

# Business is War: Can Military Literature and Trends Explain Everything?

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## Abstract

By orthodoxy, theorists often associate the language of business practices to its military counterpart. For example, in the world of commerce, the term strategy is defined with conception that evokes conceptions of enemies, defeat, competition, etc. This terminology can be traced back to military endeavor from 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC. However, while most scholars agree that business literature from the 20<sup>th</sup> century borrows ideas and definitions from the military, there has been no attempts – at least to our knowledge – to appreciate to which extent the business literature in the digital age can be based on the military lexicon. This paper has two objectives. First, it demonstrates that the military and the business literature have somewhat similar historical trajectory and similar ruptures. The second objective of this paper is to highlight three distinctive military trends following World War II and their analogy to current managerial issues in the digital era. The aim of this article is to give managers a focus on new challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and their possible solutions.

**Keywords:** business, management, military, strategy, digital age

## Introduction

Business literature, especially from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has known to be closely related to the military literature. Management scholars often refer to military terms to give a definition and operationalization of concepts like strategy[1], resources and resources planning,[2] and positioning[3]. Several analogies are noted between management and military literature. For example, the conceptualization of an industry within a zero-sum market includes firms that are competing between each other to gain economic advantage. This zero-sum market is analogous to war, where market share from a firm is territory gain from an army[4]. Specifically, “relative” improvement takes on importance when a market is saturated and/or not expanding and an “enemy” is thwarting expansion. Because shareholders demand a return on their investment year over year, in the absence of an expanding customer base – and assuming minimal offering innovation – such a result can only be delivered through “stealing” market share from competitors. This is analogous to what is proposed by Sun Tzu[4], a renowned warlord from 500 B.C., who indicates that expansion of the lands and possessions of a kingdom should be primarily done with non-claimed lands, resorting to violence with another nation only when forced. Finally, to get more territory – to expand within a market – managers from firms must have a strategy – a set of specific actions in order to ‘steal’ market share from opposing parties. The latter concept is the most widely known to have taken roots within the military

language [5]. As a matter of orthodoxy, a strategy describes how the ends (goals) will be achieved by prescribed means (resources)[1].

The commodification of the Internet as a public utility in 1995[6], has had the effect of a bomb in the management literature[7]. Multiple predominant industrial age theories are now challenged in the digital age. The widespread of Internet forces scholars to re-examine industrial age business models and try to conciliate them with new realities. As many authors have already highlighted, the business lexicon took many terms and definitions from the military genre[8]. The authors of this paper make the argument that management scholars and business representant alike may find the answer of those new digital age realities for their business by deepening the link between the history and ruptures of the military literature. As the commodification of the internet have disturbed the everlasting industrial age theories, the atomic bomb from the Second World War has also changed the way war is thought and fought.

This paper is divided in three sections. First, a historical parallel between military and management theorists is explored. Specifically, it is discussed on how the two domains of literature have known similar trends across their history. The second section demonstrates that both management and military have known a rupture of their orthodoxy; the business sector with the arrival of the Internet and the digital age, and the military with the first atomic bomb of 1945. The third section describes three major consequences of the atomic bomb for the military's sphere and draw conclusion on what business scholars and those who work in a management position should look for when facing new challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **A Brief History of War and Business**

For more than two millennia, many militaries have endeavoured to write down their warfare experiences. There are mainly two types of writing. First, those presented as textbook of best practices, or step by step narratives on how to win a war. The second includes a more nuance literature with strategic considerations when it comes to fighting an enemy.

The first typology of literature documenting wars includes those who wish to present to their readers the correct way to win wars. This arrangement is composed by theorists such as Julius Caesar (58 BC – 50 BC), Nicolas Machiavelli (1521), Erich Ludendorff (1935) and Heinz Guderian (1950). Julius Caesar, Machiavelli, Ludendorff and Guderian leave behind them extremely detailed writings of great victories or bitter defeats. They offer a very pragmatic, applied vision of their strategies. Their work is mainly about what they did to win, or what they should have done to win. Those best practices are in the form of narratives, which help reproduce each step to win a future battle. For example, Julius Caesar is at the origin of the work *Gallic Wars*, recounting his victories in the north of the Roman Empire which was intended and written for historians, for future military leaders curious to study Caesar's successes. Heinz Guderian, another advocate of best practices, develops the independent armoured division of the infantry and the idea of the *blitzkrieg*, which completely destabilized the Allied troops at the beginning of the Second World War[9]. Machiavelli, more a philosopher than a military, elaborate in his essay *The Art of War* on how to raise, train and deploy an army[10]. Lastly, inspired by the German defeat in 1918, General Erich Ludendorff published his essay *Total War* in 1935, in which explained the reasons for the German defeat in the First World War. His book details how the concept of Total War is *the* method to win and how it should be applied by nations.

