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## **Agonistic Governance:**

### **The Antinomies of Decision-Making in U.S. Navy SEALs**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This article expands organization theory about Wicked, Tame, and Critical problems and their associated decision-making styles, Leadership, Management, and Command, by offering a framework that spans across all three which we call 'Agonistic Governance': an approach to decision-making that is premised on the acceptance that complexity generates paradoxes and contradictions and, to be successful, organizational actors must have the agency to positively embrace these, rather than try to eliminate them, recognizing that some failure is the price of overall success. Through an ethnographic study of US Navy SEALs, we suggest that, unlike the cultures of conventional military forces, elite military units can thrive in a leadership environment that is much more subtle, paradoxical and complex, and can be seen as illustrative of Agonistic Governance. Findings reveal that the success of these groups is dependent on the construction of a contradictory decision-making model that recognizes leadership is often as much an art as a science, and an understanding that the willingness to seek out and learn from failure rather than avoid it, is itself part of the solution not the problem. Agonistic Governance offers a way to move from binary thinking rooted in decision-making models that aim to be

internally coherent, unilinear and without contradiction, and instead offers a way to accept the irrational and paradoxical prevalent in today's complex organizational environments. In effect, Wicked Problems can only be addressed by accepting that failure is a prerequisite not a proscription.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Learning from extreme cases is hardly novel, and whether we choose a contemporary scholar such as Patton (2005) or Flyvbjerg (2006), or an ancient one such as Aristotle (2004), it is clear that as a way of exploring the limits of conventional thinking, an extreme case study is often useful. In this paper we aim to examine the strategies professionals facing the most dangerous, complex and ambiguous environments use to cope with extremely unstable and confusing work situations (Starbuck and Farjoun, 2005): United States Navy Sea, Air and Land (SEAL) military commandos. Can civilian leaders in equally unpredictable but less dangerous situations learn anything from such groups about how to lead?

To accomplish this analysis, the paper begins by revisiting Grint's (2005) article which explores the social construction of leadership and introduces the Wicked, Tame, and Critical problem model, and their associated decision-making styles: Leadership, Management and Command. Next, we propose an Agonistic Governance model that spans across all three decision-making styles. By embracing the antinomies of these decision-making challenges, we move away from binary thinking rooted in decision-making models that aim to be internally coherent, unilinear and without contradiction and consider ways to accept the irrational and

paradoxical. After a review of the research methods, we then evaluate whether elite military groups, such as US Navy SEALs, who are regularly faced with ambiguous and evolving situations can offer empirical material outlining a new paradigm. Finally, we end with a discussion and conclusion, and suggestion of areas that warrant further research.

## **WICKED PROBLEMS REVISITED**

In 2005, Grint adapted the original work of Webber and Rittel (1973) to suggest that Iraq embodied many facets of a Wicked Problem: a recalcitrant complex issue without single cause or resolution, where attempts to solve the problem were just as likely to compound it; without a stopping point; without a right or wrong solution and where, at best, an attempt to stop it getting any worse was probably the best we could hope for. Since then, while Iraq has continued to fester, the concept of Wicked Problems has received some support from a variety of arenas: Currie and Lockett (2007) deploy it to consider the failed attempt to embed Transformational Leadership amongst UK public sector managers; Carroll et al (2010) link leadership to the resolution of the Wicked Problem of boredom, and Fyke and Buzzanell (2013) link it to the Wicked Problem of change.

Webber and Rittel's original work suggested societal problems could be divided between the aforementioned Wicked Problems and Tame Problems that were complicated but not complex so that fixing them did not change the context of the problem and all had pre-existing solutions or standard operating procedures. Grint (2005) suggested that a third category of problems exists – Critical problems – or crises which were self-evident to most participants and thus people were

generally willing to accept coercion from above providing it was in the general interest. These three problem scenarios were related to (but did not determine) three different decision styles: Leadership, Management and Command. 'Command' is the most common decision-style in the face of a crisis where time is short and the danger obvious, but it is also commonly deployed with uniformed organizations, especially the military, police and emergency organizations. 'Management' is often deployed for Tame Problems that have a known cause and a tried and tested standard operating procedure for fixing the problem. 'Leadership', in contrast, is the most difficult to operate because it implies a decision-making mode that acknowledges the complexity of the problem, the difficulty of resolving it and the pre-requisite for collaborative effort.

