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SISYPHUS ON THE MOUNTAINTOP
Acquisition Reform: Past and Future

November 2024

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— The MITRE Corporation

Ancient History

In 2009, when I was a Major in the Air Force, I wrote an article for Defense Acquisition University's magazine titled "Call Me Sisyphus." The piece summarized almost a half-century's worth of failed acquisition reform efforts and bemoaned the lack of progress in improving acquisition outcomes. Despite the title, the article ended on a somewhat hopeful note—but frankly it did not paint a particularly confident picture that the defense acquisition community would ever see a better future. Like the Greek myth of Sisyphus, doomed to eternally push a boulder up a hill, history seemed to suggest that improving defense acquisitions was a task both laborious and futile.

Today's acquisition environment remains far from perfect, but there are real signs of major improvements. As I look across the acquisition landscape of 2024, I'm seeing a large-scale shift toward new approaches and methods that deliver better acquisition outcomes—both programmatically and operationally.

Signs of Progress

Specifically, I'm seeing wide adoption of modular, incremental approaches for rapid prototyping, particularly using the Middle Tier of Acquisition Pathway. I'm seeing increased use of flexible authorities and faster delivery of operational capabilities. I'm seeing tighter and more frequent linkages between acquisition and operations. I'm seeing niche innovation units like the Defense Innovation Unit (DIU) scaling up and building effective, enduring partnerships with legacy organizations. I'm seeing military "software factories" prove that it's possible to "continuously deliver software that adds value to the warfighter." I'm seeing capabilities get fielded faster and cheaper, with better alignment to operational needs.

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I and other reform advocates spent decades imagining, describing, practicing, and advocating for these innovative acquisition methods. I don't want to declare victory prematurely, but these changes seem to be taking root and making a real difference. I might even go so far as to say, Sisyphus has reached the mountaintop.

ULTRA

For example, CENTCOM is currently flying the Unmanned Long-Endurance Tactical Reconnaissance Aircraft (ULTRA), which is reportedly capable of keeping a 400-pound payload airborne for 80 hours without refueling. The operational performance of this drone is both impressive and important, but the system's acquisition and programmatic results are equally impressive.

Although MQ-9 Reapers cost roughly $30M each, the Air Force is buying *four* ULTRAs for $35M—so ULTRA's price tag is about 30% what the Reaper costs. For anyone who is tempted to object to that comparison on the grounds that the Reaper is designed to do more than ULTRA—that's the point. As DZYNE CEO Matt McCue put it, the military doesn't "need to fly a 'Ferrari' when it can just use a 'pickup truck.'" Moving away from exquisite technologies and toward simpler, less expensive, more focused systems that align with specific operational needs is an important behavioral shift. The fact that ULTRA is more of a pickup truck than a Ferrari is a good thing—programmatically, technically, and operationally.

ULTRA was developed quickly, in part because it leveraged previous work from the Long Endurance Aircraft Program, which produced a drone with a 40-hour dwell time. ULTRA is a terrific example of iterative, incremental development that leverages prior work. Perhaps most importantly, ULTRA was developed in close collaboration with users—a practice that is increasingly popular these days but was actively *discouraged* in previous eras. When I was a Lieutenant, Captain, and Major, I was explicitly and repeatedly told—by multiple leaders in several different program offices—that "acquirers don't need to talk to operators." I always found that perspective ridiculous, and I worked hard to find ways around the barriers this notion set up between developers and users. It is gratifying to see this mindset changing, and I hope this more enlightened perspective continues to spread.

Enterprise Test Vehicle

Keeping with the unmanned aerial vehicle theme for a moment, the Air Force's new Enterprise Test Vehicle is a modular drone prototype that uses an open system architecture and deliberately sets out to deliver a low-cost solution that is *not* over-engineered. To foster speed, competition, and flexibility, the Department of Defense (DoD) picked four companies to develop the prototypes, and directed each to "minimize the use of expensive materials." This partnership between the Air Force and DIU aims to pick one of the four prototypes to be "rapidly scaled into production," with an emphasis on manufacturability. Pretty much everything about this scenario lines up with reform recommendations my colleagues and I were making 15 years ago. Sisyphus would be proud.

Vista

Then there's Vista, the artificial intelligence (AI)–controlled fighter jet that flew its first dogfight

in September 2023. In May 2024, Vista ran an hour-long flight that simulated combat against a human-piloted F-16, with the Secretary of the Air Force (SECAF) sitting in Vista's front seat. To go from first flight to "SECAF onboard" in just eight months is breathtakingly fast, far exceeding the pace of development I hoped for back in 2009. To be fair, the May flight was a tech demo, not an operationally fielded capability. But the system was clearly deemed mature enough to put a senior leader in the aircraft, which is a pretty big deal. The Air Force currently plans to put an AI-enabled fighter into the field in 2028—just a couple years from now. That short timeline is itself a big step forward for acquisitions.

