

Acquisition as Deterrent

Maj. Dan Ward, USAF

THE CONFUSION, EXPENSE, AND DELAY *IS* THE WHOLE POINT...



The other night I had a dream. I was walking through a deserted part of the Pentagon, down a hallway I'd never seen before. I suddenly realized I had a slip of paper in my hand and, unsurprisingly, no clothes on whatsoever. Scrawled on the paper, in handwriting I did not recognize, were the words "6th floor, F-ring."

"Huh," I thought to myself. "I didn't know there was a 6th floor, or an F-ring. Must be new."

Dreams are funny that way, you know, with that funhouse distortion of reality they so often contain.

Ward is the chief of process improvement and reengineering in the Acquisition Chief Process Office, Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Acquisition Integration. He holds degrees in systems engineering, electrical engineering, and engineering management. He is Level III certified in SPRDE and Level I in PM, T&E, and IT.

Illustration by Jim Elmore

There was a staircase ahead, and I began to ascend, climbing endless steps with a dreamy slow-motion pace with which you are no doubt familiar. My legs felt like lead while my gut screamed to go faster. I briefly wondered where my clothes were.

Suddenly, I found myself wearing a formal uniform, standing outside a door that said, "Welcome to the Office of Acquisition Deterrence." There was no sign; the door actually said the words out loud. It was one of those kinds of dreams.

The door swung open invitingly, and I walked into a lush foyer with dark paneling. An elegantly calligraphed sign on the wall displayed a dictum by Sun Tzu: "All warfare is based on deception."

The rest of the walls were decorated in the traditional decorating scheme of military facilities, with images of high-tech weapons systems in action. I perused the photos of artillery pieces, jet fighters, and helicopters for a few moments before something struck me. These were not just any old weapons. They were the Navy's A-12 Avenger, the Army's RAH-66 Comanche helicopter, and the Crusader field artillery. A one-fifth scale model of the Sgt. York Division Air Defense Gun sat on a mahogany table. Those weapons, every single one of them, had been cancelled after significantly overrunning their budgets and schedules, often because the hopelessly complex technologies had become operationally irrelevant, ineffective, or both. Not a single one of those projects had delivered an operational capability. "Who would build such a hall of shame?" I wondered.

Suddenly, a giant man in a grey and orange uniform was standing at my side. He had two rows of six stars on each shoulder—a 12-star general. I told you, it was one of those dreams. With a deep voice, he said, "Ah, thank you for coming. I've been expecting you."

The Truth Revealed

The general's massive hand gestured for me to take a seat in one of the deeply padded, high-backed leather chairs that were scattered around the room. It was the most comfortable chair I'd ever sat in.

"What I'm about to tell you is likely to be quite a shock," he began. "It's also extremely classified. In fact, it's almost too classified to say out loud, and even though you're not really cleared to know this, you've left me no choice. I have to brief you in to the program before you do any more damage to our national defense posture."

He paused, taking a long drag from a huge cigar. "I won't beat around the bush. When it comes to acquisitions, you've got it all wrong. The truth is, the schedule delays, cost overruns, excessive complexity, and ineffective performance frequently associated with American military hardware development are not an accident. We do it that way on purpose." He paused again to let the words sink in.

"These supposedly unfortunate acquisition outcomes are not inadvertently caused by ineptitude, greed, or confusion," the general continued. "The truth is, it's all part of a deliberate strategy. Your efforts to introduce reform and efficiency are inadvertently undermining an important element of national defense, and they need to stop." He took another puff

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How could they?

from the cigar, and a river of smoke poured out of his mouth as he continued.

"Decades ago, we made a strategic decision that American military weapon development projects should be expensive, complex, and lengthy. The more time and money we spent, the better. We did this in order to discourage other nations from imitating us. It is a brilliant strategy, really. By spending billions of dollars and countless decades building hugely complex weapons systems—some of which never work and others of which barely work—we send a not-so-subtle message to our adversaries: 'You can't do this.' Heck, we can barely do it, and we're the United States of America."

I sat there in my comfortable chair, unable to move or blink, surrounded by a constantly expanding cloud of suffocating cigar smoke. My mind raced, "No, it can't be true. It can't be true!" But deep down, with ice-cold dream logic, I knew it was. It was all making so much sense to my slumbering mind. The Sun Tzu sign on the wall now read, "Appear weak when you are strong, and strong when you are weak."

"As long as our stuff is expensive, complex, and takes decades to accomplish," the general said, "nobody else will even try to develop advanced weaponry. How could they? Nobody else has the kind of money necessary to design, develop, and field stuff like the F-22 Raptor, the Future Combat System, or Naval supercarriers. As long as the expense, delay, and complexity seem inevitable, nobody else will have

the kind of patience and the persistent, consistent political will to do so. Nobody else has the necessary level of technical expertise required to construct such beasts. Nobody else can understand our Joint Capabilities Integration Development System process, that's for sure. For that matter, we don't really understand it either. That's not an accident. The confusion, expense, and delay is the whole point."

"Look, Major," he leaned in closely, thrusting his head through the smoke. "If we suddenly began to make weapons system development look easy, if we were to rapidly develop and deliver innovative weapons systems that were both inexpensive and simple, the rest of the world might decide that they, too, can build state-of-the-art weapons. And they might be right ... and then we'd be in a heap of trouble, wouldn't we? We'd have to fight them, and nobody wants that."

The Sun Tzu quotation on the wall changed again and now read, "Supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting."