'Leadership' thus requires the formal leader to acknowledge their own ignorance and to engage the collective in addressing, if not resolving, the Wicked Problem. Or to put it differently, Commanders provide the answers, Managers provide the process and Leaders provide the questions. The implication of this typology is not that three discrete models of decision-making can be mechanically deployed to address three discrete problem types. Rather, it suggests that the analytic frame might explain why the problem type and the form of decision-making may be contested: because people simply do not agree on what the problem is or how to deal with it. Moreover, those in formal or informal positions of authority need to be able to deploy all three decision-models, sometimes simultaneously, if they are to cope with the vicissitudes of life. Hence, rather than assuming that organizational success is derived from those who are just managers - good at deploying the appropriate process to fix the Tame Problem, or those who are just

Commanders - good at ensuring coercive compliance to resolve the Critical problem, or those who are just Leaders – good at engaging the community in addressing its own Wicked Problems, instead, the complexity of life implies all three decision-styles are necessary – sometimes simultaneously. That is, a decision-making style that encompasses the paradoxes and contradictions inherent in combining the three decision-making frames is required: in effect, an example of antimony.

### ***ANTIMONY AND AGONISTIC GOVERNANCE***

Antinomies, or logical (in their Greek origins, legal) contradictions, sit uncomfortably in intellectual thought rooted in models of singular rationality: they are tensions to be ironed out or illogicalities to be transcended. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* focuses on the antinomies of Reason – its apparent inability to explain the totality of the world (for example, how to explain the co-existence of freedom and God), which was in itself the product of Reason. Yet many of our most creative theoretical frames are constructed out of these apparent logical self-contradictions. Both Hegel and Marx, for instance, derived their dialectical schemas from attempts to explain the trajectory of history either in idealist or materialist terms: the very tensions emanating from the counterpoised thesis and antithesis would eventually evolve into, or rather be transcended by, a synthesis that embodied the antagonisms of the thesis and antithesis.

For both Hegel (1976) and Marx (1973) the eventual transcendence of the contradictions would be a consensual and universal end point: either the universal homogeneous state of Hegel (Avineri, 1974) or the Communist society of Marx.

Walter Benjamin, on the other hand, although a Marxist inspired Critical Theorist, was, like Adorno (1974), constantly torn between a positive regard for the value of German culture and a negative recognition of what it could do – and was doing in the 1930s - to German society (McCole, 1993; Patke, 2008). In effect, the tensions seemed irreconcilable; they were antinomies. Or as Benjamin put it in discussing the paradoxical necessity of maintaining the past while changing the future: 'The idea of discontinuity is the foundation of genuine tradition' (Benjamin quoted in McCole, 1993: 296).

Benjamin's rejection of the universal consensus at the heart of Marx's communist vision is also refracted in the Agonist tradition of political writing, where the conflicts, contradictions and tensions in society are perceived as inevitable and potentially constructive rather than temporary and negative, much in the way that Foucault (2003) considered power. The Greek origin of the term *Agon* reproduces this positive understanding in the sense that contest – for example an athletic contest – requires conflict for all those engaged and it is the struggle in itself, rather than the end point of victory, that generates progress. In other words, while *Antagonism* is the conflict between enemies, *Agonism* is the conflict between adversaries (Mouffe, 2000, 2009; Cf. Crowder, 2006; Erman, 2009). Or, to put it another way,

Conflict in liberal democratic societies cannot and should not be eradicated, since the specificity of pluralist democracy is precisely the recognition and the legitimation of conflict...What is important is that conflict does not take the form of an 'antagonism' (struggle between enemies) but the form of 'agonism' (struggle between adversaries) (Mouffe, 2013: 7).

Might what we call 'Agonistic Governance' be a way of capturing this tension-ridden approach to the complexities at the heart of decision-making?

In American political life, Thompson (1984) suggested that leadership is often framed around such antinomies – the charismatic leader who leads people astray; the quiet political leaders who have the humility to lead properly but are constrained by that very same humility to engage with the population adequately. Harmon (1995) has insisted that the two forms of citizenship – taking personal *responsibility* for decisions made and simultaneously being *accountable* for those decisions to others, is the antinomial paradox that sits at the heart of American liberal democracy. He argues that attempts to avoid one or the other end of the paradox may lead to a more 'logical' political position but it cannot sustain a society based on active citizenship.