The second trend used by warlords included works that propose their future readers specific variable to consider winning wars. As such, they can be considered as having a more strategic view of warfare. This includes theorists such as Sun Tzu, Carl Von Clausewitz, Charles de Gaulle and Liddell Hart. They all identified great strategic principles, such as judgement, instinct, intelligence, and authority. These theorists stressed that a condition to win wars is not to follow a plan, but to know how to apply a set of specific principles to their current situation to emerge victorious. They promote that there are no two wars alike; two armies can implement the same strategies and they will get two different outcomes[4]. Sun Tzu, Clausewitz, Gaulle and Liddell Hart propose a flexible vision of military strategy. According to them, wars should not be taught as a fixed doctrine - as a course of action from which it must not deviate. As advocated by these authors, a warlord must be able to leverage specific variables and learn to guide his army through particular circumstances in each battle. While not every strategist agrees on the generic set of skills and/or variables to utilize in wars, Clausewitz and Charles de Gaulle both consider that intelligence and instinct are two indispensable qualities of any officer[11].

From an historical perspective, management literature has known a similar parkour in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when compared to the military history. Indeed, the same two perspectives noted in the military history can be found in the management literature. First, there are scholars that were interested in measuring and controlling activities in order to find the most efficient way to maximize profit. Notable authors from this era include Charles Taylor and Henri Ford from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first trend, mostly present in the initial era of industrial age, includes firm administrators routinely sought to control costs and were concerned about efficiency (maximizing output and minimizing input) from both capital and labour. During this period, arguably for the first time, manager used formulaic-based methods of analysis and formalized budgeting protocols to measure and control activities. In this era when notions such as Taylorism and Fordism were at their zenith, these approaches were adopted universally across industries and as such represented a baseline orthodox standard for profitable functioning. However, this research of best practice is not exclusive to the first stage of the industrial age. The American corporate hegemony from the after-war, where the axiom ‘‘Bigger is Better’’ detail a world where the firm just need to exist to be profitable, without any consideration for strategic implication.

Second, the instantiation of modern strategy – at least from a historical perspective – is a response to market saturation and the stagnant market growth of Western economies in the latter part of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century[12]. In such constrained circumstances, a profitable entity expropriates its surpluses in an increasingly zero-sum context. From the 1970s strategy essentially became synonymous with what needs to be done to enhance industry-based competitive positioning. This focus establishes the object of analysis as an industry; a group of firms (configured nationally or internationally) which each produce, as its principal output, the same or a substantially similar kind of offering. In such a milieu, the mission of a strategy is to determine how the executive of any one firm within a configuration can improve their entity’s relative performance. The rationale for such a stance harkens back to the war/military conflict metaphor. Specifically, ‘‘relative’’ improvement takes on importance when a market is saturated and/or not expanding and an ‘‘enemy’’ is thwarting expansion. Because shareholders demand a return on their investment year over year, in the absence of an expanding customer base such a

result can only be delivered through “stealing” market share from competitors[13]. To that end, multiples late industrial age paradigms for conceiving generic strategy options have been proposed by scholars. One of the most preeminent strategists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is arguably Michael Porter. A notable contribution of Porter was that his generic blueprint for the orientation of any single entity is a derivative of the industry circumstances in which that entity exists[14]. Porter`s legacy has become that a strategy orientation is largely constrained by the prevailing circumstance of a competitive arena[14]. Moreover, an often-overlooked point concerning Porter`s generic strategy conception (originally presented as “low-cost niche” “low-cost general”, “differentiation niche” and “differentiation general”) is the principle that the stewards of a firm should not knowingly take their entity into “occupied” terrain.

