

## Strategy

# Why Do Militaries Stifle New Ideas?

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Militaries need to be as innovative and creative in drafting strategies to counter a potentially cunning adversary as they are in retaining existing efficiencies, processes and social norms for the organisation. However, modern militaries are continuously chastised for our lack of imagination and inability to shake institutional beliefs that are obsolete or irrelevant. Here, we explore how and why militaries stifle new ideas and consider the pattern of outright rejection of novelty and punishment of unorthodox thinking in war. Heretics and visionaries tend to be ignored or worse, until they end up being vindicated after the fact, which then predictably converts into a retroactive acceptance and championing of innovative thinking in conflicts. This paper is the first in a four-part series on innovation and takes a philosophical approach to framing this challenge for defence organisations.

## 1. Introduction

Militaries perpetually call for innovation, creativity in warfare, and the need for an organisation to be as nimble and flexible cognitively as they might be when tangled in conflict with a cunning adversary. Yet modern armed forces are continuously chastised for our lack of imagination, inability to shake institutional beliefs that are obsolete or irrelevant, and our penchant for advocating ideological, pseudo-scientific processes as proven, unflappable and settled constructs for warfare.

Worse still, militaries honour military heretics and visionaries who were ignored, marginalised or eliminated because they dared offer novelty that was alien and disruptive to the institutionalised norms, beliefs and behaviours (Mrazek, 1968, pp. 152–156). It is dangerous to one's career and reputation to step outside the box, if the 'box' lashes back at any actual innovative activities that threaten cherished beliefs, institutional identity or ritualised practices. Moreover, the uncertainty of success in warfare could pressure innovators to think outside the box that could potentially cause a failed campaign. The pressure of absorbing blame could fall upon those who dare to innovate. Those who dare and fail are in far more peril than those who fail in compliance of set practices and doctrine, able to avoid serious punishment with 'the enemy gets a vote' and other justifications.

This paradox of desiring innovation yet suppressing the consequences of actual innovation produces a culture of convergent thinking, adherence to written and unwritten rules, and a risk avoidance mentality where only those ideas that already nest with existing constructs are welcome. At the same time, innovation still happens in war. Often, the process is organic and somewhat insurgent, blurred within the strange bedfellows of heretics, crackpots, mavericks, and outliers to the establishment.

Here, we explore how and why militaries stifle new ideas and consider the pattern of outright rejection of novelty and punishment of unorthodox thinking in war that then predictably converts into a retroactive acceptance and championing of innovators. This first paper represents a four-part series where we take a philosophical inquiry into how and why defence organisations understand innovation, and often confuse how and why such activities cannot be rendered in purely scientific rationalised and explicitly managed processes. Indeed, the standard scientific rationalisation by most in military communities assume that inductive or deductive reasoning through mechanistic, positivistic methodologies are not only adequate for innovation, but often are the only way the armed forces find any value in seeking new ideas. This four-part series holds to a philosophical approach above such technical rationalism and instead will introduce a series of arguments concerning how we miss the mark, punish those not aligned to our narrow views, and suppress experimentation due to deeper institutional and organisational beliefs that govern how we make sense of social reality, conflict and warfighting activities therein.

## 2. Superficial innovation in militaries

Modern militaries need innovative thinking, yet they want that innovation to unfold in a *predictable, orderly, easily managed process that retains and reinforces the legacy system*. Unfortunately, innovation does not emerge this way, and thus such a mindset presents a profound tension in how modern military institutions prefer regularity and order at the expense of uncertainty and disruption. Change must occur, and in complexity science, there are few expectations that significant or meaningful change will be orderly and predictable. Yet we continue to reinforce the cliché of preparing to fight yesterday's war tomorrow, while

failing to appreciate what is needed today for tomorrow's fight may be entirely unfamiliar and beyond our collective experiences thus far.

Indeed, institutions fail to imagine that which is needed tomorrow due to such novelty in warfare unfolding in unfamiliar, ill-described and confusing contexts that do not link directly to past experiences. Yet we still insist on trying to improve our position of advantage through some focus on innovation so that we might gain novel advantages unimagined by competitors and adversaries.

We often fixate and obsess on technical and tactical innovation while expecting such local or immediate developments to suffice for overarching, strategic and game-changing transformations. Militaries fail to see the forest for the trees. Or better still, we fetishise seeking out new things and ideas that already come in recognisable packaging, complete with clear instructions, able to integrate seamlessly with all existing systems and processes. We thus create a forest of the mediocre and the mundane, bereft of anything divergent or disruptive to the established and static order. We crave trees that prop up a forest of barren originality so that the institutional identity, form and function is protected. This begets further bureaucracy, propelling the forest toward greater risk of a flash fire when actual innovation sparks novel flames.