This would not be news to De Tocqueville (2003) who assumed that active citizenship through citizen education and political engagement was really the only mechanism for transcending the majoritarian problem in democracies – that political leaders would pander to the majority and never challenge their assumptions or attitudes for fear of losing popularity and their seats. It was, of course, for these and other reasons that Plato (2007) condemned democracy, though Beltrán (2004) has suggested that the Socratic method of debate as described by Plato is itself a crucial aspect of generating an agonistic polity where citizens are challenged, rather than courted, by political leaders (Beltran, 2004).

The desire to frame leadership models, rather than governance models for society, along similar lines that are strictly logical, rational and unitary or consistent, is also commonplace. Whether that model is 'Authentic' (George and Sims, 2007; Cf.



Caza and Jackson, 2011), or 'Heroic' (Lowney, 2005; McCrimmon, 2010); 'Transformational' (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1990; Diaz-Saenz, 2011), 'Collaborative' (Gronn, 2008), or 'Strong' (Kotter, 2001; Cf. Brown, 2014) seems less relevant than that models are internally coherent, unilinear and without contradiction. At a political level one can see this model at work in the leadership of Margaret Thatcher in the UK or George W Bush in the USA or Vladimir Putin in Russia: all emphatically strong and unyielding leaders – and all at their least effective when the situation before them was mired in complexity and confusions, not the binary states of good and evil that suited their singular visions (Brown, 2014). But organizations, rather than individual political leaders, have to cope with different levels of risk, regulation and complexity so how do the military cope and what are the implications for civilian organizations and leaders?

## RISK & REGULATION

Contemporary military culture has become increasingly complex as technological innovation and mission diversification in multicultural environments illuminates the need for new ways of leading and communicating beyond antiquated command and control strategies. In response, leadership scholars have begun to examine military operations as a way to understand emergent leadership in unconventional environments (See for example: Campbell, Hannah, and Matthews, 2010; Hajjar, 2013; Hannah et al., 2009; Ramthun and Matkin, 2014). Yet there remains a lack of empirical research examining how leaders manage the contradictions inherent in this dynamic operating environment in order to make decisions. This study analyzes

the leadership skills identified by US Navy SEALs as central to success operating in this enigmatic milieu.

Unlike the cultures of conventional military forces, elite military units such as the Special Forces thrive on a leadership environment much more subtle, paradoxical and complex. We suggest that the success of these groups is dependent on the construction of a contradictory decision-making model that involves consensual *and* coercive approaches, an adoption of the latest technological weaponry in combination with a recognition that science could never be the arbiter of success, a recognition that decision-making is as much an art as a science, and an understanding that the search for a singular rational coherence is itself part of the problem not the solution. We call this concept '*Agonistic Governance*'.

Agonistic Governance is defined as an approach to decision-making that is premised on the acceptance that complexity generates paradoxes and contradictions and organizational actors must have the agency to positively embrace these, rather than try to eliminate them. This includes a positive approach to errors that are the inevitable consequence of acting in complex and contradictory environments. Thus, we challenge the widespread assumption that in most contemporary organizations failure – the F word – is something to be avoided under all circumstances (C.f Danner & Coopersmith, 2015; HBR (2011); Hillson (2011)). In fact, Navy SEALs are challenged in training to learn from failure (Frayser, Grint and Branicki (2016)). Failure in the field for Navy SEALs is likely to be fatal, not a chance to start over, so the opportunity to learn from failure in training is a critical precondition for success in the field. The absence of controlled failure in training has a deadly pattern in the casualty rate of those involved in armed combat that are

insufficiently trained for the field. Thus, for example, a raw recruit in Normandy in 1944 was much more likely to become a casualty than someone who had experienced combat, even for a few weeks (Mcmanus, 1998: 266) and in the Battle of Britain pilots of both sides were more likely to get shot down if they had little combat experience (Bergstrom, 2015).

Of course, complex and ambiguous situations are not restricted to military combat; indeed, there is already a significant literature on coping with ambiguity and complexity, but this veers away from assuming that ambiguity is something to be welcomed, rather than controlled, and seldom suggests that the point of this proclivity towards chaos is precisely to learn from it rather than just to try and control it.

