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## SEAFORD HOUSE PAPER

Strategic Leadership in the 'Soft Power' environment  
– are there lessons for the Military?

Colonel Richard Nixon-Eckersall (Late QRL)

2013

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**Colonel Richard Nixon-Eckersall (Late QRL)  
British Army**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Focusing on strategic leadership in the 'soft' power environment, this work seeks to determine whether or not there are any lessons that might usefully be employed by the military at the strategic level. Several contemporary strategic leaders from the political and business domains are examined to ascertain what it is that has made them particularly effective. Many of their qualities and leadership styles have strong similarities to those found in the military but there are a number of aspects, not routinely associated with the military approach, that are worthy of future consideration. The key areas that have been identified as those that may merit closer attention in the future are; cultural awareness, new media and communications, relationship building and trust, negotiating skills and information management.

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## Strategic Leadership in the ‘Soft Power’ environment – are there lessons for the Military?

*“All men can see the tactics whereby I conquer, but what none can see is the strategy out of which victory is evolved.”<sup>1</sup>*

Sun Tzu, 4 BC

### Introduction

This study will focus on strategic leadership in the ‘soft’ power environment, to determine whether or not there are any lessons that might usefully be employed by the military<sup>2</sup> at the strategic level. In doing so there will undoubtedly be elements of strategic practice that hint of the use of ‘hard’ or ‘smart’ power but the focus is firmly on those elements that complement the soft style of strategic leadership. It will examine a number of strategic leaders from the political and business domains in an attempt to ascertain what it is that has made them particularly effective.

In the case of business, is it because they have achieved a critical mass or momentum that enables them to drive through initiatives that would otherwise flounder; a steamrolling effect that flattens out what would ordinarily be significant obstacles? In the case of politics is it because they are backed by ‘hard power’ to a degree that anyone that might oppose their leadership is persuaded otherwise? Of course these are merely two characteristics that may be pertinent to the strategic leader in these domains. There will undoubtedly be many others that, individually or in concert, complete the picture.

Military strategy and its associated leadership has a history that stretches back over millennia. Illustrious scholars, such as Sun Tsu, Jomini and Clausewitz, have analysed the subject in finite detail, so it is unlikely that this brief study will result in a ‘*eureka*’ moment in terms of identifying a strategic leadership quality that has not already been thought of and applied. That said, and in the knowledge that the environment in which strategy is developed and implemented is constantly changing, there is merit in examining where the areas of overlap are and trying to identify aspects of best practice that are either not routinely associated with the military approach or may not be being given sufficient attention.

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<sup>1</sup> John Adair. *Effective Strategic Leadership*, London: Macmillan, 2010. p 136.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this study the term ‘military’ is taken to mean the UK military in its entirety but the majority of examples used will be drawn from the British Army.

## Discussion

Before getting into the detailed analysis of this study, it is helpful to establish the meaning of some of the key terms that will be used:

**The definition of strategy and strategic leadership.** ‘Strategy’ originates from the Greek word *strategia*, which relates to the control or ‘generalship’ of a large group of people or *stratos*. In the military sense, strategy concerns the conduct of war. Chandler<sup>3</sup> describes it as comprising “*the art and science of employing the nation’s military resources to secure the objectives of policy in the most effective and economical fashion possible by the use of force or its threat.*”

Strategy in its most basic form is about understanding and implementing a course of action that integrates the objectives, processes and resources<sup>4</sup> to meet policy objectives with the knowledge that this is a dynamic process that will require a constantly evolving strategy. Therefore any strategy must adapt to take into account the inevitable changes, second and third order consequences, which will be encountered as a result of benign or malign forces. Strategy is also about scale and, as highlighted by Adm (Retd) Charles Style, “*a truly strategic issue without an international dimension is more or less unimaginable.*”<sup>5</sup>

Turning now to strategic leadership, a useful contemporary description that works equally well for the political, business or military environments is that used by the United States Army War College (USAWC):

*“The process used by a leader to affect the achievement of a desirable and clearly understood vision by influencing the organisational culture, allocating resources, directing through policy and directive, and building consensus within a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous global environment which is marked by opportunities and threats.”*<sup>6</sup>

Strategic leadership is therefore about possessing the intelligence, vision, confidence, humility and communication skills to inspire team members in the pursuit of a successful strategy. It requires the strength of character to robustly get to grips with complexity and then independently, or in a coordinated effort with others, to reach a successful endstate.

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<sup>3</sup> David G Chandler. *Atlas of Military Strategy*, London: Arms and Armour Press, 1980. p 8.

<sup>4</sup> Often referred to as ends, ways and means.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Style, Nicholas Beale and David Ellery, *In Business and Battle*, Farnham: Gower Publishing Ltd, 2012. p 119.

<sup>6</sup> Colonel (Retd) Stephen J Gerras. *Strategic Leadership Primer*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edn, Department of Command, Leadership and Management, United States Army War College, 2010. p 2.

**Soft Power.** As originally conceived by Joseph Nye<sup>7</sup>, soft power is the ability to persuade, influence and co-opt others into acting in support of your strategy to achieve your desired outcome.

**Hard Power.** One tends to think of military might, physical aggression and kinetic activity when dealing with the subject of ‘hard power’ but this is too narrow and ignores the potential for other instruments, such as sanctions in the form of political and economic constraints, to be brought to bear in changing an opponents position against their will.

**Smart Power.** Finally ‘smart power’<sup>8</sup> is the ability to determine and deliver the correct combination of hard and soft power to achieve the desired effect.

What purpose is there in considering these three domains, which on the face of it appear to be very different? In his book, Adair<sup>9</sup> points out that despite outward appearances, the higher one goes in any particular organisation there is a clear trend towards the convergence of leadership requirements and styles.