### **The Point of Rupture**

Even with the introduction of firearms and the increase in fire power, war stayed roughly the same – that is, the importance of manpower to determine the might of an army. The nuclear bomb does not represent evolution, but a rupture in the art of war. This new weapon brings instant, massive destruction and leaves the enemy unable to defend himself since there is no effective way to counter a nuclear attack[15]. No army, no matter how big can defend against a nuclear attack. For the first time in history, manpower is no longer the decisive factor to win wars. Historically, nuclear weapons have been deployed on the territory of 23 countries[16], but no nuclear attack has taken place since 1945. Hence, it is a weapon that nations have at their disposal but do not want to use.

While not as explosive and dangerous as the nuclear weapon, the Internet, as a public infrastructure in 1995, had the effect of a bomb in the management sector. The Internet has accelerated the growth and proliferation of other technological advances. Specifically, it has been an influence on certain circumscribed technologies becoming redundant, the fusion of technologies and the blurring of boundaries between the physical, digital, and biological spheres[17]. Consideration of the Internet cannot be divorced from notions of a so-called new economy that, according to Castells[18], is informative, global and networked. These emergent constructs are cardinal characteristics of the contemporary world of commerce.

The widespread uptake of the Internet was seminal in transforming myriad aspects of firm operations in nearly all sectors of Western economies and in integrating pre-industrial non-Western economies into global value chains[6]. Broadly speaking, as was the case immediately prior to the Industrial Revolution, a circumscribed essentially technological trigger event provided new commercial opportunities (i.e. new markets), more efficient ways of transforming input into output (through more sophisticated paradigms for combining labour and capital – factories), and new means of corporate communication (multi-workplace firms)[19]. The tendency has unambiguously been to give managers a wider repertoire of decision-making options, irrespective of their operational ambit. However, when philosophizing about optimization, it is noteworthy that having more choice is not necessarily beneficial[19].

## **Three Trends from the Military that Managers Should Focus On**

Military historians have noted – although not necessarily linked together – three consequences which results from the rupture brought by the atomic bomb. This section presents these trends and their interests for business theorists and managers alike.

### **I. Diminution of Direct Conflict Between the Big Players**

Following for at least 20 years after the Second World War and the first nuclear bomb, there has been a complete loss of interest in conventional warfare. During the Cold War, superpowers tried to never enter in a direct conflict in their own territory, a first in millennia of warfare activities. The destructive power of the atomic bomb is used as a deterrent to direct conflict[20]. However, the two superpowers used a strategy of repeatedly clashing indirectly on the territories of their smaller allies or enemies (in Korea, Vietnam War, Afghanistan, Cuba, etc.)[21].

The avoidance of direct confrontation from superpowers in the Cold War era, while directing conflicts in the territories of smaller countries is analogous to some digital age industries' behaviours in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For example, the Canadian's telecommunication sector 'Big Three' (Bell Canada, Telus and Rogers Communications) are known to have exerted a configuration somewhat similar to a monopoly in the industry until rise of the smartphone and proliferation of data. Before that, the 'Big Three' were in direct competition, offering mostly the same product for the same price, with little to no differentiation[22]. The advent of the Internet as a public utility in Canada, roughly around 1995, has been accompanied by massive deregulation which changed the competitive landscape: news, smaller providers entered the market (ex. Freedom Mobile, formerly named Wind Mobile, Public Mobile, etc.). In response, the 'Big Three' created smaller firms to compete with the new entrants, while avoiding the main firm to enter in direct competition clash. Hence, Fido (Rogers), Virgin (associated with Bell) and Koodo (Telus) have emerged in the industry to fight the new entrants. This idea of avoiding direct conflict from major firms within an industry is also apparent in other sectors. For example, Costco and Walmart are both major providers in the food industry following a cost-leadership strategy[23]. However, while they are aiming for the same strategy, the process they use to offer their consumers lower-cost products are disparate and cannot be considerate as a direct competition by traditional management models.