Robertson's (2015) 'Holacracy', for example, attempts to model a form of organizational structure that embodies both hierarchy and self-determination, though Denning (2014) suggests that the self-determination is very limited, does not work well for already flexible organizations and does not include the voice of the customer. Smith and Lewis (2010: 388), on the other hand, suggest that adopting a 'paradox lens' enables leaders to cope with ambiguities whether they are 'inherent' in the system or socially constructed. So while traditional approaches often end up with denial or defensive reinforcement in the face of inconsistencies, the paradox lens 'triggers a management strategy of acceptance rather than defensiveness' (391). But 'acceptance' of paradox is rather different from the 'seeking out' of paradox that is visible in the SEALs; moreover, there is little concern for the learning that derives from the experience and what there is, is oriented to creative problem solving, not learning from failure.

‘Ambidextrous Leadership’ (Zacher and Rosing, 2015) takes a related but slightly different approach and suggests that successful innovation is rooted in an appropriate mix of ‘opening up’ (increasing variance in followers’ behaviour - exploration) and ‘closing down’ (decreasing variance in followers’ behaviours - exploitation) leadership behaviours. But again, the framework does not focus on failure-tolerating behaviours to establish whether the earning mechanism is critical to eventual success.

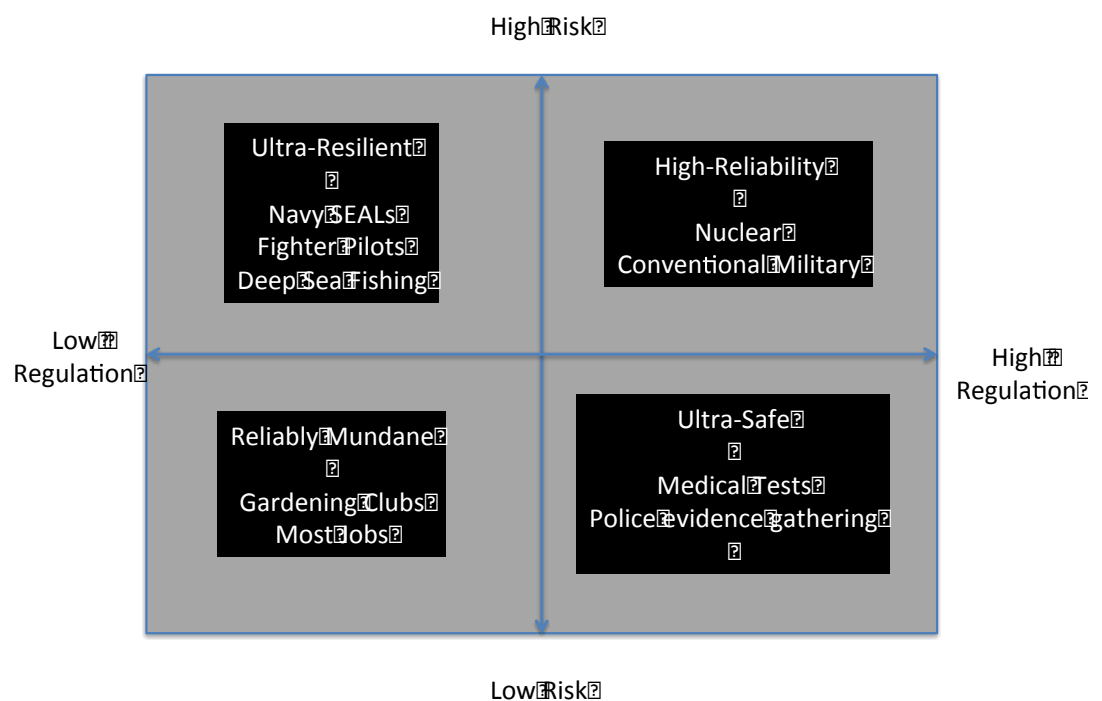
More useful is the work of Amalberti and Deblon (1992) and Vincent and Amalberti (2014) who differentiate between three safety models rooted in how organizations respond to risk: do they avoid, manage or embrace it? The ‘Avoid’ risk – or Ultra-Safe system - is visible in systems that seek to contain risk by embedding it in processes and procedures so that front-line operators are interchangeable and risk is avoided – such as in airlines and the nuclear industry; when the Icelandic volcano erupted in 2010 the civil airlines simply stopped flying.

The ‘Manage’ risk approach is common in High Reliability Organizations (HROs), such as firefighting and surgery teams in hospitals – the point is to manage the inevitable risk not to avoid it, but to learn from it and manage it in such a way that exposure is minimized with high levels of external regulation and individual decision making restricted to those with expertise (Weick and Sutcliffe (2007).

