Paratroopers assigned to 173rd Airborne Brigade conduct inspections prior to airborne operations in Grafenwoehr Training Area, Germany, July 23, 2020 (U.S. Army/Ryan Lucas)

Success on Purpose

A Message for Leaders of Military Organizations

By Russell Steven Williford and Wendi Peck

Why do leaders of successful military operations often struggle to recreate that success when placed in charge of standing military organizations? What do the leaders of highly effective military organizations have that is missing for organizational leaders struggling with cultures mired in bureaucracy and box-checking?

We propose that highly successful military operations and organizations share a feature that is so obvious it is easy to miss: Their teams have been given a clear *and* meaningful purpose—an elevating "why" behind their work—that they understand and embrace. This phenomenon appears to occur more naturally with active military operations than with standing military organizations. But when it does occur, the result is a committed unit that is outcome-focused and agile, prioritizes smartly, and innovates or adapts as needed. Clear and meaningful purpose also begets collaboration; people with a common purpose tend to work well as a team, even if they have little else in common.[1] These teams attract and retain top-tier talent. The ultimate outcome is success—success on purpose—whether in a relatively short operation or in a long-standing organization.

Thus, the aim of this article is threefold. First, we intend to establish communication of clear and meaningful purpose as more than just a nice-to-have skill for military leaders. In fact, a wealth of research has spelled out both the criticality and the characteristics of team members' connections to their team's particular purpose. Second, based on our own research and experience within the Department

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of Defense, we argue that active military operations and standing military organizations have vastly different levels of purpose-driven leadership. Leaders of operations tend to guide their teams with clear and meaningful purpose; leaders of organizations tend to struggle to elucidate the organization's purpose and connect it to every member. Finally, we review four ways by which effective leaders connect their teams to purpose. We attempt to offer that information with sufficient range and specificity so leaders at all skill levels will find actionable information to help them achieve their unit's purpose.

More Than a Nice-to-Have: A Requisite for Success

When a team has a purpose that its members find both clear and meaningful, that purpose drives the team toward success. Both those aspects of purpose—clarity and meaningfulness—have been studied exhaustively in military and nonmilitary settings. Here, we emphasize the importance of both.

Clarity. Aristotle distinguished between *telos*, the result or purpose of something, and *technê*, the means of achieving a purpose. It is a useful distinction. Purpose answers the question, "What are we trying to achieve?" That often is harder to answer than, "What are we doing?" For any military team—from fully operational to fully supporting—purpose must answer the question, "Why does our unit exist?" or, at a minimum, "What outcome or accomplishment are we aiming for?" The answer must be specific enough that members know when their unit's purpose has—or has not—been achieved. In other words, core mission outcomes must be verifiable.

When a team understands the unit's purpose in terms of verifiable outcomes, it has the unifying focus that is foundational for successful performance, including the informed decisionmaking required for innovating or adapting to achieve success. In their examination of 75 work teams, researchers Carl Larson and Frank LaFasto found that, "without exception, when an effectively functioning team was identified, it was described by [its members] as having a clear understanding of its objective."[2] All the poorest performing teams were missing this clarity.

Meaningfulness. Yet knowing a team's purpose, even if it is clear, does not suffice to drive team members toward accomplishing that purpose. Something else is needed. Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl is best known for his work advocating for the importance of meaning. A Holocaust survivor, Frankl theorized that those interned in the concentration camps who had a higher purpose were more likely to survive, and in his writings he encouraged finding meaning by embracing activities that connect the individual to something greater. He often quoted Friedrich Nietzsche: "He who has a 'why' to live can bear almost any how."[3]

Today, many people want to find meaning in the higher purpose they serve through work. Decades of research have shown that meaningfulness often outweighs other occupational features, including job security, income, and career advancement opportunities.[4] This is good news at a time when the military is struggling to attract and retain talent.

In his book *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, Daniel Pink devotes an entire chapter to purpose, where he writes, "The most deeply motivated people—not to mention those who are most productive and satisfied—hitch their desires to a cause larger than themselves."[5] Research supports Pink's assertion, but with provisos: There are aspects of purpose, aside from clarity, that make it meaningful. We cite four that all leaders should know.

