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Scholars organizing in times of peace for times of war and other extreme contexts have become a necessity and not a luxury. Engaged scholarship (van de Ven & Johnson, 2006), which traditionally focused on bridging the theory–practice gap, can serve another purpose in dire times. Alongside participatory methodologies, engaged scholarship can be a potential solution for simultaneous knowledge production and societal impact. However, the route of engaged scholarship is one less traveled today, as it is considered a career risk that mainly more senior or tenured academics tend to take. Universities today have the opportunity to create models of engaged scholarship that encourage proactive organizing in times of peace for times of war in multiple ways: organizing to ensure the continuity of the day-to-day running of the institution, of research production, and of societal impact without scholars having to jeopardize their career progression. In preparing for resilience of the academe and academic career in times of war, reimagining scholarly impact with a societal footprint can benefit from integrating engaged scholarship and participatory methodologies as core to the strategic planning for extreme contexts.

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Quagmires

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What is a Quagmire?

Within a month of the Russian military launching a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it was clear this was not going to be a quick war. Military analysts soon started calling the conflict a quagmire. Originally a quagmire referred to swampy ground. Now it is used to describe complex, sticky and dangerous situations. Quagmires are complex because many hopeless tangled issues are at play. Quagmires are sticky because actors can't make progress nor can they easily withdraw. Quagmires

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are dangerous because actors usually struggle to stand still and find themselves facing existential threats in the process.

Quagmires are common in war. The United States' invasion of Vietnam, the second US invasion of Iraq, the Soviet and US wars in Afghanistan as well as many civil wars are textbook examples. But quagmires aren't just the preserve of the military. Quagmires are just as common in civil life. Public sector organizations often commit themselves to unworkable policies they can't withdraw from. Non-government organizations launch campaigns they can't get anywhere with but can't pull out of. Corporations launch strategies which causes more problems than they solve, then find themselves stuck with it. Entrepreneurs venture into industries, discover things aren't as rosy as they planned, then find it difficult to get out.

Four Kinds of Quagmire

We can find ourselves in quagmires for many reasons. Perhaps the most common is when people gradually increase their commitment to a losing course action. The stakes start out small, but they gradually increase. One thing leads to another and before an actor knows it, they are in deep trouble. The best example of this kind of quagmire is Arthur Schlesinger's classic account of the Vietnam war. He saw it as 'a triumph of the politics of inadvertence'. Schlesinger argued that the US's increasing engagement in the war was

> not after due and deliberate consideration, but through a series of small decisions. [. . .] Each step in the deepening of American commitment was reasonably regarded at the time as the last that would be necessary. Yet, in retrospect, each step led only to the next, until we find ourselves entrapped today in that nightmare of American strategists, a land war in Asia – a war which no president [. . .] desired or intended. (1967, p. 37)

In this kind of quagmire, actors make what seem to be rational decisions to start off with, but they progressively commit themselves to increasingly impossible situations from which they can't get out.

There are other cases when people consciously choose to wade into a quagmire, believing it will serve their interests. Some choose a quagmire when they believe they have a strategic advantage. They think a quagmire will help them to wear their competition down and eventually win. In these wars of attrition, the aim is not a stunning and quick victory. Rather, it is to exhaust your enemy into surrender. In some cases, a war of attrition is the chosen strategy from the start. In other cases, they might switch from a rapid 'war of manoeuvre' to a 'war of attrition' when the former approach fails (Freedman, 2015). In yet other cases, individuals or groups find that wallowing in a quagmire might not serve the collective interest, but it does serve their own self-interests.

Frequently, quagmires are not of an actor's own making. Difficult situations can become impossible when multiple external parties start taking an interest. As more actors start paying attention, more interests are added to the mix and finding a resolution becomes increasingly impossible. In his recent study of civil wars, Schulhofer-Wohl (2020) argues that military quagmires happen when external backers provide resources to combatants. Often these external backers have less to lose from continuing with a quagmire and more to lose by withdrawing.

Finally, there are strategic quagmires. These happen when there is a disconnect between the ends an actor wants to achieve, the resources it will need to achieve these goals and how these resources are used. These disconnects can happen when a military is obsessed with getting the right ways and means in place and ignores the strategic ends it wants to achieve. In these cases, militaries have the right resources and are effective at using them, but they cannot get individual victories to add up to progress on a wider policy goal. Strategic quagmires can also happen when there is a

well-developed strategy, but it is not connected with sufficient ways and means to achieve it. It is this final type of quagmire which I explore in the remainder of the article.