Often, modern militaries remain well stocked with careerists and leaders who attempt to introduce and use ideas and terms such as 'disruption', 'innovation', 'creativity', and a host of other concepts oriented toward imagination and change. Sadly, however, 'the rhetoric is simply camouflage designed to deflect attention from use of managerial practices and technology that disappeared decades ago in civilian life' (Kroger, 2020). We assimilate new concepts only superficially, stripping away the content and retaining the flashy terminology (buzz words) so that our cherished beliefs and ritualised behaviours remain intact (Mrazek, 1968, pp. 31–33). Promotion of the best requires at times an asterisk, in that being more successful than one's peers while in compliance with the institutional norms is not nearly the same as forging ahead in novel directions, entirely outside the box and incomparable to any peer groupings.

### 3. Embracing traditional mindset

Our militaries exist in a complex, dynamic reality but continue to orient to the past through a Newtonian styled, factory-management themed worldview for how to approach innovation and transformation (Gharajedaghi, 2011, p. 51).<sup>1</sup> We want to win, but only in familiar ways that reinforce our service identities and particular forms and functions as warfighters. Critics of new theories and ideas will

deny their potential value by decrying that only 'proven, established' constructs with 'thousands of years of historical validity' ought to be taken seriously, and never critically examined beyond whether one complies with this dominant warfare paradigm. Innovation is welcome if it extends what worked yesterday, which means that hardly anything innovative is allowed in, and obsolete practices are extended well beyond their shelf lives.

Contemporary military theory and methods seek ways to innovate in warfare so that the military organisation creates novel, unimagined opportunities that their adversaries have not.

Innovation is important, necessary, and whether one invents the necessary change or one is dragged there by a cunning adversary through defeat and disruption, such innovation always occurs in war. However, militaries that unwittingly adhere to their particular war paradigm are institutionalised into rejecting many acts of innovation that are not immediately recognisable and able to integrate seamlessly with existing legacy constructs. Instead, in often a blatant showing of anti-intellectualism for any war theory outside the approved, organisationally relevant war paradigm in practice, militaries also show outright hostility and contempt for creative war thinking that threatens disruption, change and painful introspection, especially within established training institutions and doctrinal publications. This is a damning statement, but one that is fairly easy to demonstrate repeatedly across military services through how methods, doctrine and belief systems demand orthodoxy and adherence to the institutional framework *above all else*.

Colonel Mrazek, writing in 1968 as a former Infantry brigade and battalion commander of World War II and considering the strategic quagmire that had become the Vietnam War offers:

It is a reoccurring phenomenon of history that generals and admirals who begin a war are not necessarily those who win that war ... Brilliant peacetime performers have all too frequently proved disappointing and dimly inept in the throes of war.

This curious phenomenon occurs because those who are smooth enough to filter into the military hierarchy in peacetime are those who are best able to mold their thoughts and activities to the system, to understand it, and to use it to their advantage ... If the truth were known, probably most were conforming children, who had very orthodox youth (Mrazek, 1968, pp. 151–152).

Mrazek would challenge the convergent military institution as one that rewards conformity and obedient worshipping of established rituals and behaviours even at the expense of military successes in war. Such conformity sug-

<sup>1</sup> Gharajedaghi offers a useful metaphoric device for appreciating dynamic, learning systems in complexity theory. 'Analyzing the behavior of a nonlinear system is like walking through a maze whose walls rearrange themselves with each step you take (in other words, playing the game changes the game).' Dynamic systems are unlike simple or complicated systems where the 'maze' is either fixed, or able to be predicted in likely system transformation so that useful strategies and operations might be prepared in advance.

gests a repeating feedback loop of the same uncreative conformists rising in rank through the system, only to reinforce that system for the subsequent generation, ensuring only those that think about war just as they did follow them up the promotion ladder.

They find a better ability as they go through their careers to become part of the deep-seated customs and traditions of the services, and in due time they filter to the top as both the models for and the perpetrators of the system, the supporters of its laws that will in turn perpetuate them and their way of life (Mrazek, 1968, p. 152).

In other words, institutions institutionalise, and militaries are perhaps the biggest offenders of this cycle of strangling out change and innovation that threatens the legacy system.