First, and perhaps most obvious, a unit's purpose must be perceived by team members as meaningful. This requires a leader to help team members elevate their focus from the actions that must be performed to the important and positive outcomes that should result.[6] For example, an Air Force maintenance group commander explained his success by stating, "It is about helping our maintainers see that it's not just a collection of tasks that we do. It's about the combat capability we produce on a daily basis that is used to shape world events."

Sometimes the meaningfulness of a purpose stems from how that purpose is described. Consider the following two descriptions of one defense organization's purpose: The Defense Prisoner of War/Missing in Action Accounting Agency Web site states that its mission is to "[p]rovide the fullest possible accounting for our missing personnel to their families and the nation."[7] That is a good and noble purpose. But we recently heard another description of that same purpose that might convey a more powerful meaning to the agency's team.

Dr. Kyle McCormick, a forensic anthropologist with the agency, stayed late to show two strangers—one of the authors and her 13-year-old granddaughter—what the agency does. That evening, among gurneys holding warfighters' remains, he answered the question, "Why do you think this agency exists?" His answer was immediate, and it reflected the meaningfulness of the mission: "We keep America's promise to bring everyone home."

Second, meaningfulness comes from a personal connection. Team members who understand both their unit's higher purpose *and* their own contribution to it are more likely to see their work as meaningful. Recall the story of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) janitor who stated, "I'm not mopping the floors, I'm putting a man on the moon."[8] That attitude did not happen by accident. A recent study of NASA's Manned Lunar Landing Program revealed a key component of its success. People were not simply told NASA's larger purpose. Rather, they were shown exactly how they and their work fit into it. It was a deliberate, orchestrated organizational strategy for success. Later, we describe how individual leaders can do the same.

Third, critical to meaningfulness is that the unit's purpose be seen as "difficult but achievable."[9] Challenge—especially one unique to the unit or unit type—increases the meaningfulness of the unit's purpose. Of course, the goal must be more than just theoretically achievable; team members must see it as achievable by *them*. Members' belief

Soldiers from 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment and Chaplain (Lieutenant Colonel) Sid Taylor, USA, help conduct funeral honors with escort for U.S. Army Air Forces Captain Lawrence Dickson, MIA since December 1944 after plane crash in Austria, in Section 60 of Arlington National Cemetery, March 22, 2019 (U.S. Army/Elizabeth Fraser)

that their team has the skills, tools, and resources to meet the challenges ahead is strongly related to high performance.

Fourth, meaningfulness requires a level of autonomy. When unit members are empowered with appropriate autonomy, their ownership of the unit's purpose increases, and in turn, their belief that it is meaningful grows.[10] When a leader provides clear purpose and goals, autonomy also increases productivity.[11] This does not mean organizational leaders should ignore subordinates and subordinate units or lose touch with their work. In fact, numerous studies have shown that leaders of successful groups keep tabs on performance without micromanaging.[12]

Operations vs. Organizations

Defining purpose with clarity is difficult for all leaders, but military leaders face the additional challenge of having to lead both active operations and standing organizations during their careers. These are wildly different contexts, with diverse risks, rewards, challenges, and timeframes.

Military *operations* often have immediate feedback, with high stakes and tangible results. In such situations, it is incumbent on leaders to convey clear and meaningful purpose. Accordingly, military doctrine states that the commander's intent must include clear purpose:

> *A clear and concise expression of the purpose of the operation and the desired military end state that supports mission command, provides focus to the staff, and helps subordinate and supporting commanders act to achieve the commander's desired results without further orders, even when the operation does not unfold as planned*.[13]

Surprisingly, however, for military *organizations* there is no comparable doctrine on the development and communication of clear and meaningful organizational purpose. Without a clear purpose, the default view of "success" risks becoming "staying out of trouble," with little thought given to ultimate operational or strategic impact. Such commands come to exemplify compliance command,[14] wherein boxes checked become the markers for success. Navy Chief Information Officer Aaron Weiss stated, "We have a culture of compliance when it comes to [cyber] security. That culture leads people to say, 'If I do the checklist and I do all the right things . . . someone will give me a stamp that says I have authority to operate and I am secure.' [They miss the point that] security is a constant state of readiness."[15]

Compliance command stands in stark contrast to mission command, which encourages intelligent initiative toward a purpose within the bounds of commander's intent. While mission command generally is considered in relation to the

operational environment, its tenets are applicable—even critical—to all high-performing organizations. While serving as Army Chief of Staff, General Mark Milley explained, "We preach mission command, but we don't necessarily practice it on a day-to-day basis in everything we do. If we're going to have to operate like that in warfare, we have to train as we're going to fight. We have to live and operate like that on a day-to-day basis, even on daily administrative tasks you have to do in a unit area."[16]

In other words, "in-garrison mission command," as Darrell Frawley has termed it, will deliver both organizational and operational benefits because what happens upstream affects what happens downstream.[17] When guided by a shared purpose, any organization becomes more innovative, cohesive, and effective.

