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Thinking and Acting Like an Early Explorer: Operational Art is Not a Level of War

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Operational art is not a "level of war" as our current western military doctrines assert. It is, rather, thinking and acting like an explorer before the days of Google Earth, The Weather Channel, and Global Positioning Systems. While tactical and strategic thinking are fundamentally different, both kinds of thinking must take place in the explorer's brain, but in separate compartments.

To appreciate this, think of the metaphor of an early American explorer trying to cross a large expanse of unknown terrain long before the days of the modern conveniences mentioned in the previous paragraph. The explorer knows that somewhere to the west lies an ocean he wants to reach. He has only a sketch-map of a narrow corridor drawn by a previously unsuccessful explorer. He also knows that highly variable weather and frequent geologic activity can block mountain passes, flood rivers, and dry up desert water sources. He also knows that some native tribes are hostile to all strangers, some are friendly and others are fickle, but that warring and peace-making among them makes estimating their whereabouts and attitudes difficult. He also knows that the snows are less likely to be deep in the south, and that some fur trappers have reported an extensive mountain range running north to south. They have also provided vague descriptions of several ways to cross them. Finally, the expedition must head west because turning back can only lead to shame and penury; even perishing in the attempt to cross the wilderness will bring honor; and reaching the ocean will mean certain fame and probable wealth.

The explorer knows he or she must generally head west, but may have to veer either northwest or southwest, or even due south or due north for short distances. And he or she knows that natives may suddenly be encountered who can either help or hinder the party's westward progress. The logic the explorer must follow is one that will exploit the potential for a successful crossing to the far ocean within the country the expedition is traversing, based on an understanding drawn from partial clues only. This is choosing a strategic logic or rationale to decide what short-term concrete ends are achievable, reflect progress and allow the expedition to learn how to make even more progress. Whatever his strategic rationale of the moment, it is only as good as his current understanding. It is inconceivable that any strategy of ways and means he could formulate at the outset would not require extensive revision as he progressed and learned more about the country. (Assuming he was not capable of easily overpowering all known and unknown potential difficulties – a very rare case, indeed.)

Tactics is about taking sensible concrete actions to make progress toward the ocean. In other words; the explorer must send scouting parties in various directions at some risk to find the way forward, and at the same time must steadily move the main body of his party and its possessions and supplies of trade goods ever westward. The expedition must divide its manpower and resources between moving camp and learning about the country. It must secure the help of friendly tribes, while avoiding hostile ones. And it must react to unforeseen dangers (such as avoiding ambush along an invitingly easy route) and seize unexpected opportunities the scouts uncover (such as accepting the guidance of a mountain man and his native wife through the foreboding mountain range). These are all tactical choices based on previous and provisional choices of strategic rationale.

Strategy is about choosing the “best” way forward – one that usefully exploits the potential of what is known about the terrain, the weather, and the natives. The explorer, as the expedition advances into the wilderness, begins to piece together the clues the scouts have gathered. The better the guidance to scouts and their scouting, the better the map the explorer can construct of the terrain and the better the expedition leader’s understanding of strategic possibilities. This map will not be as accurate as Google Earth, and it will never be exact, but it will be a sufficient basis for making strategic choices such as: what available routes show more or less promise, which possible interim objectives provide an improved position for moving the main body forward toward the ocean, what route will avoid hostile tribes and encounter friendly ones, and what scouting objectives would be most fruitful for strategic learning.

But strategic rationales for tactical actions are only good for the short term until they can be discarded and replaced by knowledge learned as a result of interacting with the complex environmental system of mountains, streams, trappers and hostile, friendly, and indifferent native tribes. The explorer’s journey into the wilderness is also a purposeful journey of learning. In fact, effective explorers are always improving their scouting. And the expedition’s maps are constantly in revision.

Because choosing a strategic rationale for the next tactical action is a conscious act of creation, the responsible leadership must underwrite it. The leader of the exploration takes responsibility for the strategic choices of routes and objectives on his journey. For instance, his scouts may offer up two strategic choices. One river valley heads southwest, and another one goes to the northwest. The southwest branch is tempting because it offers the possibility of less snow and a shorter route to the ocean, but the northwestern one goes to a junction at which one branch heads toward a possible pass through the mountains, and into the lands of a well-known friendly tribe. The leader must accept the consequences of the strategic choice.

Tactics operates in a system that can be assumed “closed” within the time frame of planned tactical actions. The tactical practices of the expedition can be based on knowledge and skills that are widely applicable, or they can be invented on the spot for a unique circumstance, and some function by durable laws of nature, but all have to do with solving some concrete and real problem the expedition leader has said needs solving. Tactical decisions are about how to optimize such functioning “in this particular case” and thus achieve the concrete “stepping stone” objectives identified in the strategy. Conviction is a requirement in tactics. Without conviction nothing difficult gets done.

Skepticism is a requirement in strategy, the art of plotting the way ahead among great uncertainties. Strategy operates in a system that we must assume to be “open” within the time frame we are exploring. It would make no sense for the explorer standing at the edge of the unknown wilderness to plan backward from a particular harbor on the western ocean to the expedition’s jumping off point. The explorer has no idea what path will take him across the terrain and what obstacles and opportunities might be encountered along the way. The explorer only decides whether going northwest or southwest is the “best” strategic choice *from his current position*.

Once that decision has been made the explorer then must also decide “the right way” to traverse the chosen path. This is tactics. Tactics is about reasoning backward from the next concrete tactical end. In this case it might be the next fork in the valley that requires the next strategic choice about the “best way forward” from there.