Adair recounts the example of Nichomachides who, when asked by Socrates who has been selected as generals by the Athenians replies, disparagingly, that they have chosen an individual [Antisthenes] with little operational experience who is better known for his business acumen. Socrates’s response is that this does not necessarily make him an unsuitable choice given that much depends on how well equipped he is to look after the needs of his men, his ability to recruit the best trainers and how he delegates this responsibility. Socrates manages to convince Nicomachides that a successful businessman and a general perform very similar functions and to illustrate this he lists six functions that are of equal importance to both professions:

- Selecting the right man for the right job.
- Punishing the bad and rewarding the good.
- Winning the goodwill of those under them.
- Attracting allies and helpers.
- Keeping what they have gained.
- Being strenuous and industrious in their own work.

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<sup>7</sup> American Political Scientist, who coined the phrase ‘soft power’ in the 1980s.

<sup>8</sup> Also attributed to Joseph Nye (see above), the phrase came to prominence during the President Clinton administration but has also been used during President Obama’s term in office.

<sup>9</sup> John Adair. *op cit.* p.50.

Nichomachides seizes at what he perceives to be a weakness in this argument and says that fighting is what differentiates the two. However Socrates counters this by pointing out that the businessman will fight just as hard as the general to achieve success and will devise his strategy accordingly. So there is undoubtedly merit in analysing the strategic leadership qualities that are required in the political and business arena to determine if there is anything that can be learnt by the military.

Notwithstanding the strong similarities that exist between strategic leadership in the civilian world and that found in the military, it is the author's opinion that there are a number of key immutable differences between the modern day political, business and military spheres, which, for the sake of a common baseline, should be mentioned up front.

First and foremost, the top-level politician and businessman are in 'contact' at the strategic level on a daily basis; indeed this is the norm for both professions in a manner that is not the same for the military. The former must drive the national agenda in a global environment whilst the CEO level businessman or woman has the demands of their company's shareholders to satisfy in a global marketplace; both therefore routinely operate at the strategic level in their respective professions. The military on the other hand, unless they are actively engaged in defence matters at the national level, are unlikely to be dealing in strategic matters on an hourly or daily basis. In his book, *Effective Strategic Leadership*, Adair makes the point that in the military sphere there is a tendency to equate strategic leadership, 'Generalship', with the formulation of strategy, when in fact the routine business of a general is far more to do with the day to day administration and sustainability of his forces. However, when they do, the strategy that they devise and direct is ultimately about lives, both military and civilian, which, it could be argued, places a different level of moral responsibility on the military leader.

This is not to say that the military only conducts strategic activity when it is engaged in warfare but rather to make the point that military strategic activity has very different parameters. Put another way, the top level politician and the global businessman would be quickly out of political office or out of business if they were not focused and dealing with strategic level issues as a matter of course; whereas military strategic activity, with some obvious exceptions, is generally less frequent and, by extension, therefore less familiar. It is also far more likely that those few

military leaders that are entrusted with the business of strategy will do so at a much later stage in their careers, when compared to their civilian counterparts<sup>10</sup>:

*“It became clear to me that at the age of 58 I would have to learn new tricks that were not taught in the military manuals or on the battlefield. In this position I am a political soldier and will have to put my training in rapping-out orders and making snap decisions on the back burner, and have to learn the arts of persuasion and guile. I must become an expert in a whole new set of skills.”<sup>11</sup>*

General George C. Marshall<sup>12</sup>

Another aspect that must be acknowledged is the difference between business and military strategic leadership in terms of budgetary constraint and the effect that this has on a leader’s ability to implement strategy. Whilst this is not to suggest that business leaders are able to operate with financial impunity, nonetheless they do work in a different paradigm to their military counterparts. In the business world they are able to devise strategies that are intrinsically linked to an operating budget and vice versa; as a result there is undoubtedly greater flexibility to adapt both budget and strategy in a far faster timeframe than could ever be achieved in the military environment. This is hardly surprising given that the UK military strategic leader is governed by the resources allocated by the Secretary of State for Defence who in turn is financially dependent on the budgetary constraints imposed by the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the government of the day. This dynamic is not about to change but the consequence of this construct is that the military strategic leader is far less able to develop a strategy that is guaranteed to be robust enough to meet short-term contingencies, whilst retaining flexibility over the longer term. This is a fact of life but the result is that there will inevitably be compromise in an effort to manage/mitigate the chosen strategy and it is the author’s view that the level of compromise is likely to be greater than that experienced by the business leader.

Finally, it is a fact that the military, as an instrument of government, will always conduct strategy that is necessarily constrained by political considerations. This reality will also hold true for politicians themselves but far less so, if at all, for those operating in the business environment. This is not to say that business can completely disregard the political dimension but it is likely to be

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<sup>10</sup> The UK 2010 General Election resulted in a Prime Minister aged 43, a deputy PM aged 43 and a Chancellor aged 38. The Political and Business leaders that are being considered in this work were operating at the strategic level from their 30s onwards.

<sup>11</sup> Colonel (Retd) Stephen J Gerras. *Strategic Leadership Primer*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edn, Department of Command, Leadership and Management, United States Army War College, 2010. p 1.

<sup>12</sup> General Marshall became the Chief of Staff of the Army before going on to become the US Secretary of State.

significantly less of a driving factor in their decision making – at the very least the political time imperative will be less of a consideration.

Having laid these foundations, two contemporary strategic leaders from the political and business arenas will be examined. In doing so this work aims to capture what they themselves, and their observers, have identified as being the important characteristics and attributes that have contributed to their success:

## **POLITICAL LEADERSHIP**

### **Aung San Suu Kyi<sup>13</sup>**

*‘Leaders need to have charisma but they must use it to inspire others and not to go on an ego trip.’<sup>14</sup>*

Aung San Suu Kyi has gained worldwide recognition through her role as Chairperson of the National League of Democracy (NLD), the main opposition party to the military ruling party in Burma. Placed under house arrest by the ruling party for nearly 15 years, she nonetheless managed to drive the national agenda in a way that has been quite astonishing and was recently elected to the Burmese parliament in 2012. Dedicated to the human rights cause and the pursuit of democracy, she has been recognised widely across the globe and, amongst her many accolades, was presented with the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991. Suu Kyi’s character is succinctly described by Ma Than E, in the book *Freedom From Fear*:

*“Suu has an integrity, a steadfastness of purpose, an unswerving determination and single-minded persistence in attaining a goal, a seriousness going hand in hand with a strong sense of humour, a dignity and resolve in the face of persecution and adversity.”*

The qualities listed above strongly echo many of the qualities already listed in the earlier sections of this work and will become a common theme of this study.