Strategic Quagmires

The starting point of many strategic quagmires is when strategy-makers overestimate their abilities, underestimate their competitors, and think too highly of the likelihood of success. Overconfidence means people make inaccurate judgments and commit themselves to questionable paths of action. Overconfidence can also give actors a competitive advantage (Johnson & Fowler, 2011). It means they are more likely to take aggressive action while less confident actors are likely to retreat to avoid costly competition. Being forthright can mean the overconfident make gains which increase their resources, making them more likely to succeed in the future. But overconfidence can also lead to over-extension and eventual failure.

Overconfidence starts to become a quagmire when ambition is not matched with resources. Resources translate into firepower, and firepower gives a military an advantage against competitors. Resources are a costly signal of strength which can scare away adversaries. Resources enable actors to sustain competitive pressure and outlast competitors. In short, resources help you win wars. However, simply having resources is not everything. During the past two centuries, the most highly resourced militaries won wars 50% to 75% of the time (Biddle, 2010). In the last seventy years, militaries with fewer resources won nearly half the time. Resources can bring power, but they can also bring problems. Large pools of resources can mean actors fail to explore alternative resources and do not seek new ways of using their existing resource. Large and well-resourced militaries often rely on full-frontal assaults. Smaller forces with fewer resources are more likely to develop more creative strategies and make use of resources in unexpected ways.

When strategic overconfidence meets underresourcing, some organizations revisit their original plan and try to bring it in line with the ways and means available. But once a military has put a complicated plan into action, it can be difficult to change (Levy, 1986). A shift in direction can make senior leaders the target of uncomfortable criticism. Instead of exposing senior leaders, organizations often pass problems down to their middle managers. This can trigger resistance, local adaptation, organizational hypocrisy, or neglect. However, in highly structured organizations like the military, one common response is regression to an earlier and often less developed state. Adults revert to childish behaviour. In large and complex organizations, otherwise resourceful individuals revert to being passive followers of well-worn collective routines. Falling back on established routines can quell anxiety, but it can also make it impossible to adapt to challenging new situations. The upshot is that organizations which have set over-ambitious goals and do not have the right resources to achieve these become fixed into a rigid pattern of behaviour. They end up doing the same things over and over again, even though this can make matters worse.

What to Do in a Quagmire?

Escaping a quagmire is tricky. But there are some ways out. One way is for leaders to stop escalating their commitment to a losing course of action. Instead of throwing more resources at a problem, they can redirect them to getting out. Doing this requires that leaders are willing to bear the economic and reputational costs which come from cutting one's losses and getting out.

A second option is to try to encourage your opponent to pull out first. If an actor thinks they can hold out longer than their competitors, then they might continue to endure losses while signalling their strength and staying power to their competitors. Often this means using costly signals like

large and wasteful resource commitments to show opponents that you will continue – no matter what the cost. Doing this might hasten the exit of their opponents. But it can also lead the competition to double down.

A third option which actors caught in a quagmire have is shifting their efforts from competing against immediate opponents to thinning out the stakeholders involved in a situation. This means encouraging stakeholders who are involved to drop their stakes and lose interest in a particular conflict. If this works, then an actor can simplify an otherwise overcrowded and complex situation.

The final way to deal with a quagmire is to learn and change. This might mean changing (over-ambitious) goals to reflect recent information. It could also mean using resources in new ways. Finally, it is possible to get out of a quagmire by exploring new practices. If ends can be shrunk down to size, ways appropriately reconfigured and means become more experimental, it might be possible for an actor to find their way out of the quagmire.

Conclusion

Understanding the organization of war and peace often means studying quagmires. Historians and political scientists have often followed the balance of power and paths of decision which can lead militaries into a quagmire. Underpinning these grinding and often disastrous conflicts are often traps which are common in many other kinds of organization. They include overconfidence, under-resourcing and the inability to learn. Understand how this toxic mix plays out in a range of different kinds of organization might help to not only expand our knowledge, but also help us to avoid the tragic costs created by quagmires.

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'Reason of State' as an Organizing Stance for the World as we Find It

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A number of partly interlinked crises have traversed Western societies in the 21st century – from terrorism, financial meltdown, and political polarization, to increasing inequality, accelerated climate change, the Covid-19 pandemic, and war in Ukraine. Whereas late 20th century intellectuals hubristically claimed that we had reached 'the end of history', history is now on the move again, throwing up crucial political and organizational questions related to survival, security, and stability.

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