

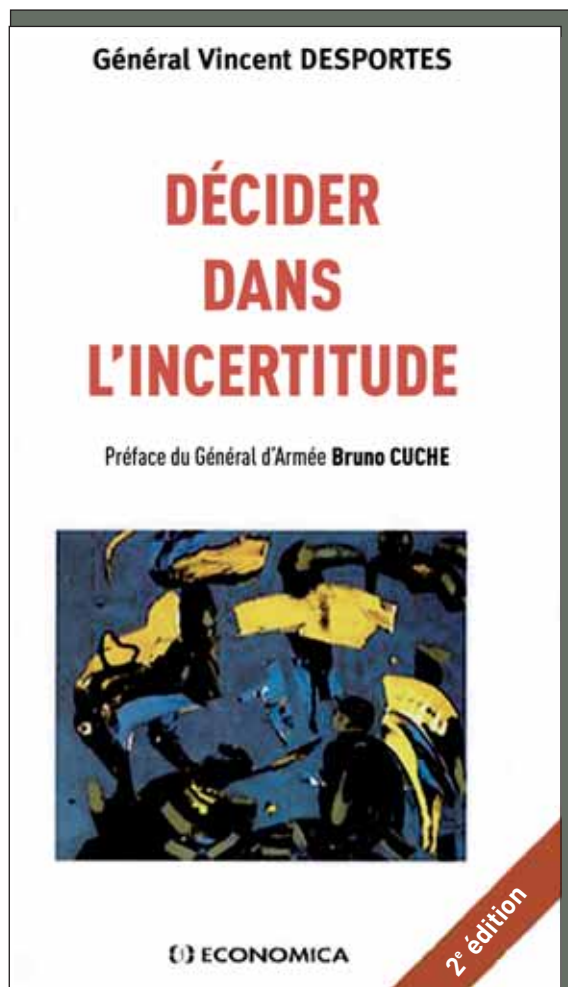
Deciding within Uncertainty¹

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Preface by (French) General Bruno CUCHE

Interview

of Major General Vincent DESPORTES (CDEF)



The Army Chief of Staff has just prefaced the new issue of your book *"Deciding within uncertainty"*. Why writing a book about decision within uncertainty?

With all the intelligence assets available, are we still all doomed to this difficulty?

It would be seriously wrong to think that we can access to perfect knowledge and to imagine that, one day, we can make a decision having in hand all the pieces of information required to make this decision. We can reduce uncertainty but it is impossible to eliminate it. Current conflicts are demonstrating that every day. The conflict which occurred in South Lebanon this summer was illustrative in this respect. In a quickly evolving world, we should be convinced that the conditions of decision-making are, from now on, marked by unpredictability: whatever the action is, it never happens in the expected conditions.

But what are the fundamental reasons for that?

The first reason, being fundamental, is that action is, before all, the confrontation of human freedoms: it is impossible to foresee the reaction of men who are permanently interacting. The second reason is that variables are so numerous that action always occurs in what Clausewitz called *"the war fog"*. When confronted reality in the field, it develops always differently from the way it was planned. The decision-maker, whoever he is, always acts then in fog, friction, random and in front of confusion.

Insofar as all that, can we act?

Of course we can, but with other methods than planning only. The fundamental principle is the capacity to adapt to circumstances. Two approaches are proposed to us: trust in man and systems flexibility. Man has a large capacity for decision self-sufficiency, initiative and adaptation. Man is the best tool for adapting to uncertainty. Being supported by this adaptation capability, we can achieve operational efficiency in spite of uncertainty. If I may, I would remind what wrote the Army Chief of Staff in his preface: *"only the initiative of leaders at the lowest echelons enables to exploit opportunities which are by nature fleeting"*.

But man-built systems for action should also be simple and deformable to easily adapt to the environment.

Are your theories applicable in peacetime and in particular to decision-makers from military administrations?

As soon as we decide and act with men, the principles are still the same. The fundamental principle is to free the capacity of initiative of one's colleagues while monitoring it in order for the collective action to mean something. Then I recommend this concept of **"space for freedom of action"**: this **"freedom space"** is defined by the superior; the subordinate can act freely in it once the common objective of action has been known to him. This objective means **the focusing point of individual liberties**. In operational engagement as well as in peace time, **the principle of subsidiarity being smartly applied is a multiplying factor for efficiency**.

Military efficiency in fighting assumes initiative: it is then up to the style of command to favor it, and up to peacetime to develop its spirit.

In a more structural way, we have to develop tools to have men ready for action. First is the development of an institution culture and a doctrine (the defined rules to guide action), these being common to border action and to identify the other's foreseeable nature. Then is the training of subordinates for taking initiative. Finally is the encouragement to a sense of risk's taking. Without any doubt, the only way leading to entrepreneur's spirit, initiative, capacity to adapt, risk taking is decentralization, subsidiarity, granted and tolerant confidence. Once the means of whole coherence are established from the top down, the only way leading from now on to success is indirect command: definition of the objective, general rules and of what should not be done much more than what should be done.

Is such liberty of initiative compatible with hierarchy structures?

For a system to work, we should comply with the principle of dialogue and participation in the decision conception: this is true with the military as well as elsewhere. But once this cooperative work is achieved, somebody should make the decision and everybody should comply with it. During the indispensable phase of consultation, anyone can explain his views and especially experts about the conditions of technical and legal feasibility. Then, it is up to the responsible in charge of the decision to make it and to the others to follow the rule. This is what I call the smart application of the principle of intellectual discipline: dialogue before decision-making and application of decision once it is made. **The art of command is to know how to encourage individual initiative while knowing how to demand as and when needed formal discipline**. All this is perfectly in the line of the pamphlet called *"Exercise of command within the Army"*² that you know well.

¹ *Décider dans l'incertitude.*

² *L'exercice du commandement dans l'armée de terre.*