Gharajedaghi (2011, p. 17) addressed modern society writ large and this bias toward retaining institutionalised beliefs and patterns of self-relevant behaviours despite their increasing irrelevance in emergent system change of-fers: 'The inability to change an outdated mode of organisation is as tragic for the viability of a corporation as the consequence of missing a technological break is for the viability of a product line.' This preference to resist the novel and alien so that the familiar and favoured is retained stems from a fundamental mischaracterisation of innovation. Modern militaries assume all aspects of complex warfare can only be interpreted through a rationalised, natural science lens that reverse-engineers warfare analytically (Gharajedaghi, 2011, p. 13; Paparone, 2017; Zweibelson, 2015, 2016).

#### 4. Humans are naturally creative

Karl Weick, a noted sociologist and organisational theorist, provides one useful explanation of how humans imagine, create and also conform to organisational frames. All innovation is accomplished through human imagination, in that 'imagination gives form to unknown things' (Weick, 2006, p. 447). That the unknown must come in alien, paradoxical, and highly disruptive forms and functions to the institutionally familiar and cherished is the primary tension in why modern militaries reject innovation. We are conditioned to protect the familiar and legacy frame and, by doing so, frequently resist imagining beyond self-imposed limits.

Individually, a military organisation does have imagination and creativity, but often such activities occur in the margins, often under secrecy or away from the forces that throttle such dangerous affairs. In other words, innovation oozes out the seams of the institutional strait jacket. Yet creative people can and do champion transformation and innovation despite these barriers. It is what makes our species unique, and ultimately despite such institutional rigidity, particularly in modern defence culture, innovative activities generate all instances of change in conflicts, defence and security affairs.

Our species imagines beyond the mere existent and proximate. We can conceptualise what has been, what could

be, and beyond this, *what never was* yet could be created and ushered into reality in an act that transforms said reality itself. Harari, in explaining the rise to dominance of the human species, provides useful context in how humans can conceptualise that which does not exist in the real world. While this first step occurs in a single mind, humans then employ narratives to convey these fantastic ideas to convince others about things that they themselves had not yet imagined either:

Telling effective stories is not easy. The difficulty lies not in telling the story, but in convincing everyone else to believe in it. Much of history revolves around this question: how does one convince millions of people to believe particular stories about gods, or nations, or limited liability companies? Yet when it succeeds, it gives Sapiens immense power, because it enables millions of strangers to cooperate and work towards common goals. Just try to imagine how difficult it would have been to create states, or churches, or legal systems if we could speak only about things that really exist, such as rivers, trees and lions (Harari, 2018, p. 31).

Imagination sparks the development of the unimaginable into the realised and useful; this is the only way that invention occurs. Invention itself is the tangible act of humans *realising the intangible* in a novel, previously unrealised way so that new opportunities and consequences occur in this deliberate creation, to include many subsequent ripples that the creator could not foresee. In these moments of innovation, the creator lacks terminology, and may need to also craft entirely new conceptual models, perhaps modify or generate new theories, so that the invention gains some form that can be shared and understood by those unfamiliar with, and surprised, by the change. Every act of military innovation requires this, and with the ushering in of the unrealised and unprecedented, the military institution tends to resist it because of these surprising qualities. It is not only that new things require new names, but invention *destroys before it creates*.

The act of innovation starts with a fantastical leap into the unknown because the current system is insufficient or faulty in such a way that a creative act is warranted. We create because the legacy frame must in some small or great way be destroyed.

#### 5. Innovation and military doctrines

Institutions do not willingly operate through destructive and disruptive activities if they challenge the very constructs that sustain the organisational identity, beliefs and known patterns of behaviour. This is why innovation cannot be manufactured or built into existing institutional processes that require convergence, uniformity, reliability, predictability, stability, order and conformity.

Military doctrines are indeed the last place where innovation might be found, in that any novelty or disruptive innovation that might occur will be assimilated and stripped down so that it can only integrate with the pre-existing, legacy frame championed by the military institution producing the said doctrine. While critical and creative think-

ing are mentioned within such managerial decision-making methodologies found in doctrine, militaries cannot allow such activities to threaten the core belief systems or venture past clear paradigmatic boundaries imposed by the institution. One must be critical and creative only so that new colouring might occur within the predetermined lines set by the dominant war paradigm.

These qualities maintain an institution and extend bureaucratic effects so that they manifest across all participants. Effective organisations tend to be adaptive instead of innovative, in that the innovation is done in the fringes and peripheries of how an organisation functions. Once innovation is realised, the bureaucratic entity adapts it through assimilation, often while experiencing damage or losses due to the legacy practices advocated by the institution failing in new ways. These failures occur because of how the innovation disrupts or changes the system.