The ‘Embrace’ risk (or Ultra Resilient) model adopts a very different approach that encompasses, indeed encourages, risk-seeking behaviour. This is the arena of fighter-pilots in war, or deep sea fishing captains – and in our case Navy SEALs - who actively seek out the more dangerous aspects of their environment because that is where they can outmaneuver their opponents or acquire the most elusive and

expensive fish. And here individual – or very small team – autonomy takes precedence over hierarchical regulation. This is also an environment where danger is ever-present, where failure can be catastrophic, and where learning from mistakes is crucial to eventual success.

We add a fourth category that we term ‘Reliably Mundane’; here the risks are low and the regulatory context minimal; indeed, this is the operating environment in which most of us live. Figure 1 below provides a heuristic for categorizing these organizations.



But many individuals, teams and organizations do not sit within any of these boxes on a permanent basis; indeed, this is always a danger with heuristics – what starts out as a mechanism for opening up a conversation ends up closing that conversation down. So how might we consider such an individual or organization that moved

across the apparently categorical divide at will? In what follows we want to use the data gathered from research into the decision-making of US Navy SEALs to revisit the original Wicked/Tame Problems literature and consider the utility this may have for capturing this diversity and the role of Agonistic Governance

### ***US NAVY SEALS***

Similar to many other unconventional military units US Navy SEALs, named from an acronym of the Sea, Air, and Land environments in which they work, evolved in and through the demands of their operating context. During World War II Underwater Demolition Teams (UDT), the predecessor to today's SEALs, were formed to meet emerging requirements for beach reconnaissance and to clear mines and other obstacles prior to conventional forces' amphibious landings. Initially trained to work from rubber boats, the sharp coral reefs of the Pacific islands required UDTs to hone their long distance swimming skills as well. Later, they would add scuba gear and helicopter operations. During the Korean War, the UDT mission further evolved as they found themselves moving inland to blow up railroads and bridges and started parachuting to better facilitate this. As conflicts in Vietnam intensified, the Navy realized that it needed a new maritime force to conduct commando-type operations gathering information as well as completing previous UDT mission. In 1962, the SEALs were established by President John F. Kennedy to enhance the Navy's unconventional warfare capability, providing a maritime counterpart to the Army's 'Green Berets', and establishing themselves as one of the toughest unconventional warfare communities in the world (Dockery, 2004).

Central to SEAL training and development is completion of Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL training known simply as BUD/S: an arduous, six month training course held at the Naval Special Warfare Training Center in Coronado, California. Phase one of the program focuses on physical conditioning such as running in sand, open ocean swimming, obstacle courses, small boat seamanship, and enduring cold, wet, and stressful conditions. A highlight is 'Hell Week' which includes five days of continuous training exercises in hypothermic environments along with intense sleep deprivation. Hell Week is so mentally and physically exhausting, about 75% of each BUD/S class typically quits by the week's end (Doolittle, 2004). Phase two emphasizes mission-focused combat swimming, scuba diving, and long distance swims. Phase three focuses on land warfare, weapons training, explosives, marksmanship, rappelling, and small unit tactics. Upon completion of these three phases, trainees attend Basic Parachute Training and a final training program focused on core competencies and tactics.

Training culminates with a graduation ceremony where candidates become authorized to wear the coveted *Trident*, and the class elects its 'Honor Man': the trainee who most inspired others to succeed. Even for retired SEALs, a sense of pride and camaraderie as a navy commando remained deeply engrained. As Hale (2012) noted, passing arduous military training such as BUD/S is an important part of the ways that military members bond and develop their professional identities because they have all proven themselves by surviving a similar ordeal.

In what follows we illustrate the Agonistic Governance model by considering the experiences of US Navy SEALs, an archetypal military elite whose selection, training and skills ought, in principal, to embody the complex contradictions at the

heart of the model. We do not claim that the data is definitive or conclusive proof of the concept but rather than it is illustrative and warrants further examination. However, we first explain the methods by which we assembled and analyzed our empirical materials.

## **METHODS**

### ***Research Context***

The empirical data this paper draws upon is a combination of interviews with US Navy SEALs; informal conversations with SEAL instructors, candidates, and spouses at the Naval Special Warfare Training Center in Coronado, California; observations of several training evolutions and a graduation ceremony at the BUD/S training facility; and extensive field notes compiled during this process. This was an ethnographic study that adopted an interpretive approach to include a strong emphasis on participant observation. Participant observation is an approach that values the researcher's first-hand experience of a real-world setting, facilitating the development of a rich and detailed account of participants' experiences. Its strength lies in the ability to study real world environments in real time situations from an insider's perspective (Brannan & Priola, 2012; Oliver & Eales, 2008; Prokos & Padavic, 2002).