Suu Kyi is the daughter of a national hero; her father had fought in the Burmese resistance during WW2 and was on the verge of forming the first government of an independent Burma when

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<sup>13</sup> Born 1945.

<sup>14</sup> Hannah Prevett. *The Sunday Times*, *Charm Seduces the Board*, London, England. 10 Jan 2013. p 2.

he was assassinated in 1947. There is no doubt that her father's considerable reputation in the hearts and minds of the Burmese people was a major factor in her favour. She herself has said:

*“From childhood I have been deeply interested in the history of the independence movement and in the social and political development of Burma. My father died when I was only two years old, and it was only when I grew older and started collecting material on his life that I began to learn how much he achieved in his thirty-two years. I developed an admiration for him as a patriot and a statesman. Because of this strong bond I feel a deep responsibility for the welfare of my country.”<sup>15</sup>*

As a younger woman Suu Kyi spent a period working at the United Nations in New York. This experience gave her an invaluable insight into the scope of the United Nation's international reach but it also gave her the opportunity to immerse herself in a number of charitable activities, highlighting her desire to serve the community in whatever way she can. Suu Kyi's understanding of the importance of cultural awareness in supporting her work and achieving her goals is very clear. Her ability to influence, persuade and, if necessary, coerce others to work to her agenda is not a character trait that has been confined solely to her activity in Burma. Her time at the UN and her formative years at university undoubtedly helped her development into becoming a highly effective speaker, who is adept at putting forward a logical and persuasive argument. Without question, it has also given her a valuable insight into the art of negotiation and the merits of strategic patience.

Suu Kyi's courage and conviction are obvious to all. On several occasions she was offered her freedom if she agreed to leave Burma and never return but this was refused every time, even though she knew that it might mean not seeing her husband and her two sons again. This was a possibility that Michael Aris was well aware of, knowing that his wife's decision would always be to put Burma and her beliefs first but nonetheless, it illustrates the lengths that she was prepared to go to in order to realise her vision. Suu Kyi's strategy of steadfast and patient persuasion at the expense of her own liberty is a vivid example of the potential for 'soft power' to bring about the desired endstate.

With a worldwide reputation that was probably second only to Nelson Mandela, the loyalty of her pro-democracy followers intensified during her long period of incarceration<sup>16</sup> into what can

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<sup>15</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi. *Freedom From Fear*, London: Penguin Books, 2010. p 326.

<sup>16</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi spent 15 years under house arrest.

only be described as a “personality cult”; something that she would never have wished for, believing that *“loyalty to principles was of far greater importance than loyalty to an individual.”*<sup>17</sup>

These talisman-like qualities must have become a source of great frustration for the military dictatorship in Burma, who would have felt themselves to be in between a rock and a hard place with whatever course of action they took being a compromise on their part. Their refusal to let her participate in Burma’s first free elections is a case in point as this undoubtedly helped to increase her popularity amongst the people. The result was that, when the military regime allowed elections to take place in 1990, her party won 80% of the vote<sup>18</sup>; an extraordinary result for a politician that was confined to her house and a clear message to the military regime, which only managed to win 10 seats. Back to strategic patience and the importance of negotiating in a manner that enables an opponent a face saving conclusion; Suu Kyi, on this occasion and many others, has always been careful to ensure that her opposition is not completely boxed in;

*“Build a golden bridge of escape for your enemies.”*<sup>19</sup>

Confucius

Throughout her personal and political life Suu Kyi has placed a great premium on the principle of an egalitarian society. Her cultural awareness and adherence to the primacy of human rights in her strategy is clear evidence of her personal beliefs but also her study of Ghandi and Martin Luther King, both strong advocates of non-violent protest. In this regard she has some striking similarities to the next individual that will be considered.

## **Hillary Clinton**<sup>20</sup>

*“No one would have doubted his ability to reign if he had never been emperor.”*<sup>21</sup>

Tacitus, Roman historian, speaking of Emperor Galba

Tacitus’s quote, albeit for a different gender and profession, is extremely apposite when considering Hilary Clinton. It is very clear that those that know her best and have worked with her have quickly recognised her innate leadership qualities; *“you had an immediate sense that you were*

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<sup>17</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi. *op cit.* p xxvi.

<sup>18</sup> The NLD took 392 of the 485 legislative seats in the National Assembly.

<sup>19</sup> James C Humes. *Nixon’s Ten Commandments of Leadership and Negotiation*, New York: Touchstone, 1998. p 122.

<sup>20</sup> Born 1947.

<sup>21</sup> John Adair. *op cit.* p. 77.

*in the presence of somebody who was just exceptionally impressive.*”<sup>22</sup> A fascinating character, she is well known as the most recent US Secretary of State and as such, the first former First Lady to serve in a President’s Cabinet. She is a trained lawyer, a former Senator<sup>23</sup> and an advocate of ‘smart power’ as an adjunct to soft power.

Hilary Clinton’s formative years are telling. Her father was a Chief Petty Officer in the US Navy during the Second World War and was clearly an authoritarian figure that ran his household and family in a very strict fashion. In his book Carl Bernstein<sup>24</sup> records:

*“He replicated the barracks experience in his own home, commanding loudly from his living room lounge chair, barking orders, denigrating, minimizing achievements, ignoring accomplishments, raising the bar constantly for his frustrated children – “character building,” he called it.”*

Hilary Clinton, many years later and perhaps with a degree of benevolence, suggested that her father simply wanted to ensure that his children were brought up to be tough, competitive but also realistic about what can be achieved in life. There is little doubt however that the exacting standards that her father set made a deep impression and have influenced her strongly in her career.

