



Apt Slogans for Acquisition in Austere Times

Roy L. Wood, Ph.D.

Off-quoted slogans can sometimes capture nuggets of wisdom that actually are helpful in informing our decisions in extraordinary times like these. Some slogans serve as heuristics and some to describe behaviors—good and bad. Most are comfortingly familiar.

Some slogans emerge when times are tough and we face difficult choices. Here are a few familiar ones that may prove helpful as we move forward into a much more austere defense budget environment.

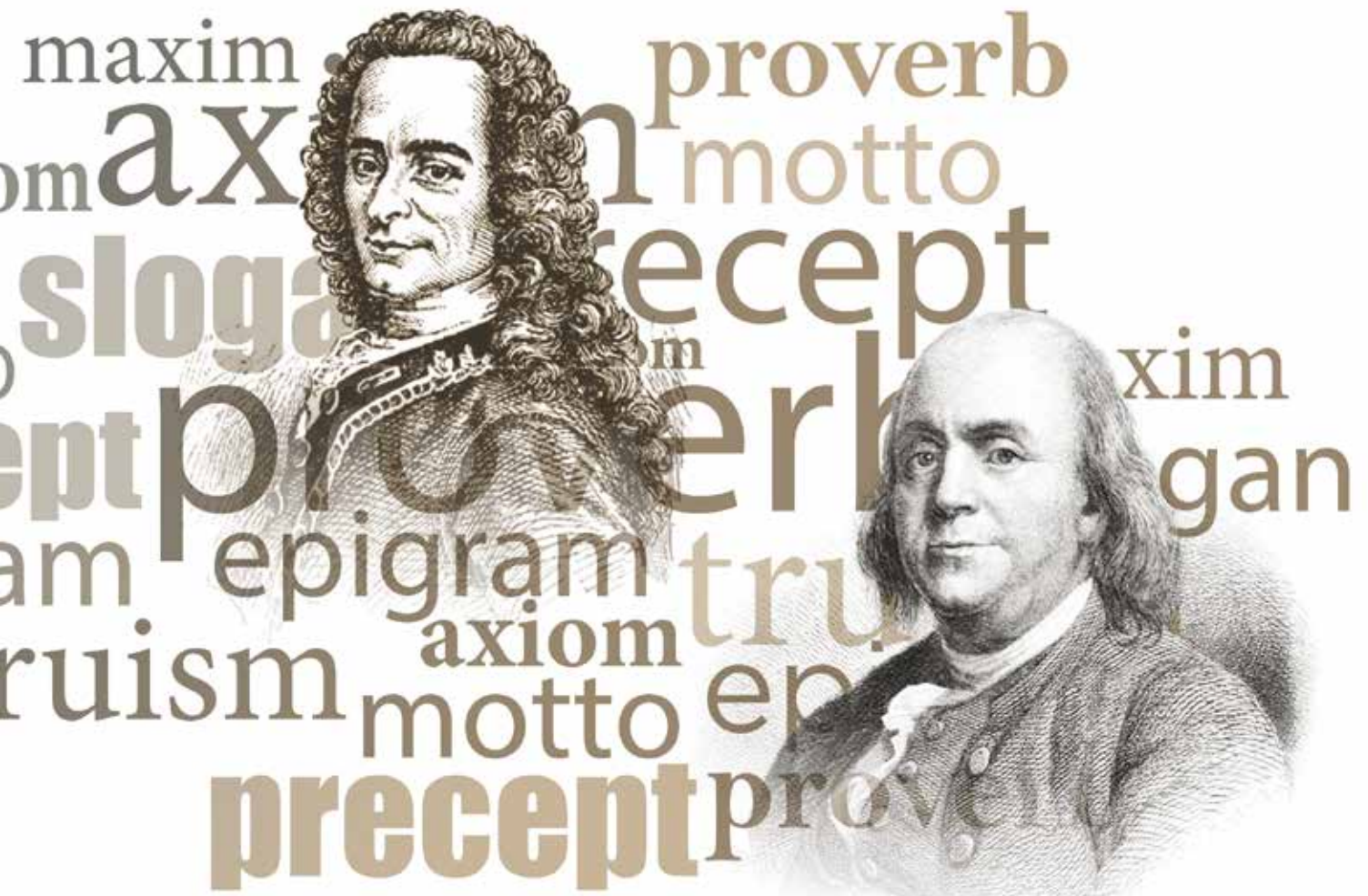
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“Better is the Enemy of Good Enough”

Creating Affordable Requirements

Numbers matter, and quantity has a quality all its own. If we build equipment that is too expensive and too precious to risk sending it into combat, hasn't the adversary already won a victory? This isn't to say we should not strive to build very good equipment that will protect our warfighters and take the fight to the enemy, but do we really need exquisite systems that force us to limit quantities we can afford to buy? The Navy, for instance, has extraordinarily capable aircraft carriers, destroyers, and submarines. Yet, for two decades each Chief of Naval Operations has complained that we need more ships than we have been able to afford to produce. This is a vicious cycle. The high design and development costs for state-of-the-art weapons systems spread over a few production units drives those per-unit costs to unaffordable levels. Dragging out those few production units over a long period to preserve the shrinking industrial capability to produce them

drives costs up even further. Higher costs are pushed to the “out-years” along with production schedules exacerbating this unaffordability cycle.