Another way in which operations and organizations ought to be alike but often are not concerns who gets to declare purpose. In most operations, the purpose is not determined by the team members or even their leader. Often expressed as commander's intent, purpose is assigned by someone further up the chain of command. However, in many standing organizations, incoming leaders are encouraged to put their own stamp on the mission statement. This misses the point. An organization's mission does not change just because its leader does. New leaders must address how best to accomplish their unit's purpose—not how to devise a different, more interesting, or more self-expressive purpose.

Across a variety of organizational improvement efforts in the military, including a recent study the authors contributed to on Air Force squadron vitality, we asked organizational leaders at all levels to describe the purpose of the units they lead.[18] Many had difficulty answering the question. Most commonly, these leaders recited only their unit's activities or duties, even when pressed for the larger, unspoken why of their work. Also common was dismissal of the question, with comments such as "it's obvious" or "it's self-evident," with no further elaboration, or "we all know our mission, so there's no need to discuss it." We also heard lofty descriptions of purpose that are too nondescript to be of much value, such as "we're here to defend our country." That is surely true, but it reveals little understanding of a unit's distinct part in that noble aim.

Finally, some leaders conflated their responsibilities as a leader with the purpose of the unit they led. They described their unit's purpose as something like "to take care of our members by creating an atmosphere that supports them and their families." While this is a good thing to do and helpful to the overall success of the team, it is not the purpose or critical outcome of the unit. It is not *why* the unit exists.

Fortunately, quite a few leaders can describe the purpose of their unit and appreciate the importance of its clarity. One Air Force security forces squadron commander explained, "Our purpose is about 'no harm': No harm to people, and then no harm to our assets. If we're talking about nuclear assets, then that priority is reversed," that is, smart, succinct, easily understood—and verifiable.

What Leaders Can Do

The Air Force study cited earlier, in addition to the authors' other work across the Services, has afforded an opportunity to learn from leaders who lead with clear and meaningful purpose. Here are some lessons from observations of those effective leaders.

Know the Unit's Purpose. Answering the question, "Why do we exist?" is devilishly hard, even though the resulting answer is usually simple. Organizational leaders who are able to answer that question usually come to it in one of two ways: deductively or inductively.

The deductive approach starts broadly and works toward specifics. For example, a leader may deduce a unit's overarching purpose by considering what problem(s) its standup aims to solve for its superior organization. Clues can also be gathered by considering what problems the unit ideally ought to solve for downstream supported organizations. This approach works because organizations are stood up to solve problems or meet challenges for people outside the organization. That outward-facing benefit is always the organization's purpose.