### **II. Intelligence is Key in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

The second trend highlighted by militarists is the reallocation and heavy investment in the intelligence sector. Nowadays, with the help of technology, nations have at their disposal data collection and processing systems that enable them to produce intelligence more rapidly and more accurately than ever before. Satellites, ultramodern aircraft, electronic systems, cameras, imaging and electronic devices are tools used to amass impressive amount of information on a scale that was unheard of in the past [24]. Hence, during and after the Cold War, intelligence became one of the world's largest industries, employing hundreds of thousands of professionals. Every major country created enormous new intelligence bureaucracies, usually consisting of interlocking and often competitive secret agencies that vied for new assignments and sometimes withheld information from each other to gain strategic advantage over other nations[25]. As an example, the United States established the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in 1947. Among other well-known intelligence organizations created during this period were the United

Kingdom's MI5 and MI6, the Soviet Union's KGB (Committee for State Security), France's SDECE (External Documentation and Counterespionage Service), China's MSS (Ministry of State Security), and Israel's Mossad. By the 1970s every regional power and many relatively small states had developed intelligence services[25]. As of 2019, the CIA budget in the United States is estimated between 3 and 5 billion dollars annually. Globally, the National Intelligence Program receives about 10% of the U.S. military's annual budget[26].

The relevance of data as a competitive lever is also a trend that is visible to the business sector in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Two consequences arise from the increase usage of information. First, some firms are taking any means necessary to steal industry secret from competitors. Supported by local legislation, Chinese firms have reported stolen between \$300bn-\$600bn of USA-based trade secrets in 2019[27]. The rise of the internet and computer networks has expanded the range and detail of information available and the ease of access for the purpose of industrial espionage. The second consequence result in a race from academics to understand and establish frameworks for distinctive digital-age business's behaviours. For example, Napier and al.[28] propose that firms should invest in modern, digital centric competitive advantages that can leverage data and machine learning to create valuable insights, intelligence, and capabilities across the organization. Amazon and eBay are both digital marketplaces that have greatly invested into analytical data to gain competitive advantage over their competitors. Scholars and managers indicate that digital age strategy should entail data collection and transformation as an essential factor of business's survival in the 21<sup>st</sup> century[29].

### **III. Complexity within organizations proposes a challenge**

The increase in information available for organizations via technological advances - military and business alike - creates a complex environment. Simon[30] defines complexity in a system as "a large number of parts that interact in a non-simple way". A growing number of interdependent parts increase coordination requirements and raise the total number of interfaces within the system. In other words, the more elements there are in a system and the more interconnections that exist between such elements, the more complex is that system. While not explicitly mentioned in the literature, it is possible to argue that the elements that rose complexity in the business and militarist environment are indirectly also augmenting the opportunity for duplicity and deception[22].

Throughout the military history, organizations and the complexity of armies have evolved. Conventionally, wars were fought by professionals, mercenaries, or patriots[31]. However, since 1945, the progress of technology has required constant improvement of the armies, requiring increasingly heavy logistics, administrative apparatus and an ever-increasing budget. Being the largest army in the world, the U.S. Army is an extremely complex organization composed of three commands (Army, Navy and Air Force), ten Army Service Component Commands, and 13 Direct Reporting Units. Today, the Army employs more than 1.9 million people, and the total budget exceeds \$700 billion annually[32].

In 1999, the U.S. Army attempted to launch a military transformation process with the goal of "see first, understand first, act first and finish decisively as the means to tactical success"[26]. According to Douglas A. MacGregor[33], military theorist and retired Army officer, the mistake of the U.S. military lies in its willingness to eliminate uncertainty and anticipate every eventuality. Thus, defeat in battle is not the result of a failure to plan for every

possible contingency, but rather, from an organization's inability to act quickly. What the army needs to achieve its transformation and to handle complexity effectively should be found in its agility. To that end, Nygren[34] argues that the army must encourage networks, horizontal movements, and cooperation between its teams to manage the complexity of the organization. These movements encourage teams to help each other and not to refer directly and automatically to their superiors. This quasi-autonomous way of working compels team members to adapt.

The complexity of a military organization can also be a defensive or offensive advantage, as Russia and China have demonstrated since the end of the Cold War. In fact, new technologies allow major powers to extend the "battlefield's boundaries" beyond air, sea or land, blurring traditional lines between war and peace[35]. When manpower was still at the center of warfare, an attack required weapons and soldiers. Now, attacks can take place in space, or in cyberspace, using new means that do not correspond to what most nations traditionally considers to be an act of aggression. Therefore, complexity should be tamed inside the military organization, but be kept as much as possible outside the organization, giving an edge to the latter by blurring the line between what an act of aggression is or not.