### ***Participants***

Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with three active duty, three reserve, and six retired US Navy SEALs. Participants were all men, in ranks from Master Chief (E-9) to Captain (O-6), ranging from 34 to 70 years in age, with between eight and thirty years of military service. Although six participants (50%) began their



careers as enlisted men, all but one were officers at the time of the study. Five had earned a direct officer commission, four had attended the Naval Academy, and two were commissioned through Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC). Four participants (25%) had served during the Vietnam-era, or shortly thereafter, the remaining eight (75%) had recent experience in Iraq and/or Afghanistan warzones. In sum, participants were all senior military members with extensive experience in Naval Special Warfare.

Contact with study participants was initially made via an email introduction by a mutual colleague of the first author, a retired SEAL now working in academia, and then through snowball sampling other participants were identified. As a former enlisted marine and retired Naval Aviator, the first author was able to quickly establish a positive rapport with participants, many of whom had considered the Marine Corps and aviation as viable career options before settling on the SEAL community. In particular, the first author's years of experience as an H-46 helicopter pilot—an aircraft often used for SEAL transport—provided common ground. As a result a sense of trust quickly developed and informants were candid, reflective, and detailed when sharing information.

Participants were generally articulate, outspoken and eager to talk. Like many professionals discussing their career with a fellow professional, they responded with enthusiasm and, at the end of the interviews, raised numerous questions of their own. The research could easily have extended to double the number of respondents or more, but we felt that a critical mass of material had already been collected to enable us to draw some consistent and reliable conclusions. Extending the number of respondents would have also weakened our

way of working with the data which involved listening to the recordings repeatedly in addition to reading the transcripts, constantly drawing comparisons between different respondents and between their own interpretations of the data.

### ***Interviews***

The first author conducted the interviews between May and December 2013, digitally recorded the conversations, and then transcribed the material herself. Interviews ranged from 56 minutes to almost two hours in duration, creating fifteen and a half hours of data and over 131,000 words of transcription. Participants were eager to tell their stories and interested in the research findings, no one withdrew from the study or refused to answer any questions. The initial scope of the study sought to explore how professionals working in high-risk fields make sense of an unusual and potentially escalating crisis situation. However, conversations often branched out to include a wide array of topics. An interview guide was used [See appendix A], however interviews were non-directive and participants were encouraged to talk about their lives, careers, families, feelings, and other experiences both inside and outside the military. Informant responses to two questions provided particularly paradoxical data which became central in this study:

What do you think are the important skills required to be excellent at your job?

What are the aspects of your job that you really like?

### ***Analysis***

In addition to conducting the interviews and transcribing the audio recordings herself, the first author listened to each conversation several times before she began

to develop a list of narrative codes. Gradually, themes emerged as interesting topics to investigate, partly as a result of an encounter with unexpected phenomenon. As some literature recommends, focusing on surprises and unanticipated responses may be a good methodological rule, encouraging findings that can offer new insights (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). In line with Alvesson and Kärreman (2007), we sought to identify points of tension or mysteries in our data and our narrative coding initially focused on identifying paradoxes such as the following quote:

I know that I am a killer but I'm not a murderer...I say that because I'm looking at a guy that I am shooting and I can see him. And I respect him. It's a business now, he's--I'm the enemy to him. And I got it.

[Seal Informant #2]

Overtime, as is clear from the quote above, it became apparent that SEALs have a unique orientation to the demands of their work and their narratives coalesced into recognizable themes that led to the identification of the phenomenon of Agonistic Governance.

Equally important in drawing out narratives that contained highly personal and confessional views and stories, the first author's prior experience as a military officer was a valuable resource in the subsequent interpretation and analysis of the empirical material as well. However, to maintain neutrality and minimize the likelihood of projecting pre-existing views onto the research material, we engaged in detailed discussions in which the first author's extensive personal knowledge of US military culture were balanced out by the second author's more detached interpretation of the research material.

