

WAR IN PEACETIME: COPING WITH TODAY'S RAPIDLY CHANGING WORLD

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"War puts nations to the test. Just as mummies fall to pieces the moment they are exposed to the air, so war pronounces its sentence of death on those social institutions which have become ossified."

It is over 150 years since Karl Marx wrote these prescient words. Much of his thinking has been discredited since then, but his understanding of the revolutionising impact of war on society has been proved correct. His understanding was based on the appreciation that the most important feature of war, particularly large-scale and protracted war, was that it was usually accompanied by much more rapid and profound social, economic and technological change than was the case in peacetime. It was this drastic, revolutionising change which overtook the ability of institutions to adapt and stay fit for purpose, and brought about their collapse.

If war is change, then to all intents and purposes the world is at war, because we are living through a period of change more widespread, rapid and profound than we have ever experienced outside a world war. Moreover, this change has been sustained longer than any world war of the last two centuries, and it is still increasing. But because this is not a shooting war like 1939–45, we in "Western" countries have not adopted the "wartime mentality" essential if we are to cope with the instability drastic change inevitably brings. We are now trying to cope in a wartime situation but with a peacetime mentality, peacetime institutions and peacetime procedures shaped by the last 70 years of living in a stable, secure, rules-based environment. We have quite naturally selected our leaders – politicians, corporate CEOs and boards, even our generals – for their abilities to shine in a "peacetime" environment. As a result, we are now in trouble.

This is not a unique situation, but it is new to many holding office today. It is best understood through a military example. If we think back to

1939 and study the British battalion and divisional commanders who were in command of their units and formations on the day war started for the UK, September 3rd, only a small fraction of these individuals were still in command three months later. This was because the skills, abilities, attitude, mentality and behaviour we need from an officer in peacetime are radically different from those we need in wartime. When the war ended, many officers who had had wonderful military careers could not cope with peacetime conditions and became ineffectual misfits whose careers failed because their wartime skills did not suit peacetime.

This, I would argue, is exactly analogous to the situation in which Western societies find themselves today. The speed of global change has outpaced all our national and international institutions. They are now becoming obsolete. They have been unable to react and adapt fast enough to remain fit for purpose. There is an excellent example in the English education system, which knows how many IT specialists are needed nationally but does not produce them, instead producing 30,000 graduates in Media Studies a year for only 500 jobs. Problems like this are often recognised, yet nobody does anything to change things because the system resists change due to inbuilt vested interest and inertia. It is just too much effort and, with peacetime mentalities, it just does not matter enough.

This inability to recognise the problem we have and acknowledge its cause – our inability to adapt our institutions because they have become so strong and inflexible – is paralysing our social, economic and political system. It applies in government even more than it applies in the corporate boardroom. It even applies in armies as we prepare to fight the latest war and fail, and fail again. In 1963 Professor Leon Megginson, interpreting Darwin in societal terms (and in a quotation often attributed to Darwin himself), put it most succinctly: “It is not the strongest of the species that survives ... It is the one that is most adaptable to change”.

Now we should be learning from our failures but we are not, because today we only record lessons, we do not learn from them and amend our procedures and our institutions as we should. Institutional resistance to change is just too strong; political correctness too widely enforced; “Performance Management”, with its corrosive ideology of self over team spirit, is just too entrenched.

So if we consider what qualities and characteristics we need in those whom we select for leadership today, in a period of rapid and profound change, in all sorts of institutions, the conclusion is that we need to look for people who have abilities that suit a wartime environment rather than a peacetime one. The Russian President Vladimir Putin is a good example. With his KGB background and exposure to the corrupting influence of money in East Germany, combined with his cleverness, ruthlessness and ambition, he rose to the top during the turmoil, vicious free-for-all and extreme violence that characterised Russia in the 1990s. This process of natural selection rewarded his “wartime” mentality – his capacity to deal with complexity, instability and uncertainty. Compare his ability to achieve his policy objectives in today’s turbulent international system with that of many Western leaders, and his willingness to use all forms of power in pursuit of his aims. Putin needs a “wartime” environment if he is to thrive. He has not hesitated to create such an environment when it suits him.

In each case, the qualities we need are not a straight choice between clear alternatives, not exclusively one thing or the other. Rather, think of a cursor on a line between two related qualities, and moving the cursor along the line so that it is closer to the wartime position than to the peacetime.