The impact of organizational complexity has been an object of scholarly interest for strategic management theorists[36]. Organizational complexity has been viewed as an aggregate measure of how many interactions between sub-entities occur within a larger circumscribed organization plus how many occur between the organization and external elements. In practical terms, it indexes the likely resource commitment for a division, project, or team. An implication of this view is that causality is bidirectional: more interdependencies increase the coordination requirements among activities and partners and a higher number of activities and partners add to complexity because it increases the likelihood of inter-element interactions[30].

To help senior management with the ever-increasing level of complexity of firms, scholars have elaborated blueprints that promote reducing complexity – or somewhat controlling it. According to Perona and Miragliotta[37], those blueprints enable firms to be more agile and proactive in the digital age. Lean production and JIT manufacturing basically aim at reducing complexity, under the principle that “the leaner, the better”, becoming a standard in the production management. This standard has been diffused to other instances of the firm which include, according to Perona and Miragliotta, variety reduction program, product platform design, mass customization and value analysis[37].

Organizational complexity has also been studied from the marketing domain and has found implications for established notions of customer types within digital age industries. For example, Petruzzellis[38] remind offering firms that elements within their portfolio should be aligned with market segments. His categories implicitly portray the vendor as responsible for ensuring customer satisfaction with all aspects of an offering; including its cost and usability. This same view is reflected in Kasper et al.[39] study which reveals that certain customers are more comfortable than others with complexity. The strategic implication of such research is that agents of the industry should effect cultural change and/or re-education of the market; with the goal being to generally make consumers more technically savvy.

However, this trend of encouraging limiting complexity across firms seems counter-intuitive when comparing current developments in the military history and taking a neoclassical view of the economy. While reducing complexity within firms demonstrate competitive advantages – with cost reducing and a higher flexibility – an industry may have its greatest chance of maximizing its profit when blurring the line between the organization and their external environment[22]. Firms can get the upper hand by using a complex environment to render commercial transactions opaque for helpless consumers, akin to military organizations. Recently, scholars have started to consider complexity as an advantage to maintain for firms. This tactic has been analysed in the telecommunication sector, the aviation sector, the finance sector, and the real estate industry. This complexity can also be found in marketing science. Guerrilla marketing, a term coined by Jay Conrad Levinson[40], is an advertisement strategy in which a company uses surprise and/or unconventional interactions in order to promote a product or service. This technique often renders the boundary of the firm fuzzy with its external environment. For example, a publicity stunt by Burger King in 2017 implied that a couple publicly broke up over Instagram because of the restaurant<sup>1</sup>. This situation created a snowball effect over the internet and became quickly viral, making #burgerking a top search hashtag on social media. However, users discover that the couple involved in this story had suspicious accounts and were part of a marketing team. Guerrilla marketing is an increasing popular way to market products to consumers and, coincidentally or by design, borrow its name from the military lexicon.

## Conclusion

This paper sought to demonstrate that the association between the military and business sectors is more profound than what is currently conceived by historians. This article reveals historical similitudes and ruptures between the two domains. To help managers face new digital age endeavours, the authors of this paper demonstrate three current issues from the military. These three elements are (i) the reduction of direct conflict, (ii) the increase in importance of intelligence (data) as a means to gain advantage over the enemy and (iii) the increase of complexity within the organization, as well as the environment. From those military trends, conclusions are drawn for managers. First, large firms within digital age industries represent such a threat that it is better for managers in those firms to avoid entering in direct competition. Instead, they should protect their positioning by defending the threat of new entrants with subsidiaries firms. Second, managers should increase their investment in data gathering and analysis systems, via complex algorithms, to detect new commercial opportunities in their industry. Third, managers must try to maintain an opaque picture of the organization for the external environment while simultaneously reducing the level of complexity inside their firm.

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<sup>1</sup> We invite the reader to visit <https://www.oberlo.com/blog/guerrilla-marketing> for the full story and others example of Guerrilla Marketing.



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