Simplicity
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For anyone who has studied them closely, the principles of war sometimes seem as if they are deliberately contradictory: they tell you to sit down while standing and face left while facing right. The principle of security, for example, clashes with both maneuver and offensive, because in order to accomplish either, an army must compromise its security, at least to a degree. The same is true for the principle of simplicity. The principle advises modern commanders to “prepare clear, uncomplicated plans and concise orders to ensure thorough understanding.” Yet the very nature of operations today mandate detailed coordination on land, sea, air, and space. Modern plans and orders are anything but uncomplicated and concise. A typical division-level order today is several inches thick and replete with cryptic annexes, matrices, and templates. Commanders and their planners acknowledge that modern warfare is inherently complex and requires detailed coordination. So what of simplicity?

Simplicity, while it has some points in its favor, should not be a principle of war. At best, it represents good advice, but advice that is often laid aside. The principle of simplicity derives from an age when Newtonian science and drunken grenadiers vied for control of the battlefield. As the science of war developed from the time of Frederick the Great to the eve of the Great War, plans for mobilization, force development, weapons technology, and tactical maneuver became ever more complex. At the same time, European armies were populated by the scum of the earth—often illiterate soldiers shanghaied from public houses, where they drank themselves into unconsciousness only to wake up the next morning in uniform. These reluctant grenadiers became the stuff of legends spun by Kipling as they marched, conquered, and secured the Empire. They were brave and capable in battle, honed by harsh discipline, paid next to nothing,
and proud of their regiments. But they were not mental giants. To employ the infantry soldiers of the British army or its European counterparts, commanders had to keep things simple. As pundits and historians took note of battles lost through confusion, counter-orders, and chaos, they hit upon some wise counsel: keep it simple, stupid!

America’s military today is a vastly different enterprise. Soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines are almost invariably high school graduates, and not a few of them have college degrees. The officers are all college graduates, and many (if not most) go on to earn advanced degrees. In short, modern armies are smarter and better equipped to deal with complexity.

The proliferation of computers has also impacted the anachronistic principle of simplicity. The essential problem that underlies the principle is that human cognition is greater than human memory. That is—I can concoct a more complicated plan than I can remember in battle. This memory shortfall mandates that armies of the past compensated with simple plans. But with the arrival of the computer, the modern warrior now has a memory aid that helps him to get his arms around complex maneuvers. (One could argue persuasively that computers also add their own level of complexity, but the latest generation of Americans grew up with them and can assimilate that complexity with relative ease.)

The casual observer who wanders into a modern tactical operations center (or air operations center, or combat direction center on an aircraft carrier) will be challenged to find evidence of simplicity. In its place are highly educated, thoroughly trained warrior-technicians who thrive in complexity. Does this mean that we should throw out the whole notion of simplicity altogether? Not at all.

The issue in modern war is not simplicity, which doesn’t exist, but rather simplification. A good commander and his staff constantly strive to elicit and understand the details of the battlespace, but they simultaneously try to simplify their plans and orders as best they can. The science and art of command thus looks like a constant sine wave, oscillating back and forth between complexity and simplification.
The science of war (the word ‘science’ has the same etymology as ‘scissors’ and ‘scythe’) is all about cutting things into their component parts--analyzing and ferreting out critical facts. As staffs perform mission analysis or course of action analysis, they delve deep into the complexities of modern combat in order to understand the situation better than the enemy does. In short, the scientific part of command searches for truth. In theory, this quest is endless, but in practice there are limits to how much the commander can analyze. There is never enough time to analyze thoroughly, because to prevail in battle, the army must act. Time is of the essence.

The art of war (‘art’ has the same root as ‘artificial’ or ‘artisan’) is all about bringing things together into an integrated whole. It is the opposite of science, in that it creates and simplifies, rather than breaking things down for analysis. In war, a commander must simplify in order to act. He evaluates the analyzed facts and makes a decision. He then communicates that decision as rapidly and clearly as he can. The art of war, then, focuses on action.

The principle of simplicity ignored this crucial balance between the science of war and the art of war. The reality of modern war depends to a large degree on concepts, technologies, and systems that are inherently complex. To embrace a principle that eschews complexity is unrealistic and inapplicable to
experience. At the same time, the science of war must be balanced with the art of war through the process of simplification. The result is a commander who can effectively balance the never-ending quest for truth with the need for prompt action.

There is another aspect to the requirement for simplification: the ubiquitous, global media that accompanies military operations. One of the salient characteristics of modern war is the sensitivity and immediacy of public opinion. This trend has been growing ever since an ambitious photographer snapped pictures of the piles of corpses on the Antietam battlefield in 1862. Public reaction was immediate and dramatic. Vietnam illustrated how public opinion is both central to success in war and at the same time easily manipulated by the press. In our latest conflicts, each skirmish, each minor incident is instantly broadcast to the world and evaluated in excruciating detail.

In order to gain or retain public approval, governments and military authorities must simplify the situation. Modern media—television in particular—does not excel at dealing with details and complexity. Even weighty decisions concerning major national policies must confront fidgety anchor-persons anxious to cut to commercial. An official trying to explain a complicated plan will come across as incompetent, unsure, and untrustworthy. Media managers within military organizations have become experts at presenting the bottom line in a simplified manner in order to retain public confidence.

There remains, then, some good horse sense to the old principle of simplicity, even if the principle itself does not measure up. By appreciating the inherent complexity of modern military operations, commanders and their staffs can nonetheless strive to simplify, so that our armies, navies, and air forces can act swiftly and operate in the context of a population that understands our efforts. By balancing the science of war with the art of war through simplification of detail, today’s commander can dominate the cognitive domain of modern war.