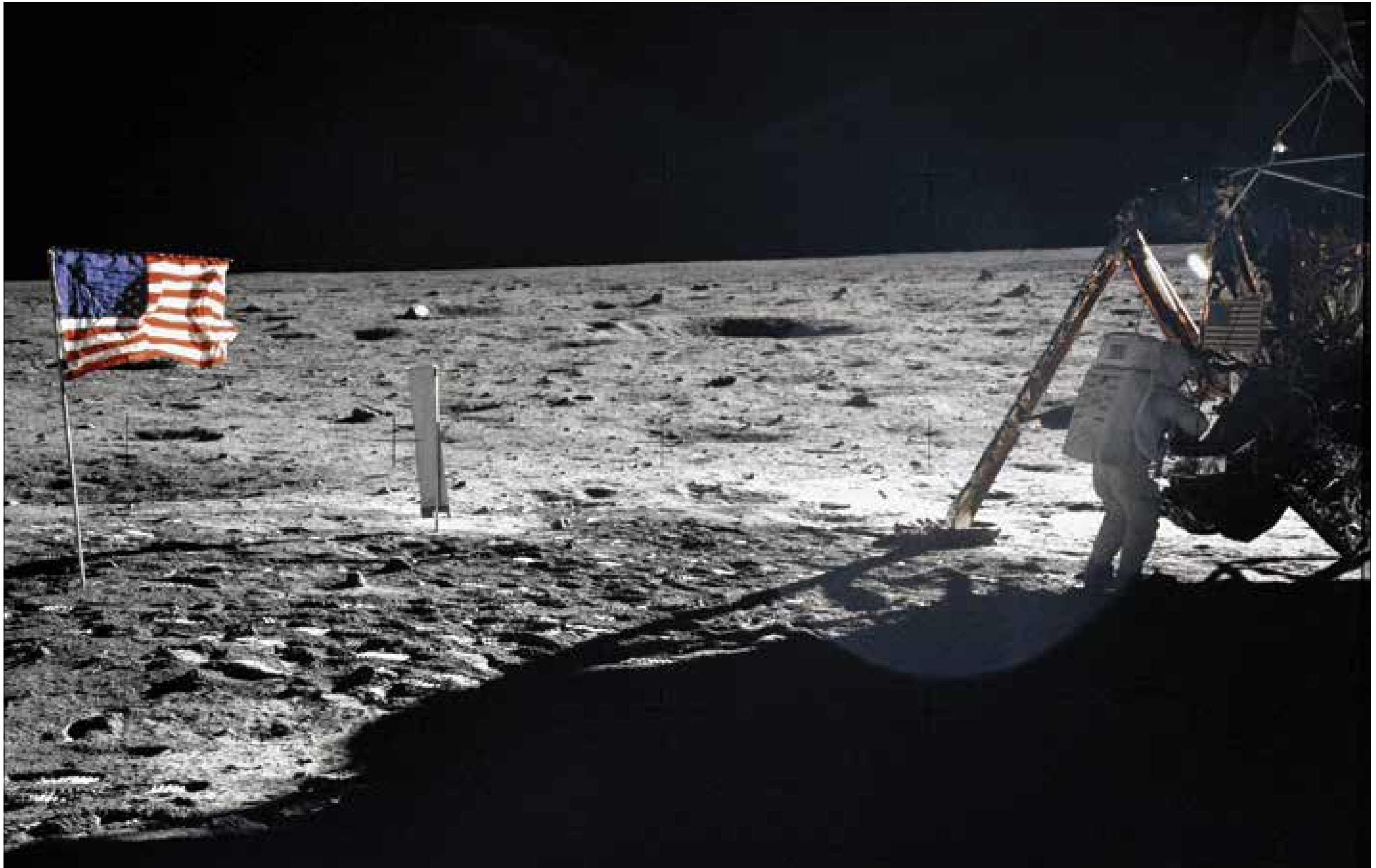
But the deductive approach is not for everybody. Especially for people quite close to the work of an organization, it might be easier to use the inductive approach—inferring purpose from activities. For them, the question to answer is, "Given the unit's primary tasks, what must its purpose be?" Based on the answer, leaders then can determine how best to state that purpose clearly. With this clarity, they return to their unit's tasks and determine what things it ought to do and ought not to do, revising based on a clearer view of purpose.

Both approaches can work, and success usually involves a combination of both: comparing forest to trees and back again until both the forest and the trees make sense and the purpose can be expressed in a clear and verifiable way.

Communicate Purpose Often and in Different Ways. Communicating organizational purpose means not only ensuring every team member knows the unit's purpose but also inspiring them to care about that purpose and to want to play a role in fulfilling it. As anthropologist-philosopher Gregory Bateson famously stated, "The meaning of your communication is the response you get."[19] Team members must believe, act on, and be willing to sacrifice based on that message. To that end, two aspects of communication are worth considering: variety and frequency.

Most new commanders determined to convey their unit's purpose would get high marks for variety during their first few weeks. They include the purpose in a short speech during their first commander's call, they put it on signs in hallways, they include it in guiding documents such as project charters and mission statements, and they put it under their email signature blocks. But the effort must be ongoing.