In her early years her ambition was to be altruistic on a grand scale. In her pursuit of this goal her instinct was to strike the right balance between principle and pragmatism. Rather like Suu Kyi, she was greatly moved by Martin Luther King and everything that he stood for. When King’s movement was at its peak she was already an active personality in the student leadership of her University<sup>25</sup> but his assassination led to her playing an instrumental role in defusing the potentially militant actions of her fellow students. She brokered a solution between the University and the Student Union, which in due course resulted in the employment and admission of more minority students. This is one of the first examples of her leadership; the finer detail of which, although not covered here, provides a perfect illustration of her ability to negotiate with and influence groups in pursuit of her desired outcome. It is also one of several examples of her appreciation for the importance of cultural awareness. A further illustration of her principled beliefs can be seen from her decision to select Yale over Harvard on the basis that, in her opinion, the former was in the vanguard of utilising law to bring about social change.

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<sup>22</sup> Quote by Peter Edelman, Carl Bernstein, *A Woman in Charge*. p 65.

<sup>23</sup> Hillary Clinton was elected as Senator for New York in 2000.

<sup>24</sup> Carl Bernstein. *op cit*. p 15.

<sup>25</sup> She later took on the role of President of the Student Union.

Perhaps one of her greatest strategic successes during her political career has been the adroit manner in which she has steered her course to achieve ever greater heights while actively managing the turmoil surrounding her husband's impeachment during his presidency. This episode resulted in her gaining enormous support that, in the longer term, has done her no harm at all.

Her political stock was sufficiently robust to run for office as Senator for New York; quite a feat when taking into account that she is not a native New Yorker, had never lived there and no woman had ever run successfully for public office there. Nonetheless, she is said to have made her decision with great deliberation and analysis, with success the result. In terms of 'soft' power, throughout her New York campaign she invested heavily in developing her knowledge of the constituency, met each new challenge with firm logic and relied on her powers of persuasion to influence the key protagonists.

Her subsequent move into the Senate was skilfully undertaken. She seems to have consciously adopted a deferential approach to the institution at the same time as actively seeking out those that might be considered her enemies, or those of her husband, and subtly working to change their perceptions. This 'influence' campaign is clear evidence of her strong understanding of the importance of communication, a skill that she has used to very good effect on numerous occasions.

In her role as a senator it quickly became apparent that she was prepared to get involved in the "drudgery of government"<sup>26</sup> as opposed to simply standing back and directing. This, allied to a strategic patience and tolerance that many have marvelled at, has won her a huge amount of respect and political capital.

She ran for the Office of President in 2008 but lost out to President Obama. That she then accepted the key post in his Cabinet as Secretary of State<sup>27</sup> speaks volumes and it will be interesting to see whether or not this is yet another astute move in her potential strategy to achieve higher office at some stage in the future.

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<sup>26</sup> Carl Bernstein. *op cit.* p 45.

<sup>27</sup> Hillary Clinton stood down as SoS on 1/2/13.

## BUSINESS LEADERSHIP

### Bill Gates<sup>28</sup>

*“Success is a lousy teacher. It seduces smart people into thinking they can’t lose.”<sup>29</sup>*

Bill Gates

Bill Gates is internationally renowned as the Chairman of Microsoft but this American business magnate and philanthropist, who is one of the world’s wealthiest individuals, has more recently channeled his wealth into the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. This \$30Bn entrepreneurial enterprise is focused on scientific research to develop medical solutions to tackle some of the more problematic global health issues such as malaria and polio. The Foundation’s work has a tandem strand on health and education matters that is aimed at the US domestic audience.

Gates has operated at the strategic level in the business world for decades. He has been closely studied by those who aspire to emulate his meteoric rise in the business world and others who simply want to try to determine how he has been so brilliant in business. As a result there is no shortage of commentary or observation about what has enabled him to achieve such enormous success. For the purposes of this short study, the aim is to identify those elements that best capture how he has developed and implemented his highly effective strategic leadership.

There is little doubt that Gates is a visionary. He has that innate ability to identify an opportunity and to understand what needs to be done in order to exploit it. As Des Dearlove points out in his book, *“this is not simply a story of technical brilliance and enormous wealth. It is one of remarkable business vision and an obsessive desire to win.”<sup>30</sup>* But Gates also recognises that, whilst having vision is important, a vital component for any strategic leader is the ability to give people clear direction and guidance. As he himself has said, *“you can’t just get a bunch of smart people together and know which path they should go off and pursue. Actually, it’s amazing that that worked for the Manhattan Project.”<sup>31</sup>*

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<sup>28</sup> Born 1955.

<sup>29</sup> Lisa Rogak. *Impatient Optimist*. London: Hardie Grant Books, 2012. p 118.

<sup>30</sup> Des Dearlove, *The Unauthorised Guide to Doing Business the Bill Gates Way*, Capstone Publishing Ltd, 2010. p 4.

<sup>31</sup> Lisa Rogak. *op cit*. p 30.

This forward thinking and self-challenging mentality has enabled Gates to address the business excellence of Microsoft and to tackle perceived and real risks and threats. As he has said, “*all good capitalistic companies get up every morning and think, how can we make a better product? What are they doing well? We’re going to make it cheaper, better, simpler, faster.*”<sup>32</sup> Equally there is a need to correctly identify the competition and accurately interpret the threat. “*You always have to be thinking about who is coming to get you.*”<sup>33</sup> This mindset has distinct parallels with the military way of thinking and operating, both at the lower levels of command and, more importantly, at the strategic level. In military terminology, it’s all about accurate and timely intelligence on the threat, which in turn generates a level of understanding that enables the senior level of command to act in the time and space of their choice. It also reinforces that this is an iterative process as the threat or competition has a vote.

To expand on this it is obvious that Gates and Branson, who I will turn to shortly, have been adept in positioning themselves in order to give the best opportunity for success. Both have invested a considerable amount of effort into their research capabilities so that their organisation can make critical business decisions that are based on sound intelligence. This effort, which includes a situational and cultural awareness of their respective markets, is something that, again, has strong parallels with the military. In the case of the British Army there is ongoing work to increase the pool of cultural/regional specialists so that key decisions can be made in an informed manner that takes due account of the often alien (unfamiliar) complexities of tribe, clan, culture and religion. Such a capability will be essential for the newly created Adaptive Force brigades with their regional focus.

