About 400 years ago, Miguel de Cervantes wrote in his epic Don Quixote, “He who is prepared has his battle half fought.” This adage is as true today as when it was first written. While most law enforcement tactical operations cannot be predicted with any degree of certainty, many are capable of being foretold long in advance. Parades, political rallies, championship sporting events, protests, strikes, carnivals, festivals and parties are only a few of those that are commonly preceded by invitations, posters, notices, handbills, brochures and the like. These identify not only the type of occasion, but even the times and places they will occur.

Other situations, like responses to natural disasters, are not quite so accommodating, but experienced experts can often identify likely locales and vulnerable times and effects, or at least eliminate those so improbable that they do not merit serious consideration.

With all this information available, why should a commander accept a tactical operation on the terms offered? Why not maximize those factors and influences that will enhance success and degrade those that would interfere, while at the same time avoiding the competing interests inherent in any ongoing operation? This is the purpose of a “shaping operation.”

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is also a countermeasure factor inherent in information operations. Informing the public in advance of tactical operations, for one example, not only allows them to take personal measures to avoid inconveniences and adverse consequences but serves to “inoculate” them from exaggerations and propaganda from adversaries who seek to gain advantage with misinformation.

Shaping operations are nearly always in a supporting role, but they are not always prior to other operations. In fact, shaping operations may continue through and even after the supported operation. Moreover, law enforcement shaping operations are frequently multi-disciplinary, and include those not ordinarily viewed as law enforcement in nature. Skills, knowledge and support from people working in parks and recreation, water and power, mass transit, public works, education and others, are commonly needed for a comprehensive approach to shaping a time and place to make them more conducive for a successful operation. Any commander who neglects or ignores the value of these types of operations does so at his or her own peril.

How important are shaping operations? Having the advantage of hindsight, would just two additional officers have made a difference in the JFK assassination? What if they had been stationed on the grassy knoll and book depository building?

Endnotes
1. Miguel de Cervantes, Don Quixote, Chapter XVII, 1615. Of note: Although it is nearly impossible that Cervantes was aware of it, the concept was expressed even earlier by Sun Tzu in The Art of War (c. 500 BC., translated by Samuel B. Griffith) when he stated “... to be prepared beforehand for any contingency is the greatest of virtues.”
2. As just one notable example, the Union’s early occupation and resolute defense of Cemetery Ridge during the Battle of Gettysburg is often cited as the decisive action that ensured the Union victory. For a law enforcement example, consider the implications of who controlled the “Texas Tower” and when.
3. It should go without saying that in this day and age, the “environment” includes all dimensions, especially the Internet.
4. On exceptionally rare occasions, a shaping operation can be designated as the principal operation. In law enforcement, this may occur when factors like favorable public opinion are deemed more important than prevailing in a civil disturbance.

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