Commissary IT

Proving that it's not all about aircraft, the Defense Commissary Agency recently published its first Commercial Solutions Opening (CSO) as part of an effort to modernize its Enterprise Business Systems. As the solicitation explains, this will be a "1-3 phase competitive process that may result in the award of FAR-based contracts under Part 12 Commercial Item Procedures or Other Transaction Agreements (OTAs) for prototype projects." You know innovative concepts like CSOs and OTAs are having a moment when they are being used not just for high-tech systems like drones and artificial intelligence, but also to update the Commissary's IT systems.

Gathering Momentum

I've written about successful acquisition programs several times over the years (alongside my gloomy Sisyphus-style articles). Previously, those good-news stories tended to be exceptions and outliers, not statistically significant trend indicators. It used to be hard to find such examples, but now—like the four described above—they are popping up much more frequently, across all the Services.

This is not the case for *every* acquisition program, of course. Plenty of efforts still end up costing more, taking longer, and delivering less than promised. But the DoD also has powerful new tools in place to enable better outcomes, and is expanding the group of practitioners who know how to use those tools.

In a recent gathering of senior acquisition leaders, there was a clear consensus that our situation has fundamentally changed since overarching acquisition policies were updated in January 2020. The group generally seemed to agree that the new Adaptive Acquisition Framework is enabling speed and efficiency in ways the previous system rarely did. One participant even said that acquisition is no longer the slow part of the system—no longer the bottleneck. Given the long history of slow acquisitions, that is a remarkable statement.

While the pacing challenge of China is a legitimate and important concern, one participant observed that "it is not true as a blanket statement" that China is outperforming the United States. To be sure, China is making progress and moving fast in some areas, but it is also falling behind in many critical areas, in large part because the DoD's acquisition system has become increasingly agile and innovative. There's hope for Sisyphus yet.

The View from the Peak

I don't know if you've ever climbed a mountain. Me, I lived in northern Italy as a kid and spent a lot of time hiking with my Scout troop in the Dolomite mountains on the edge of the Alps. Then we moved to Colorado Springs, where my Scouting adventures continued across the Rockies. I went to college in the Adirondacks, and my first assignment was to Albuquerque, nestled up against the Sandias. The point is I've spent a lot of time in the mountains, and climbed more than I can count. If there's one thing I've learned from all those hikes, it's that even if the view from the trailhead makes

the nearest peak look like the highest one around, once you reach the summit you always discover a whole bunch of other peaks stretching out ahead of you. Always. Which brings us back to Sisyphus.

Camus famously wrote, "one must imagine Sisyphus happy," and that sounds good to me. But what we probably shouldn't imagine is Sisyphus accomplishing the task once and for all. Even if he manages to get his boulder to the nearest summit, there will always be more peaks ahead. That is probably what both Camus and the ancient Greeks were saying—although I'm an engineer, not a philosopher, so maybe I garbled that part.

Either way, the point is that the defense acquisition world has made enormous progress in the past five years. I'd love to go back and tell myself from 2009 that we kind of did it. We pushed that rock to the top of the mountain, we put those ideas into policy and into practice—and they pretty much worked the way we hoped they would. The acquisition system is faster, simpler, and more agile than it used to be. It's not perfect, but it's a heck of a lot better than it was.

Enjoy the View

My message to the acquisition community in 2024 is this: we worked hard to reach this summit, so let's take a moment to enjoy the view. Let's acknowledge the progress we've made. Let's recognize that we are indeed standing on a mountaintop that previously seemed unreachable. Now that we've blazed the trail, let's lend a hand to our colleagues who haven't quite arrived yet and are still working their way up this particular mountain.

But as we enjoy the view, let's not get too comfortable. There's a whole range of other summits stretched out ahead of us. Let's set our sights on the next peak and get to work on carving a new path.

About the Author

Dan Ward is military technologist and innovation catalyst at MITRE. He served for more than 20 years as an acquisition officer in the U.S. Air Force, where he specialized in leading high-speed, low-cost technology development programs. Dan is the author of four books: *PUNK* (2023), *LIFT* (2019), *The Simplicity Cycle* (2015), and *F.I.R.E.* (2014).
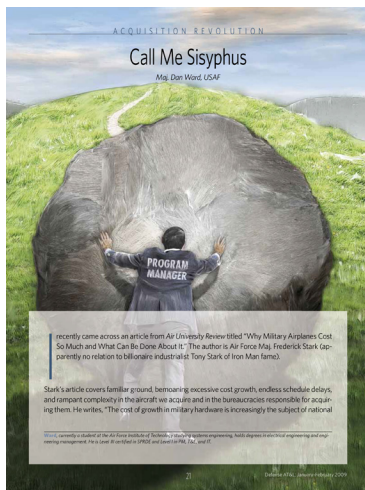
The "Call Me Sisyphus" article referenced in the opening paragraph was featured in the January-February 2009 edition of Defense AT&L.

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