For Gates the dissemination of information or effective Information Management (IM) is key to an organisations success. If information regarding a similar project cannot be accessed in less than 60 secs then individuals will probably not find it.<sup>34</sup> Again, the military strategist will be familiar with this aspiration as Information Management/Information Exploitation (IMIX) is now seen as a critical element of any effective headquarters. He also highlights that organisations are not generally good at taking action on bad news.<sup>35</sup> This is a cultural aspect and will only develop effectively if there is trust throughout the organisation that whoever identifies the shortfall or failure will not be adversely dealt with. His point being that the sooner that bad news is acknowledged it can be acted upon so that plans can be changed to alter the outcome or mitigate the impact. Again,

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<sup>32</sup> Lisa Rogak. *ibid.* p 27.

<sup>33</sup> Lisa Rogak. *ibid.* p 28.

<sup>34</sup> Lisa Rogak. *op cit.* p 15.

<sup>35</sup> Lisa Rogak. *ibid.* p 11.

there are strong parallels with the military ethos of mission command and the trust that must be established throughout the chain of command for this to be enabled.

In terms of 'brainstorming', planning and seizing the initiative, Gates is firmly of the opinion that "*smart people anywhere in the company should have the power to drive an initiative.*"<sup>36</sup> His rationale being that there is no monopoly on good ideas and that there is potential for competitive advantage to be gained with as diverse a group of thinkers as possible. This again is a feature of the military's mission command philosophy but it is often easier said than done when the headquarters' head count is under constant review and 'double-hatting' a busy staff officer is rather missing the point. The military has, in recent years, started to get to grips with the concept of 'Red Teaming' in order to try and ensure that every angle is analysed in an effort to out-manoeuvre the enemy. The use of 'constructive contrarians' or, in plain English, alternative thinkers is increasingly in vogue.

A key observation that is a common theme with each of the individuals being studied is the importance of team dynamics. Gates's view is that, "*size fundamentally works against excellence. Small teams can communicate effectively and aren't encumbered by a big structure slowing them down.*"<sup>37</sup> He also highlights the value of having a trusted lieutenant<sup>38</sup>, who is able to act as a sounding-board for the development of strategy as well as the more mundane, but no less important, administrative requirements – "*the benefit of sparking off somebody who's got that kind of brilliance is that it not only makes business more fun, but it really leads to a lot of successes.*"<sup>39</sup> This again has strong similarities with the military, where the drive for smaller and more agile headquarters set-ups means that key personnel are at a premium. How effectively will this be achieved by a military that is going to become increasingly reliant on a Reservist element who, by virtue of their routine civilian employment, are going to be far less able to develop such a strong bond of understanding and trust?

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<sup>36</sup> Lisa Rogak. *ibid.* p 46.

<sup>37</sup> Lisa Rogak. *op cit.* p 89.

<sup>38</sup> Steve Balmer has been a key ally to Gates but in recent months there has been evidence of friction in this relationship. However this should not detract from what has been a remarkable long-term business strategic leadership pairing.

<sup>39</sup> Lisa Rogak. *op cit.* p 115.

## Sir Richard Branson<sup>40</sup>

*“ars est celare artem – the art lies in concealing the art”<sup>41</sup>.*

Sir Richard Branson, the Chairman of Virgin is regarded as a maverick both for his audacity in challenging business convention and for his habit of indulging in sporting/adventure records. During the course of the last forty years he has built up an enormously successful and internationally recognised business that has managed to incrementally reinforce a brand in a way that few others have managed to match. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this successful growth has been the diversity of business; from a student newspaper<sup>42</sup> to space travel<sup>43</sup>.

Over time, Branson has skilfully developed a reputation that has struck a chord with the general public. In a sense, he has cultivated the idea that in taking on some of the competition he has been the public's David to big businesses' Goliath. He has found that by engendering a common touch with the man on the street, the customer readily relates not just to him but also the Virgin brand. In fact, this has developed to such an extent that it could be argued that Branson is the brand. He is a popular and extremely charismatic figure who is bold and ruthlessly ambitious but his informal and easy going charm invariably has the effect of lulling his competitors into a false sense of security. John Antonakis, Professor of Organisational Behaviour, at Lausanne University notes that:

*“Charisma is a key attribute when it comes to influencing and persuading people.”<sup>44</sup>*

It could be argued that Branson utilises the full spectrum of power from 'soft' through 'hard' to 'smart'. On balance however, whilst there is no denying that he is not averse to using every tactic to change an opponent's position against their will, his approach is probably best described as 'soft' power but with a hard edge – by and large, the emphasis is on gaining support through influence and co-opting support.

In the military sense there is undoubtedly an element of deception in much of what Branson does. He certainly seems to have achieved some astonishing victories by adopting a strategy of asking for more than he ever hoped to or expected to win and explaining away his intransigent

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<sup>40</sup> Born 1950.

<sup>41</sup> Des Dearlove (referring to Tim Jackson's, *Virgin King – The Unofficial Branson Biography*). *op cit.* p 8.

<sup>42</sup> The *Student* magazine was first published in Jan 1968.

<sup>43</sup> The Virgin Galactic space company based in Mojave, California.

<sup>44</sup> Hannah Prevett. *op cit.* p 2.

stance on his highly qualified legal team or other members of his staff.<sup>45</sup> His negotiation skills are complemented by a strong degree of pragmatism and patience, qualities that are familiar to the military but arguably harder to adhere to when subject to political imperatives.

Branson is a risk taker with an irreverence for big business that has become complacent but he will always back up any initiative with a considerable amount of research. He is surrounded by talented advisors and he chooses his battles very carefully indeed. This is also the case with his derring-do exploits, which have often flirted with disaster<sup>46</sup> but that have been instrumental to the success of the Virgin brand. Whether successful or not he is astute enough to balance his entrepreneurial business persona with a cold hard logic that is based on considerable research into the art of the possible. Here again there is a strong similarity to the sort of analysis or campaign estimate that a military strategic leader would conduct.