The tactical decision-makers of the expedition can reliably plan backward from tactical mission objectives to tactical ways and means because the causal logic of the expedition’s tactical functions is not likely to change on the way to the next tactical objective. But the strategic decision-maker must constantly evolve his strategic rationale. The expedition of exploration must search for a way through from where it is, having only a general bearing in mind, and without a clear idea of whether the expedition will end up at the mouth of the Columbia, or in San Francisco Bay.

A strategic end is conceptual and general; it cannot be specific or concrete. It would be foolish to make it so. A very specific desirable end may be impossible to achieve, while the route to an acceptable one may be readily at hand after some progress. Or, an even better outcome than could be first imagined may become available by a new route not currently exposed. Strategy is moving from one promising position to another, occasionally retracing steps to find a way around obstacles, and following where learning takes it.

The expedition leadership must periodically construct a new strategic logic for its short-term tactical actions that will allow them to make incremental improvements of position. And how well they do this is dependent on their strategic conceptual mapping skills and on the effectiveness of their scouting and strategic learning -- the thought given to scouting objectives; and the quality of scouting skills (moving unobtrusively across the terrain, spotting relevant clues in the environment, making connections with potential guides to the region, and drawing valuable information from them).

Expedition success is also dependent on the critical and creative thinking of the leadership who must make strategic and tactical sense of the information the scouts provide. What they must do is less analysis than synthesis, and less deduction than abduction. (Abduction, a method of logical inference introduced by Charles Sanders Peirce, is the process of inference that produces a hypothesis as its end result. Abductive reasoning starts when an inquirer considers a set of seemingly unrelated facts, armed with an intuition that they are somehow connected.

Diagnosticians and detectives are commonly associated with this style of reasoning.) And they must be skeptical of their own beliefs and biases, especially their belief in the adequacy of previous knowledge about the wilderness they are traversing. And they must be actively hunting for that first clue to falsify their strategic theory rather than seeking comfort in the large number of clues that may confirm it. It takes only one new fact that can't be explained by the previous logic to mandate a revision of strategy. For instance, the discovery of some snow at a lower elevation than thought possible at this latitude might not preclude getting to the next tactical objective, the next base camp, but it might indicate that a hoped for mountain pass up ahead may be denied.

In the end it takes effective tactics and wise strategy to succeed. If the strategy is faulty, excellent tactics are not likely to matter. And if the tactics are faulty, excellent strategy is not likely to matter either. This, of course, is not a new discovery, only a reminder. So what is new here? This has been a much-simplified way to explain the many important differences between tactics and strategy but I have not, yet, mentioned operational art. Operational art is not a level of war, or the art of generalship. It is what goes on in the explorer's mind, the mediating and balancing interaction between his strategic and tactical reasoning.

We doctrine writers of the 1980's inserted operational art as a mid-level of war between tactics and strategy – making it the art of translating the governing strategy into the implementing tactics of the “tactical echelons.” And thus, making operational art the province of “campaigning” generals. Because of the way I was conditioned to think then, that strategy was the business of the upper echelons and tactics the business of the lower ones, I miss-translated an idea borrowed from Soviet doctrine about the mediation between strategy and tactics. I was then a product of indoctrination in the US Army's War and Command and Staff Colleges. These institutions, and the business schools of the time, taught based on the industrial age organizational model of the head (where strategic decisions are made) and the rest of the body (where tactical decisions implement the strategy). I now believe that, without violating the historical meaning of the terms strategy and tactics, this is a much more useful and natural way to think of the relationship between tactics, strategy and operational art.

In fact, this allows one to close the conceptual gap between our bifurcated way of thinking about warfare between nation states and that between states and armed movements of any kind. It also helps do the same for the two tactical operating modes that have recently surfaced in new Army concepts – “combined arms maneuver” and “wide area security.”

Campaigning, another word for operational art, can occur at any scale, and in any milieu, as a close look at what our best company, battalion, and brigade commanders have been doing in Iraq and Afghanistan. In fact, most of our extended operations of the last decade have been multi-echelon campaigns of the most complex kind. Thus campaigns depend on sound operational art – the mediating and balancing mental interaction between strategic and tactical reasoning -- from the top down, and from the bottom up.

Moreover, this way of relating tactics, strategy, and operational art is useful to making headway in all competitive situations in complex, unbounded, interactive, and unpredictable human environments, such as any extended business, military, or political endeavor. And this way of

thinking is a stepping-stone to understanding why a well thought-through “design inquiry” has such great potential at all levels of command. It is a methodology the operational artist uses to shape, revise, and evolve his strategy and to link it to his tactics.

A design inquiry is really looking at a situation closely and with “new eyes” to develop a better understanding for the purposes of formulating (or re-formulating) a strategy. *A strategy is a hypothesis for exploiting “the way things appear to be” in a particular situation by taking a number of specific parallel and sequential concrete steps designed to advance toward some conceptual aim.* In other words, if we create these new realities, then we will not only progress toward our goal, but be in a better position to advance further by gaining a better understand of “the way things appear to be” to avoid misfortune and to reveal new opportunities for continuing progress. “The way things appear to be” is an understanding, at minimum, of what elements of the situation including oneself seem to be key, how they might relate, how the current situation came to be, how the situation might change, and how elements of the situation and the currents of change might be employed, sidestepped, avoided, removed, blocked or manipulated to gain advantage on the way forward.

But that is the topic of another article.

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