Militaries maintain institutional control and stability through convergent doctrinal processes with an epistemological position that essentially claims ‘anything new must be clearly understood by the entirety of the force in recognised language, and easily validated through established practices so that immediate advantage can be gained in a reliable, risk-reducing mode of execution’. This presents a convergence of deductive and inductive logics on how innovation ought to occur so that the institution experiences incremental process improvement, and not radical, surprising and transformative change.

Brown, a security theorist, provides a blistering critique of the modern military culture as demonstrated in the Pentagon where the entire institution remains wedded in the past, while rejecting any call to transform and discard outdated theories, beliefs and concepts that are now ritualised into institutional identity:

[Within the Pentagon and Department of Defense culture], stolid managerialism is the default, and people are too often treated as interchangeable widgets in an immense industrial machine. Founded on a doctrine of hierarchical control informed by both the military traditions and the pseudo-scientific management theories of the 19th century, it has elevated conformity to virtue and excels at stifling dissent; initiative and creativity are just collateral damage. Information flows up – or is ‘staffed’ in defense parlance – and power trickles back down. Important leaders choose less important leaders; everyone else competes within the rigid confines of a civil service system that we’ve known to be fundamentally broken for decades. Compensation is commensurate with status and tenure, not talent or contribution. Tasks are assigned, performance is evaluated, rules are promulgated – forming the basis of a culture of risk aversion that makes the faithful maintenance of the status quo a much safer bet than attempting to challenge it. Pentagon reporter Jeff Schogol perhaps put it best when he compared the Defense Department to a ‘Sears mail-in catalogue that is struggling to stay relevant in an Amazon Prime world’. (Brown, 2021)

This modern military frame is an extension of one crafted largely in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, through a fusion of Napoleonic War theorisations, the con-

sequences of the rise of Westphalian nation states, and the adaptation of Newtonian styled scientific logic to explain war in objective, predictive and largely mechanistic terms (Zweibelson, 2023, pp. 74–92). Management of war would become factory-like, built within the Industrial Revolution and oriented toward increasing efficiencies, uniformity and process adherence. Modern militaries believe that art is oppositional to science, with scientific rationalisation in war superior to artistic aesthetics (Mrazek, 1968, p. 33). Gharajedaghi, a complexity theorist, provides an excellent rebuke of this Newtonian styled epistemology on how innovation unfolds. Complex reality does not function this way, as such Newtonian orientation can only exist in simple or, at most, some complicated system conditions (Fromm, 2005; Tsoukas, 1998).

## 6. Discussion

Innovation occurs in surprising, often confusing ways, where at first, an organisation may only have glimmers of the opportunity, and those that realise it may struggle with dense theory and require new words and models to develop it. Over time, an organisation experiments and develops this innovation, gradually refining and maturing it, so that the last step for institutional change is one where the entire organisation gains some common understanding or framing. This inverts the modern military paradigm in that common understanding across the entire enterprise becomes the last, not the first, step. Gharajedaghi summarises the absurdity of forcing all innovation to first clear the bar with new learning being immediately understood across the largest population with: ‘I assure you that we will fast fall to the lowest level of banality. Life would proceed with setting and seeking attainable goals that would rarely escape the limits of the familiar’ (Gharajedaghi, 2011, p. 63). Modern military fixation on oversimplification of all novelty extends from earlier periods of factory-styled order and discipline, and likely a paradigmatic lack of awareness of how strong this Newtonian stylisation grips the force (Bousquet, 2008; Paparone, 2017; Waring, 1991).

Weick offers an important distinction in how organisations resist innovation and instead encourage a self-serving, institutionally relevant mode of creation. Citing Coleridge, Weick explains that ‘fancy’ operates in a mode where the institution insists on recombining known things and concepts in institutionally recognisable ways, compliant and orthodox to extending that institutional paradigm from yesterday to tomorrow (Weick, 2006, pp. 447–448). Weick uses the mythical creature ‘Pegasus’ to illustrate. Pegasus is a static combination of two known ideas, ‘wings’ and ‘horse’. The concepts are already well understood by the institution, and ‘neither idea changes nor interacts with the other. They are simply stuck together’ (Weick, 2006, p. 448). Mrazek draws from Edmund W. Sinnott by terming this as ‘deductive creativity’ where military staffs plan operations by channelling a conditioned sort of creative thinking within a productive pattern that adheres to existing processes that generate logically sound solutions readily accessible for military applications (Mrazek, 1968, p. 34).