Perhaps the area in which Branson is just simply different from almost any other strategic leader in the business world is his ability to generate publicity for any new ventures that he is undertaking. As Des Dearlove puts it, “*public relations is Branson’s special gift.*”<sup>47</sup> He truly understands how the digital age has provided leaders with the ability to communicate in an apparently one-to-one manner with their audience. New media platforms, most notably social media applications<sup>48</sup>, are extremely powerful means of rapidly spreading information. ‘Messaging’ is of enormous importance to the military, particularly during a period when its forces are actively engaged in an overseas campaign and when defence spending is constrained but, surprisingly, this is an area that the military has not yet invested in as heavily as might be expected. However, it is still of vital importance to the military that the right message is heard and the discipline of strategic messaging, now referred to as Strategic Communications or STRATCOM is an area that needs to be properly resourced.

The charismatic Branson is a great motivator and he inspires his team to achieve results beyond what would realistically be expected at the outset. Branson, like Gates, does not believe in large and unwieldy headquarters structures. In line with the military style mission command approach, he is a highly effective delegator and will empower his team to follow his intent and deliver the desired outcome.<sup>49</sup> With the possible exception of the Virgin Atlantic airline business,

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<sup>45</sup> Des Dearlove. *op cit.* p 53.

<sup>46</sup> Even those that have failed, such as his ill-fated first attempt to take the Blue Riband trophy for the fastest crossing of the Atlantic ocean in the Virgin Challenger, are generally viewed as being PR successes.

<sup>47</sup> Des Dearlove. *op cit.* p 82.

<sup>48</sup> Social Media web applications such as Twitter, Facebook, Myspace and, in the case of China, Weibo.

<sup>49</sup> Des Dearlove, *op cit.* p 63.

which he continues to lead, the phenomenal success of Virgin as a global conglomerate has meant that he has been forced, probably willingly, to let a number of talented individuals run the component companies for him. This trust and delegation of power has had a highly motivating effect – the results speak for themselves. A valuable lesson to take away from this is the importance of the strategic leader being able to act as the ‘conductor’, gaining greater situational awareness of the key influencing factors and buying thinking space in order to adapt a strategy proactively. From the military perspective this is common ground but it is a healthy reminder of the importance for all commanders’, but particularly those at the strategic level, of the need to resist the temptation to fight the ‘tactical’ battle, especially at a time when technology enables greater scrutiny and interference.

In analysing the strategic leadership styles of these four individuals it is no great surprise to find that there are numerous characteristics and skillsets that are common to each. In the research that the author conducted, it quickly became apparent that there is a vast quantity of literature available on this subject and that it would be easy to lose sight of the objective. However, one reference that struck a particular chord in its applicability to the strategic leadership of all four leaders is that of President Nixon’s ‘Ten Commandments’<sup>50</sup>. These guidelines have stood the test of time and would undoubtedly be of value to those military leaders of today that are destined to become the strategic leaders of the future:

1. Always be prepared to negotiate but never negotiate without being prepared.
2. Never be belligerent, but always be firm.
3. Always remember that covenants should be openly agreed to but privately negotiated.
4. Never seek publicity that would destroy the ability to get results.
5. Never give up unilaterally what could be used as a bargaining chip. Make your adversaries give something up for everything they get.
6. Never let your adversary underestimate what you would do in response to a challenge. Never tell him what you would not do.
7. Always leave your adversary a face-saving line of retreat.
8. Always carefully distinguish between friends who provide some human rights and enemies who deny all human rights.
9. Always do at least as much for our friends as our adversaries do for our enemies.

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<sup>50</sup> James C Humes. *op cit.* pages: 29, 45, 57, 75, 91, 105, 121, 133, 149 and 159.

10. Never lose faith. In just cause faith can move mountains. Faith with strength is futile, but strength without faith is sterile.

In honing into the specific detail there are certain characteristics that have made each of them particularly effective because of the specific setting (time, location, event etc.) that they found themselves in. This is perhaps where there are potential lessons for the military that are worthy of closer investigation.

## **Potential Lessons**

**Cultural Awareness.** Strategy formulation, and its successful deployment, is highly dependent on accurate cultural awareness as it is this that will determine how well a strategy works in relation to the population and other key actors. From what can be gleaned through autobiographical work and general observation, each individual considered has an extraordinarily detailed understanding of the environment in which they conduct their strategy. A key aspect of this is their cultural awareness; a knowledge that, in most cases, takes a considerable amount of time to develop. The evidence gathered from this study highlights the importance for the military of sending future leaders on foreign postings at an early stage in their careers and the benefits accrued by improving language skills in order to give them a deeper understanding of the local practices and nuances that will influence both strategy formulation and implementation<sup>51</sup>. This understanding of what has become known as ‘human terrain’ is not simply an exposure through operational deployments, important though these are in shaping future strategic leaders, but the invaluable cultural awareness that can be gained from a prolonged immersion in a different environment. The US military is devoting time and effort towards Cross-Cultural Competence (C3) so that it can operate from the outset with greater sensitivity in complex environments.

*“I also needed to know the culture. How people thought about things, their attitude to our presence, and their reactions to our actions were all important to our success and relationships. I had to know the “street”. Knowing that street meant seeing through the prism of their culture.”<sup>52</sup>*

The leaders that have been considered have all exhibited a strong grip on this aspect of their respective operating environments’ and, in several cases, have shown a determination to really

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<sup>51</sup> A reduced opportunity for foreign postings means that other methods of achieving cultural immersion and/or greater cultural exposure should be considered.