The first quality requires a change in the balance between training and education. In peacetime, we can maximise training because we have slow development. In a period of slow change, experience is our best help. So we ask for proof of everything. Evidence-based policy is what we think we need. Best practice is revered. All of these have value, of course, but all are based only on the study of the past. At a time of slow change this can be sufficient, but at a time of rapid change it is like driving down the M6 motorway and steering only while looking in the rear-view mirror.

Today, we need to move the cursor along the line away from training and towards education. Training is still necessary, but education becomes proportionately more important than before. Education differs from training in that it prepares people by enabling them to distil principles to guide their actions so that they can use an understanding of things to deal with the unexpected; because that is exactly what wartime rates of change will bring – the unexpected, the unthinkable, the unpalatable. In periods of rapid change we will be faced with the unpredictable. It will surprise us.

The second quality concerns management. In times of slow change we can *manage* everything. We can give in to the desire to *control* everything. But at times of rapid change, we cannot do that. We need to move the cursor along the line away from management towards leadership. Of course, we will always need management. But the meaning most organisations and businesses give to management today in reality is “administration”. To deal with a situation of rapid change we need leadership. *Leadership* understands that in a period of tumultuous change you cannot *control*, you have to *command*. To command means to trust and to delegate, because there is never time to monitor and check up on everything.

The third quality is risk. In peacetime we become risk-averse. Everything has to be failsafe. But in times of war or in times of rapid change, we need a system that encourages us to take risks; that allows us to make mistakes and learn from them. We have to create an environment for staff where it is safe to fail and try again. This means we must move the cursor along the line away from “error and trial” towards “trial and error”.

The fourth quality is effectiveness. Peacetime forces us to be *efficient*. It forces us to plan long term, to tie everything up for a long time so we have no reserves. But in wartime that leads to disaster because it means we are no longer flexible and cannot respond to a surprise or when things take a bad turn. It is the same in business and government during today's rapid change. Think of investments tied up long term. Think of just-in-time-delivery, which gives supermarkets and filling stations only 2 days' reserves. No flexibility results in failure.

In wartime, or at a time of rapid change, we must have a clearly articulated, long-term vision and a clear objective. Without that, short-

term thinking can lead us astray. "Tactics without strategy is just the noise before defeat", to quote Sun Tzu. But guided by that strategic understanding, we have to be able to think and act very short term indeed. For that we have to create a big slush fund of people, time and money, so we can adapt quickly and react quickly, so we are not so vulnerable to disruption. With our short-term flexibility coupled with long-term vision and a clear view of the goal we can still keep going in the right direction, even if we have to zig-zag. Strategy is not "having a big, detailed plan". Strategy is being able to adapt and react, to take advantage of a situation.

All the above means that institutions in wartime or in periods of rapid change MUST operate differently from how they do in peacetime if they are to survive or flourish.

The hierarchical structure of an organisation in peacetime is very different from in wartime. In war, you look for the people who can do things best, whatever their age or rank, and put them in there to do it. Then you listen to what they say. Stupid is the colonel who doesn't listen to his sergeant when the sergeant says "boss, things are going wrong".

This is not necessarily an issue of too many "yes-men", i.e., of a failure to challenge the boss. It may well be an organisation in which younger staff have not been able to adapt in the way their leaders can and learn to think differently. These people will not say yes – quite the opposite; they will oppose the innovator and stop them doing the drastic, necessary thing, saying instead: "No, we think you should go the old way. We don't think you should change so quickly". This is a question of understanding people's ability to take risks, to be imaginative, to be creative, to turn old tools to new tasks.

The institutions of the West have been slow to react to this new reality. A lot of the West's competitors have not. Countries in what we condescendingly call the developing world; countries like Russia and China; sub-state actors like Al-Qaeda or Islamic State: all have learned more rapidly than we have how to cope with today's instability, complexity and rapid change. They are presenting us now not with a crisis, which will pass, but with a strategic challenge, which we are not matching up to because we are trying to deal with it tactically. These countries and organisations want to set up their own alternative world system to rival ours. We are today in a constant, existential competition with these and all other actors in the global ecosystem, be they nation states, sub-state groups or big corporations. Our success in this competition will only be guaranteed if we learn to cope with change as they have. Change is war. To paraphrase yet another unpopular Russian revolutionary, Leon Trotsky: "You may not be interested in this war, but this war is interested in you."