The resulting collaboration successfully cross-fertilized the first author's insider knowledge with the second author's substantive theoretical and

methodological expertise in problems and their associated decision-making styles. Through this dialogical process, the study's empirical material was scrutinized in a manner that revealed nuances and decoded industry jargon in ways that might have been missed without the first author's insider understanding; conversely, some of the assumptions unquestioningly made by insiders may not have been problematized without the second author's more detached standing. Our overall approach was consistent with the emerging reflexive approach in qualitative inquiry, one in which researchers seek to question their own values and assumptions, their active role in the field work and the stake they have in the findings and interpretations (Cunliffe, 2003, Sims, 2005, Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009, Özkazanç-Pan, 2012).

Instead of formally coding the data with computerized software, we probed the empirical materials to tease out tensions, irregularities and ambiguities. This way of 'working with the data' provided a valid and valuable alternative to using coding software that can easily lapse into mechanical routine. Instead, our approach was iterative, discursive and reflexive, the latter apparent in our continuous attempt to assess how our own interests and prejudices may be surfacing in our interpretations and inferences, something that often goes unnoticed when researchers undertake formal computerized data coding. Throughout our discussions of the empirical material, we constantly iterated between our data and the findings of other studies, as well as between data and theoretical formulations.

Inevitably what our participants disclosed should be viewed in the context of a conversation with a professional peer rather than an academic researcher. Through this engagement we believe that the field material justifies our conclusion

that in talking to a fellow-professional our respondents attained a considerable level of critical self-examination and reflexivity. The SEALs interviewed confided, reflected, and self-analyzed, candidly expressing strong opinions while also unabashedly revealing ambivalence and inconsistencies. Untroubled by these disparities, participants seemed comfortable discussing chaotic, confusing, and complex situations with little need for tidy closure or to identify a logical answer or inevitable conclusion. This perspective offered us valuable insights into some of the conflicting emotions and narratives guiding decision-making in their world, steering us towards development of the Agonistic framework discussed in the previous section.

## **FINDINGS**

Agonistic Governance is defined as an approach that encourages organizational actors to positively embrace the paradoxes and contradictions inherent in today's complex operating environments in order to complete their mission flexibly and autonomously. In effect, the agonistic frame implies that the contradictions of decision-making in complex situations are precisely the key to explaining success: the search for a logical, elegant, unilinear answer is the problem not the solution. Being comfortable within a confused situation, not relying upon tried and tested procedures, and being reliant on one's own resilience and learning requires an acceptance that, ironically, the antinomies of the situation and your own Agonistic Governance is your friend not your enemy because the very same confusions will probably inhibit the ability of your competitor, opponent or enemy to respond appropriately.

This requires an ability to thrive in complex, uncertain environments which require centralized strategies for guidance yet decentralized execution of tactics in order to be successful; an inherently contradictory and tension-ridden approach.

One SEAL interviewed provided an excellent example of this Agonistic Governance process:

[We were given our instructions]. They were very simplified... Ok there's our goal, clear as crystal....It was crazy because it was so simple; uncluttered...I said, 'Hey we've been doing this for a long time now. You trust us. You know what we do. We trained for this'. You don't need to be a tactician and tell me how I'm going to do this job. You assigned this mission to me: 'Hey see what you can do to free Captain Philips'. That's what the mission was. It wasn't about killing pirates it wasn't about anything—it was 'Hey, free him'. OK, that's enough for me.

[Seal Informant #2]

Embedded within the Agonistic Governance process of centralized strategic guidance yet decentralized execution of tactics, is the empowerment of frontline operators to violate an order if warranted. Here we see the SEAL engaging in Command (accepting a hierarchical order to free Captain Philips), Management (engaging in the trained processes that will execute the command), and Leadership (doing whatever was necessary in the circumstances, including challenging upwards). One senior SEAL officer described his philosophy this way:

If I felt in my heart that if I tell them I am not doing this mission [their way], they are going to send someone else to do it anyway, then I would have disobeyed the order...I would have accomplished the mission [my way] and dealt with it afterwards. And if I got fired afterwards, nobody would have been killed, nobody would have been injured. I may have lost my career, but so what?

Another SEAL, recently back from Afghanistan, explained that rather than looking for pre-scripted responses to an emerging challenge, SEALs emphasize the artistic side of leadership and are not afraid of relying on emotions to guide them:

In a real world challenge—whatever word creativity, ingenuity—I think that’s really important because whatever just happened to you is probably a surprise. It’s probably something that you didn’t predict because it’s just the way—you know, plans are a basis for change. It just rarely happens that the problem you are faced with is the problem you were expecting. So you quickly have to come up with some alternative, some options.... That’s a pretty important factor because if it’s art...then that means the solution is going to involve some kind of artwork and then it’s going to require me to think or act or feel this out.