<sup>52</sup> Zinni, Gen Tony and Kaltz, Tony. *Leading the Charge*, New York: PalgraveMacmillan, 2010. p 118.

understand cultural complexity through the process of ‘Red-Teaming’ and the use of constructive contrarians. The use of Red-Teaming is developing in the UK military and the value of the process is recognised, although much depends firstly on the ability to employ effective alternative thinkers (constructive contrarians) but secondly, and more critically, the willingness of the senior leadership to listen to the alternative view rather than dismiss it without due consideration. The latter can occur either because of a culture of ‘not invented here’ or because its findings are an unwelcome interference with the strategy development. In short, in an increasingly connected world the military needs to maximise its ability to achieve cultural awareness in order to ensure that every effort has been made to avoid a misunderstanding that has strategic ramifications. The use of cultural advisors is an important step but perhaps this could be developed further with the increased employment of advisors that have a specific remit and the subject matter expertise for a geographic region.<sup>53</sup>

**New Media and Communications.** Modern society has an insatiable appetite for immediate news. The social media phenomenon has provided the ability to upload real-time video with accompanying text and verbal commentary virtually anywhere on the planet. This is of critical importance to the strategic leader as there is enormous pressure to act in a timeframe that would have been unheard of even as recently as 10 years ago, effectively denying them the thinking space that once existed. The use of social media is a skillset that is well understood in both the business and the political spheres. One of Hilary Clinton’s former advisors<sup>54</sup> talked of the rapid spread of information via social media that could be targeted to achieve rapid results. He highlighted the “Digital Divide” that has become increasingly apparent, between those that really understand the importance of digital social media platforms found within Web 2.0<sup>55</sup> that can galvanise support in timeframes that were, up until relatively recently, unimaginable and those that have not grasped this. Evidence from Iran<sup>56</sup>, the Arab Spring and numerous other global events highlights the need for military strategic leaders to get to grips with this digital toolset so that they can use it to their advantage. If they fail to do so there is potential for a generational digital divide, with senior leaders being outflanked by a nimble and ‘tech’ savvy youth. The Israeli Defence Force (IDF) learnt from its experience during the Second Lebanon War in 2006 against Hezbollah that information is a strategic weapon and has since invested heavily in this capability. A recent IDF attack on the leading Hamas commander, Ahmed al-Jabari, was announced via the IDF’s Twitter

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<sup>53</sup> Past examples are Col T E Lawrence (Arabia) and Lt Col Ewen Southby-Tailyour RM (Falklands).

<sup>54</sup> Presentation given to RCDS, during visit to the British Embassy in Washington, Nov 2012.

<sup>55</sup> Web 2.0, examples of ‘blogging’ and messaging mediums used were the ‘Tittersphere’, Facebook, MySpace and YouTube.

<sup>56</sup> Social media used to rapidly inform global audience of the death of Neda Agha-Soltan in Tehran, 20/6/09.

account and on YouTube.<sup>57</sup>

*“Whatever the full implications might be, the military must embrace the new media; there is really no choice. Its power and dynamism dictate that military estimates accord it the attention and focus it deserves.”*<sup>58</sup>

Each of the strategic leaders considered has a talent for getting their message across on camera. Some, like Sir Richard Branson, are exemplars of the art but all are highly adept at using the visual medium of television or webcasting. The military has made great strides forward in this area<sup>59</sup> but there is still considerable scope for improvement<sup>60</sup>. General Zinni, in his book ‘Leading the Charge’, states:

*“There is no substitute for doing it. Initial instruction has to be followed up with tough simulation, actual communicating, and brutal critique.”*<sup>61</sup>

A further aspect to be considered, which is of particular relevance to the military, is the potential impact that social media can have on management structures. Social Media is, by its very nature, a collaborative medium that encourages participation in a far wider and more dynamic way than existing management models were designed to cope with. Information can be distributed at previously unimaginable speeds and is very likely to short-circuit established power dynamics and traditional lines of communication<sup>62</sup>. This is particularly so in the case of hierarchical organisations like the military.

It will be interesting to track how well this capability is resourced by the UK military against the understandable concerns raised by security, openness and accountability, both during and after a significant event. Staff processes will need to evolve in order to reap the benefits of the various mediums whilst maintaining the highest possible levels of detail and accuracy.

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<sup>57</sup> [www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2012/11/21/israel-gaza-social-media/1719981](http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2012/11/21/israel-gaza-social-media/1719981)

<sup>58</sup> Caldwell, Murphy and Menning. *Learning To Leverage New Media, The Israeli Defense Forces in Recent Conflicts*, Military Review, May/June 2009. p 4.

<sup>59</sup> The Defence Intranet is increasingly using webcasts by senior officers to reach to widest possible audience.

<sup>60</sup> Over a 2-year period in command of the Command Staff and Tactical Training Group, responsible for the collective level of command and staff training for all deployed headquarters, it was telling how many senior officers would actively avoid engaging with the media. The only alternative is to use a spokesperson but this individual must be outstanding if the desired audience effect is to be successfully achieved.

<sup>61</sup> Zinni, Gen Tony and Kaltz, Tony. *op cit*. p 184.

<sup>62</sup> [http://www.mckinseyquarterly.com/Six\\_social-media\\_skills\\_every\\_leader\\_needs\\_3056](http://www.mckinseyquarterly.com/Six_social-media_skills_every_leader_needs_3056)

**Relationship Building and Trust.** The development of trust, so vital in any military endeavour but particularly so at the strategic level, is an evolving process and takes time to achieve. General Rupert Smith in his book, *The Utility of War*, notes that the modern paradigm of conflict demands that military leadership places far greater emphasis on the “*establishment of trust and good relations with the people over time*”<sup>63</sup> From this brief study of the political and business world it is very clear that the strategic leaders that have been considered have each benefitted from well established and, more often than not, long-term relationships with their principal advisors. In this regard there is perhaps a significant difference with the military model, which is characterised by frequent change as individuals are posted and promoted. As a consequence, the military leader’s ability to devise and implement strategy is potentially subject to a higher degree of turbulence as far as key personnel are concerned and this brings with it questions over ownership and accountability. The flip side of this, it could be argued, is that a fresh set of eyes may well bring a positive influence to the process. Notwithstanding this possible benefit, it is worth considering the effect that an increasing reliance on reservists might have on the process of strategy formulation – trust will not be easily forged at short notice from a disparate pool of manpower. Ensuring that individuals receive sufficient exposure to strategic level situations so that they can develop their competency is a long term project and not something that can be quickly or easily taught.