When organisations prefer fanciful thinking to innovation, they are defaulting to an institutionally self-relevant mode of extending yesterday's favoured concepts into an uncharted tomorrow, assuming along the way that solutions proven trace straight lines to the next ill-defined problems. Dorst explains this static, linear interpretation of a complex reality with: 'conventional problem-solving requires us to stop the world, isolate the problem, and come up with a one-off solution ... This approach is curiously nonexperimental ... All organisations will initially try to approach a new problem in ways that have worked in the past' (Dorst, 2015, p. 15). Weick reinforces this organisational habit with: 'when people settle for fancy, the problem is that their choice of current frames is too dependent on frames previously used' (Weick, 2006, p. 449).

Advocates of modern military doctrine tend to miss this distinction in that they are convinced that fanciful content is innovative when it merely recycles approved institutionalised forms into different combinations. While it may barely qualify for innovation, anything beyond this automatically becomes too disruptive to ever include into military doctrine without breaking the mould. Thus, all innovation occurs in the peripheries and margins of a military enterprise, often pursued by mavericks, heretics and improvisationalists who refuse to conform to the existing system. Schogol, citing Kroger on the institutionalised patterns of conforming behaviour in the Pentagon, illustrates how difficult it is to break from the party line:

More disturbing than the Pentagon's antiquated information technology was Kroger's description of meetings in the building, where subordinates are expected to keep quiet rather than ask questions.

'Instead of interjecting their own questions or raising alternative points of view, they're encouraged to "stay in their own lane",' Kroger wrote. 'The purpose of many of these meetings is not to make a decision, but to "update leaders on progress". There are no whiteboards, no thinking out loud, and usually no analysis. Almost everything is scripted.'

In other words, the purpose of these meetings is for Pentagon leaders to let everyone know that they are handling things perfectly. Any objection to group-think is heresy because it implies subordinates might actually understand an issue better than their superiors. The meetings themselves are useless and the information could have just as easily been sent by email (Schogol, 2020).

Fanciful creation generates novelty in that Pegasus does not exist in nature, but this configuration is merely a realignment of known things that *already do exist*. As illustrated previously, not only is fanciful creation a standardised mode for institutional convergence across the modern

armed forces, but it is also common practice to hold senior-level meetings that perpetuate the utility of Pegasus-style thinking as successful and the only option. Wings are good, horses are good, and combining wings plus horses over and over is the best and only option ... or else. The institution retains both original concepts, and while Pegasus is a new naming device, the original paradigm remains unaltered in that nothing is disrupted, destroyed or challenged in some critical manner of self-examination. As Weick offers: '[when] people engaged in fancy, they produce simple associations of adjacency rather than the compound associations of simultaneity; they link one point to another rather than form clusters of multiple links around one point; and their ideas grow incrementally rather than exponentially' (Weick, 2006, p. 449).

Thus, an institution such as the Pentagon can maintain the illusion of progress by promoting fanciful production of 'known knowns', with operators instructed to carry on in scripted, ritualistic fashion to tow the party line. It is this incremental manner of fanciful development that the institution seeks, so that an orderly, controlled, and linear mode of progression retains all the institutional beliefs, patterns and framework while the fanciful additions enhance or otherwise retain the paradigm relevance.

## 7. Conclusion

Innovation *unfolds in direct opposition of fancy*, in that innovative efforts threaten the preferred illusion of order, control and stability. This is where the heretics thrive or are slaughtered. Mrazek, drawing from early human behaviorist theory on creativity in the 1960s, suggests that military forces restrict creative thinking in that 'a soldier is saddled with an extra measure of restriction when he must observe the additional military regulations, codes of conduct, and tactical doctrines essential to the operation of a disciplined and effective modern fighting force' (Mrazek, 1968, p. 134). Most people in these institutionally restrictive, regimented environments may 'find it too difficult to try to think innovatively under these burdens; they lose hope, their intellectual energy wanes, and they sink into apathy, content to follow the channels of thought approved by the omnipotent majority' (Mrazek, 1968, p. 134). This is how we go about failing at war in a familiar, institutionally championed form and function that is somehow more acceptable than creatively taking novel risks to innovate away from the 'known-knowns'. The next paper in this four-part series continues this examination of how and why military forces struggle with innovation in war (Zweibelson, in press).

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