks to all involved in the operation. The best tactical leaders I've known included it as a formalized planning process and the most skilled leaders I know did it intuitively. All leaders should do it. Good luck and good planning.