People need to be reminded that they are contributing to a meaningful purpose and, because of that, that they and their contributions are meaningful, too. *Creative redundancy*—making the same, important point repeatedly, but in a variety of ways and contexts—is an



Buzz Aldrin's photograph of Apollo 11 landing site captures mission commander Neil Armstrong on lunar surface, July 20, 1969 (NASA)

essential tool of effective leaders. These leaders never forgo an opportunity to revisit a central theme, to use an occasion, a success, or a failure to emphasize the things they care about and want subordinates to care about, too. This is not the same as merely using a slogan or story again and again. It is about creating a cycle between daily articulation of purpose and refining and amplifying performance based on that purpose. It is a big job that requires a leader's attention from the first day on the job to the change of command.

Make It Personal. Nonoperational organizations exist to support or enable operations, and their effectiveness is critical, but they are removed in time and place from military victory. That is why effective organizational leaders work hard to help subordinates see the golden thread between their sometimes-mundane tasks and the contribution of those tasks to the greater good. This leadership task demands framing or tailoring the message to the audience or the individual.

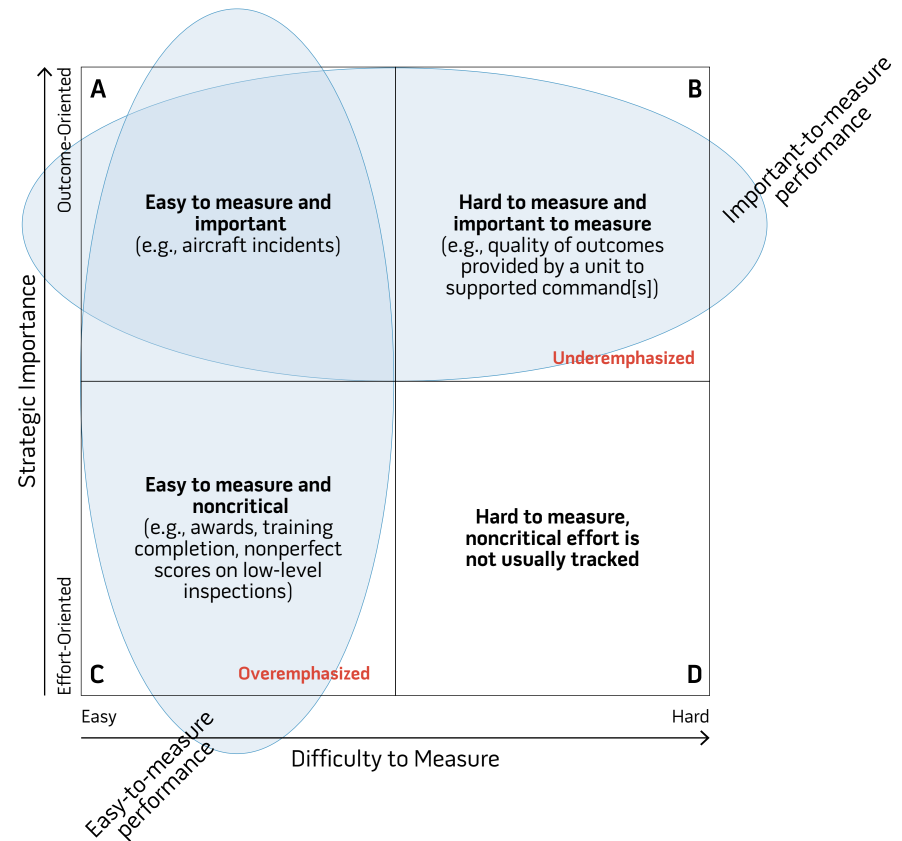
The Air Force security forces commander mentioned earlier—the one who understood his unit's purpose—recounted this conversation with a bored security forces Airman: "If you let someone through the gate without proper ID, what might happen?" The Airman shrugged and admitted a possible bad result, but the commander kept digging. "And if that happened, what might happen? And then what? And then?" The Airman got the point, one domino at a time, and finally saw how her often-tedious task contributed to a weighty and worthy purpose. Her job was not always interesting. That did not change. What did change was her personal connection to the good she does—making a powerful difference to the people and property she cares for. Many successful leaders have had some version of that conversation: a time when they entered a subordinate's frame of reference to help him or her see how his or her work fit into something greater.