**Negotiating Skills.** An earlier reference to Socrates highlighted the importance of negotiating skills in order to build consensus across a broad range of stakeholders at the strategic level. Each of the leaders studied has demonstrated considerable talent in their ability to negotiate in respect to their particular circumstances. What is notable is that they have all had the luxury of time to develop their strategic level negotiating skills in a manner that is not germane to the military. General Marshall’s acknowledgement of the need for him to “*learn the arts of persuasion and guile*”, which were in his words, a new set of skills in the latter stages of his career is a case in point. Career long military experience undoubtedly assists the military leader in the art of negotiation but do we really devote enough time and effort to this skill? It is a strategic quality that is growing in importance and, in an increasingly connected world, is a key competency that needs to be practiced both face to face and via digital media. A recent briefing from Aberystwyth University to one of the RCDS Regional Tours demonstrated the potential for future cooperation in the Strategy Game that the faculty runs as part of its International Politics course. Perhaps there is merit in the UK military leadership participating in this type of event in order to develop this skillset in a broader setting?

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<sup>63</sup> Rupert Smith. *The Utility of Force*, London: Penguin Group, 2005, p 388.

**Information Management.** It's clear that accurate and timely information, let's call it intelligence, is an area in which both politicians and businessmen invest heavily when devising their strategies. Modern technology enables the collection, aggregation, analysis and dissemination of vast amounts of information over a very short period of time, which can become a powerful intelligence tool if the information that is gathered is managed effectively. All too often however, organisations are inefficient in the processes required. Gates estimates that the average company investing 80% of effort in this area will typically only realise 20% of the potential benefits<sup>64</sup>. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Peter Drucker stated that:

*“Information technology so far has been a producer of data rather than a producer of information – let alone a producer of new and different questions and new and different strategies.”*<sup>65</sup>

This ability to master IT in pursuit of coherent and robust strategy formulation is axiomatic for the military<sup>66</sup>. Possessing the right networks to identify a competitor's weakness and to exploit any opportunities before they can is a critical capability. Recently the British Army, at the operational level, has learnt the power of network analysis in developing its strategy for attacking the insurgent network in Afghanistan. It is this sort of skillset, in which the detail of second and third order consequences can be analysed, that lends itself to strategic level problem solving and strategy design and is therefore an area that deserves more resources. That said, this form of network analysis to deliver what some might term 'wicked' situational awareness must be seen as a complementary tool, with human judgement having the final say.

## Conclusions

This work has highlighted a number of strategic leadership characteristics that are pertinent to the political and business arena and, by implication, the 'soft' power environment. This is not to say that 'hard' power is not a tool that is available to the political and business world, it certainly can be, but the emphasis is towards the former and this work has focused on that.

The author acknowledges that whilst the application of strategic leadership in the military sphere will always be a unique activity and that some political and business skills are not, and never will be, appropriate, there is undoubtedly merit in devoting time and consideration to the following

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<sup>64</sup> Bill Gates. *Business @ The Speed of Thought*, London: Penguin Books, 1999. p xv.

<sup>65</sup> Bill Gates. *op cit.* p 317.

<sup>66</sup> Rupert Smith. *op cit.* p 390.

areas in the future:

- **Cultural Awareness.** The importance of cultural awareness in the strategic environment cannot be overstated. Put simply, a cultural disconnect is, at the very least, going to hinder the success of any strategy and in the worst case a seemingly minor action could completely halt any progress. Advisors, be they anthropologists or individuals with specialist knowledge of local customs and issues, are as vital to the commander as the more conventional military planning disciplines.
- **New Media and Communications.** As George Bernard Shaw said, “*the greatest problem with communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished.*”<sup>67</sup> Military strategic leaders must ensure that they strike the correct balance between traditional and contemporary means of communication so that any strategy is broadcast effectively<sup>68</sup>. Greater emphasis on Web 2.0 mediums and honing interview techniques will enhance results.
- **Relationship building and trust.** Teams will change and it is healthy that they do so but there is no getting away from the fact that the military environment is subject to more frequent change than its political and business counterparts. Although there is little evidence to suggest that this is detrimental to the military strategic level of operations, the responsibility is on the leader to develop their team so that individuals understand their commander’s intent and the latitude they have to implement it.
- **Negotiating skills.** For the military, the art of negotiation is a skillset that tends to be more prevalent in the latter stages of a military career. It is a key capability at the strategic level and must be practised if it is to be employed effectively. Nixon’s Ten Commandments emphasise the importance of preparedness in this area and it is perhaps an area that deserves more attention.
- **Information Management.** The ability to access critical information in a timely fashion is a key enabler for strategy formulation. All too often previous experience that could prove vital to the development of a plan is either lost in the electronic ether of a

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<sup>67</sup> Robin Speculand, *Beyond Strategy*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009. p 41.

<sup>68</sup> Transmission effectiveness will depend on content, accuracy, context and timeliness.

headquarters or not readily identifiable. Information Management protocols are critical to the success of the strategic leader and must be adhered to by all staff.

A final thought. The ability to define, develop and deliver successful strategy is a long-term project in terms of equipping an individual to be effective at this level of leadership. Political and business figures are helped in this in that they have greater exposure to strategic issues throughout their careers and certainly from a lower level within their respective organisations than their military counterparts. Whilst it is acknowledged that this is a generalisation, the majority of military officers will tend to be focused on the tactical and operational levels of leadership for the majority of their service. For the very few that progress to the strategic level of leadership the onus is on them to ensure that this complex skillset is nurtured in their successors as early as possible in their careers in order to instil a “strategic perspective”<sup>69</sup> and a sense of familiarity with the process.

*“Those having torches will pass them on to others.”*<sup>70</sup>

Plato

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<sup>69</sup> Maj. Gen. Peter C. Bayer Jr., Director of Strategy, Plans, and Policy in the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff, G3/5/7. [http://www.army.mil/article/67471/Army\\_leaders\\_discuss\\_challenges\\_solutions\\_with\\_War\\_College\\_students/](http://www.army.mil/article/67471/Army_leaders_discuss_challenges_solutions_with_War_College_students/)

<sup>70</sup> John Adair. *op cit.* p 3.

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