"It's a disturbing thought, I know," the general said, "but our beleaguered, often-criticized defense acquisition community is actually serving an important deterrent role by convincing our adversaries to not even attempt to develop high-tech weapons to counter the U.S. military. Our inability to constrain costs and stick to budgets sends a clear message: Even the U.S. of A. has a brutally hard time doing this stuff. All you other countries shouldn't even think about it."

"Supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting."

Sun Tzu

"This strategy of acquisition deterrence is every bit as effective as the nuclear ICBM force was against the old USSR. Dadburnit, I miss the Soviets," he said with a sigh and another long pull on his cigar. "Our ICBM fleet never launched a missile against the commies—it wasn't supposed to. Its mission was to deter them from launching against us ... and it worked. They crumbled without a single nuke being dropped on their heads (or ours, for that matter). Our acquisition community, which consistently busts budgets and overruns schedules, is actually serving an important deterrent role. We chose not to do things better because to do so would invite imitation by our adversaries, and we'd lose our ability to deter the technical advancement of hostile militaries. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

I was still unable to move, frozen in my chair by dream-induced paralysis. The icy ball in my stomach had expanded to fill my entire torso, and a cold sweat bathed my forehead.

"Why do you think Skunk Works was classified for so long? To protect the technology, sure, but also to hide the method and to disguise the fact that we could do things faster, simpler, and cheaper when we wanted to. Come on now, do you really think all these supposedly bad outcomes were anything but deliberate? Do you really think all the smart people in the acquisition community over the last 50 years couldn't figure out how to make this acquisition thing work? Of course they could, but I wouldn't let them do it—at least not in public or on a regular basis. I allowed enough successes to throw off any suspicion of our real motives, but not so many that the bad guys might decide to copy us."

He sat back in his chair and looked pensive. He now had a fistful of cigars in each hand, and he smoked them all at once.

"It was really touch-and-go for a while in the '90s, when NASA started their Faster, Better, Cheaper initiative. Nine of the first 10 projects in that portfolio were huge successes, and we nearly lost our deterrent edge. People started to realize high-tech systems could be, well, fast and cheap. That is, until 1999, when I personally arranged for four out of five of their projects to fail, and the whole Faster, Better, Cheaper thing got torpedoed. Now the idea of Faster, Better, Cheaper is just a joke." He broke into a loud guffaw that filled the room like smoke, filled my ears, filled my eyes, filled my head....

Galactical Crimes

Suddenly, I was standing on the surface of an alien desert world. It looked oddly familiar. Two orange moons circled overhead, their rapid orbits producing visible movement across the sky. A small group of strange-looking creatures was clustered along the edge of a pit in the sand, conferring and discussing something that was obviously important. You can always tell that things are important in dreams like this. One alien stood alone, a few feet away from the others. I carefully crept forward to listen in.

"For the crime of reducing the sector security of the Federated Technocracy, we sentence Commander Krog to death in this Raslac pit. As program manager of the Peregrine Starfighter program, you delivered an innovative and highly effective new weapon system at half the expected cost and in half the allocated time. By publicly demonstrating the capability to rapidly develop and field weapons systems that are simultaneously inexpensive, simple, and technologically advanced, you provided our enemies, the Minotaur-Squids of the Indigo Zone, with an example they could follow, and which they did indeed follow.

"Following your example, the Minotaur-Squids built several new 16th generation starfighters in a matter of weeks. Thus emboldened by their success in developing new weapons, they escalated hostilities against the Federation and destroyed several allied planets. You are responsible for these

losses. We will now throw you into this pit, and you will be digested by the ravenous Rascal for 22 years. Do you have any last words?"

"I understand my fault," Krog said with brave dignity, "and accept my punishment." Then they pushed him into the pit without a struggle, and he silently disappeared into the gaping maw of the unseen Rascal.

The Final Judgment

Suddenly, I was back in the Office of Acquisition Deterrence, face to face with the 12-star general in the grey and orange uniform. We stared at each other for a long moment, and his eyes silently told me he knew all about Krog, all about the Peregrine and the Rascal. He knew. I wondered if he was an alien.

With a surprising gentleness, he put a hand on my shoulder. It warmly engulfed most of my upper arm, and there was a promise of steel behind the warmth.

"Look, it's not your fault, Major. You were just doing what we said we wanted you to do, but now you know that's not what we really want. You were just trying to make things more efficient, to prevent us from going over budget and over schedule again. But you understand now, don't you? You understand that you can't do that anymore?"

"See, it's one thing when the Government Accountability Office tells us we're screwing up and we should cut schedules and spend less money. That's all part of the strategy. Those GAO reports really help spread the word that weapon systems acquisitions is an expensive, difficult, complex business. But when a program manager like you starts to actually do things, well, the people in this office need to take action. Fortunately, it doesn't happen as often as you might think."

His words made so much sense at the time, given the gauzy conviction and clarity that is so often found in dreams but that mercifully melts away in the light of day. He led me back to the doorway, and as the door swung open, I discovered the hallway was gone. In its place was a sandy Rascal pit. The general pushed, and I began to slowly fall towards a distant circle of pointy teeth. I woke up with a start, my heart pounding and my brow soaked with sweat. I sat panting in the dark bedroom. My clock read 2:22.

"Whasa matt'r?" my wife mumbled from the other side of the bed, blissfully half asleep.

"Nothing, honey," I answered, trying to keep my voice from trembling. "It was just a bad dream. Go back to sleep. It was just a bad dream."

The author welcomes comments and questions and can be contacted at the.dan.ward@gmail.com.



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