All-out mobilization-style production clearly is not possible (or desirable), but isn't a more balanced capability strategy called for now? Building a few highly capable weapons systems alongside a greater number of good-enough systems will help balance the overall portfolio cost and keep the industrial capability warm. For instance, let's build a robust air-independent propulsion (AIP) conventional submarine alongside a Virginia-class nuclear follow-on. Existing AIP boats (all foreign designs, unfortunately) are capable and less expensive than nuclear submarines, run with a smaller crew, and can perform many of the missions very well. Building these ships would help maintain industry's submarine design talent, provide shipbuilders a more robust and predictable workload, and be good training platforms from which to select nuclear crews. And we could buy them in greater

quantities. AIP submarines would be good enough for many missions.

Similarly, a few years into the Iraq war, a National Guard aviator friend was assigned to counter-Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) missions, flying slow ahead of convoys and using his Mark-1 eyeball to look for disturbed earth or other tell-tale signs of IEDs. He was performing this mission in a high-performance F-16! This sort of scouting mission would clearly be better suited to a Piper Cub than a current generation jet aircraft. Where were the good-enough aircraft?

Finally, not to leave out any Service, one may provocatively ask whether commercial Toyota 4x4s could not be used instead of much more expensive Humvees or Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles for a variety of transport and scouting missions in low-threat areas. This ubiquitous commercial truck seems to be the vehicle of choice for insurgents in all sorts of terrain and even in combat environments. Buying a dozen or more of these good-enough commercial vehicles for the price of an MRAP might just be a smart investment for use in many low-intensity environments.

“Time is Money”

Managing Cost and Schedule

In acquisition, time and money are inextricably entwined. Most major studies, like those of the Packard Commission and the Defense Acquisition Performance Assessment (DAPA) called for shorter procurement cycles as a way to

Finally, and more subtly, when government and industry embark on a program, they assemble skilled teams to do the work. These teams largely stay in place through good times and delays. If a program is delayed, or stretched out to accommodate budget perturbations (a common acquisition tactic), the program team’s labor costs continue to accrue. This “marching army” effect drives up costs regardless of their productivity. Shorter programs are better, because time is money.

“There is no Substitute for Experience”

Creating a Capable Workforce

In the mid-1990s, after the Cold War ended, the Department of Defense took a “peace dividend” and budgets shrank. In an effort to streamline acquisition, many of the processes and experienced people in the government “bureaucracy” were laid aside in favor of letting the defense industry assume many previously governmental responsibilities. This, it was hoped, would leverage industry’s profit motive and get the government out of the way of progress, reducing acquisition costs.

It didn’t work. Indeed, the ill effects of the strategy still haunt the department’s acquisition efforts. The previous symbiotic relationship between capable government program managers, engineers, and contracting officers and their counterparts in industry evaporated. Industry was left to its own devices, and many of the more experienced government professionals retired or left government service. In the last 10 years, the failure of the previous strategy has become clear,

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save money. Longer programs simply cost more, for a variety of reasons.

Obviously, there is a relationship between the complexity of a program and the time it takes to design, develop, and produce the system. Complexity drives cost up. Longer programs with large budgets also present enticing targets of opportunity for comptrollers looking for ready cash to fix more immediate problems, resulting in budget churn, the need for replanning, and unproductive—but costly—activity. Further, longer programs—some decades long—are subject to well-meaning but expensive changes in requirements as new technologies become available or threats change.

but without an experienced workforce, more and more statute, policy, and oversight have been imposed in vain hope of regaining control. Predictably, process is a poor substitute for experience and oversight cannot replace solid government program leadership.

Recently, the department has attempted to rebuild the acquisition workforce, but this is a long and difficult process that will take years, perhaps decades (perhaps never in the current budget environment). In the meantime, interns and new hires are forced to assume much more responsibility than they are ready for. Their supervisors, brought up in the era of hands-off government, are largely ill prepared to provide the mentoring and leadership the new workers need.

As government reassumes its responsibility in acquisition, a continued long-term focus is needed on recruitment and retention, robust training, and proactive professional development and mentoring to broaden and deepen the experience of high-potential emerging leaders. This will be challenging as we approach yet another defense drawdown, but is necessary for our future success. Moving forward, we also need to shift our focus back to product and away from complex processes, and lighten the oversight burden that has not provided value in improving acquisition outcomes. These are hefty and counter-cultural ideas, but there is no substitute for experience in regrowing a capable workforce.

“Doing More with Less”

Thriving in Spite of Shrinking Budgets

The cyclical nature of the defense budget is about to experience another downturn. Already, talk has started of “hollow forces” and a return to post-Vietnam troubles. Leaders encourage doing more with less, and throughout the department there is an almost manic search for efficiencies. These efforts are necessary, but not sufficient. As noted earlier, we need to pay close attention to requirements—buying good-enough, rather than exquisite, systems. We need to pay attention to program timelines—shorter is better, because time really is money. We need to continue to invest in professionalizing and rebuilding a capable government acquisition workforce.

Finally, we need to appreciate the opportunity that a budget drawdown brings. Shrinking budgets mean that brute-force, throw-money-at-the-problem, approaches won’t be possible. We need to be innovative, and look for elegant, simple, and affordable alternatives to provide needed (as opposed to wanted) capabilities for our warfighters. We need to understand that “doing more with less” will produce only marginal results, and that we need to focus on doing better with less. This may mean building larger quantities of good-enough systems to keep our warfighters equipped and industrial base warm. It may mean providing simpler systems like Piper Cubs and Toyota pickups to do the utility jobs and building fewer units of the more capable stuff for the real fight. It may mean producing modest capabilities as quickly as possible, rather than waiting decades for exquisite capabilities. Shrinking budgets will mean doing things smarter with a workforce that recognizes and appreciates this approach and is itself sufficiently capable and experienced to make it happen. Doing better with less can actually mean doing more with less.

Let’s shake off the doldrums and get started. Here’s one more slogan:

“If not now, when? If not us, who?”



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