One well-known technique is to have support personnel spend time with the people they are supporting.[20] Parachute riggers, for example, would benefit from meeting the operators who will use the chutes. Administrative personnel, who often are behind the scenes, might feel stronger ownership of the mission if they are shown around the ship or across the base where their customers reside, or if they are included in unit functions. Even the smallest acknowledgment from the people being supported can refuel a sense of purpose. Support jobs are high-leverage positions, but like a physical lever, much leverage resides far from the load—making it hard to see one's relevance and impact. It is a leader's job to help subordinates bridge that gap.

Reinforce with Actions. There is much a leader can do beyond talk to reinforce a unit's clear and meaningful purpose. Actions based on purpose will elevate a unit's stated purpose from rhetoric to reality. Following are four of the most powerful ways to do that.

Anchor Key Measures to Purpose. Measuring something is one way to convey that it is important, especially if any sort of consequence—positive or negative—is attached to the metric. That can be good news or bad, depending on what gets measured. Our study of Air Force squadron vitality revealed that many units succumb to the temptation to measure what is *easy* to measure instead of what is *important* to measure, thereby sending the wrong message. In other words, achievement of a unit's tasks often is easier to measure than achievement of its purpose (see figure).[21] Test scores, awards, or other proxies for achievement can lure leaders to focus on easily verified tasks when they may not be central to the unit's purpose. Measuring success based on compliance items such as ancillary training, fitness assessments, and the like is easy and may have to be done, but it cannot be allowed to overshadow success at delivering the unit's purpose.

Figure. Achievement of Task Easier to Measure Than Purpose



For example, imagine a training command charged with providing a leadership course. A central purpose of such a course might be for the course's students to demonstrate certain new leadership skills on the job. But measuring that outcome would require surveying or interviewing students' bosses, which is troublesome. That measurement falls into the important-to-measure but hard-to-measure category. Easier would be to check off all the material being covered and to survey students' satisfaction with the class before they depart. That might yield useful information, but it would not tell instructors whether they were having the desired impact. In fact, it might tilt course design away from the course's intended impact.

Make Overt, Purpose-Based Decisions. The leader reinforces purpose by referencing it when deciding how to allocate the unit's time, money, or energy. Purpose becomes the repeated and explicit touchstone for deciding, "What shall we do?" and "What shall we *not* do?"

Give Purposed-Based Feedback. Well-delivered feedback both teaches and motivates. However, when purpose is the point of reference for feedback, some additional benefits accrue: Performance on the thing that matters—that is, purpose—improves and understanding of the purpose improves.[22] If leadership guru Ken Blanchard is right that "feedback is the breakfast of champions," then purpose-based feedback is the breakfast of Olympians.

Align One's Own Behavior to Purpose. Subordinates are highly attuned to "glimpses of truth"—those brief moments that reveal the congruence between leaders' public personae and who they really are. An exquisitely articulated purpose understood by everyone means nothing if, in a glimpse of truth, subordinates see that the boss does not believe it or, worse, that the boss believes it does not apply to himself or herself. This usually happens when doing the right thing is also doing the hard thing. Walk the talk; it takes only a few missteps to hollow out a purpose that would uplift and direct the unit.

Leaders of military organizations must not become so distracted by the flood of daily activity that they forget—or allow their teams to forget—the point of all that activity. Clear and meaningful purpose helps teams pull together and in the right direction. *Clarity* speaks to the head, elevating decisionmaking by providing the context to make smarter decisions based on common aims. *Meaningfulness* speaks to the heart, elevating motivations and commitment. To provide both, leaders must know, communicate, and reinforce their unit's purpose. In every operation and every organization—large and small, temporary or ongoing—team members benefit when they see the point of their work, why it is important, and how they fit in to their organization's clear and meaningful purpose. The Nation then benefits when military units, whether in the action or supporting it, predictably fulfill their purpose. JFQ

Notes

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Joint Publications (JPs) Under Revision (to be signed within 6 months)

JP 1-0, *Personnel Support*

JP 2-0, *Joint Intelligence*

JP 3-0, *Joint Operations*

JP 3-03, *Joint Interdiction*

JP 3-36, *Joint Air Mobility and Sealift Operations*

JP X-XX, *Information*

JPs Revised (signed within last 6 months)

JP 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States, Vols. 1 and 2*

JP 3-05, *Special Operations*

JP 3-26, *Combating Terrorism*

JP 3-72, *Joint Nuclear Operations*

JP 3-85, *Joint Electromagnetic Spectrum Operations*

JP 5-0, *Joint Planning*