[Seal Informant #3]

When asked to provide a specific example of a scenario in which he was challenged to respond creatively, or to engage with what we are calling an Agonistic Governance challenge, this SEAL described his tour of duty during the Arab Spring in 2011:

In Yemen, it was just this constant process of not knowing what’s going on in this kind of evolving situation where every day—minute by minute, hour by hour things were changing...We evacuated all non-essential personnel but maintained a small presence [at the embassy]...You had no idea what was going to happen next....I don’t know how to characterize this but I *thrive on change*. I would prefer to be in an environment that is chaotic or changing or uncertain because I think that it presents an opportunity to do something, to excel, or to respond probably in a place where a lot of people are going to struggle and be frustrated with it.

[Seal Informant #3]

This ability to thrive on change and effectively manage chaos and uncertainty is a critical element of Agonistic Governance.

Agonistic Governance also implies the opposite of Foucault’s (1977, pp. 135-136) mechanical image of ‘the soldier’ as a body that ‘may be subjected, used transformed and improved... Someone who could be recognized from afar’, the

soldier 'bore certain signs: the natural signs of his strength and his courage, the marks, too, of his pride; his body was the blazon of his strength and valour'. We argue that when involved in Agonistic Governance situations, a paradoxical advantage for Navy Seals' bodies is that they can be made intentionally unrecognizable as military warriors. For example, one experienced SEAL described himself thus:

I had long hair and a beard for about 12 of the last 15 years. I'd go home like for Christmas and stuff and people would say, 'Hey I thought you were in the Navy'. And I'd say, "Yeah, I am". It was crazy... We all had long hair and beards and our uniforms—we made all our own uniforms, had them manufactured for us. There was no decorum as Navy personnel.

[Seal Informant #2]

This provides an image of the Agonistic warrior, less like Foucault's (1977, p. 135) soldier made 'out of formless clay', a 'machine' that 'can be constructed', and instead a thinking leader able to respond to dynamically evolving situations with creative solutions informed by a range of emotional data. SEALs accomplish this so effectively, one SEAL officer explained, because of a unique officer-enlisted relationship in which juniors and seniors feel autonomous and that their input into the decision-making process is valued, irrespective of rank:

I found that bond between the officer and enlisted among SEALs to be unique in the military... I really, really liked that...I realized that [SEALs] work in fast-paced dynamic environments and I, as a leader, have far more autonomy and decision making authority at a very junior level and that really appealed to me...The officers and enlisted go through the same exact training pipeline, so everyone has—no matter how junior or senior—everyone has buy-in and everyone has some say in the decision-making.

[Seal Informant #12]

Another senior officer explained SEAL decision-making processes this way:



The way I describe it, there is no rank. It's sort of an egalitarian process. Sure there's a chain of command...[But] no one has the market on good ideas and...just because we've done it this way every time in the past doesn't make it the best. So be receptive to good ideas. And they're not afraid to speak up. Obviously there's always some peer pressure...[but] good ideas regardless of source bubble to the top and that's tremendously empowering.

[Seal Informant #10]

Although everyone's input is valued, synergizing ideas and developing a coherent plan is another critical Agonistic warrior skill for SEAL leaders. In short, the Agonistic approach requires a tension-ridden philosophy of decision-making where the hierarchy is challenged and supported - but not displaced - by the egalitarian ethos:

Every member of the group likely has a solution in his mind for a given problem but we can't—we can't take everyone's advice. We can't follow 25 different ideas. So to be a [SEAL] leader you have to synergize the best ideas given and ultimately move in the direction that's going to accomplish the mission. And then soften the blow on the egos that maybe didn't have the right answer. So I think that there's a lot more art involved with taking these type-A personalities and getting them all moving in the same direction.

[Seal Informant #12]

Nor does this only relate to critical situations where immediate survival generates the motivation to acquiesce. Another leadership skill was finding creative ways to motivate followers to focus on a task, particularly an unpopular one, referred to by one experienced officer as the "art of being a SEAL":

With SEALs if the mission is less appealing—"Hey, we're going to go train these Iraqi police"—whoever's in charge has to know that [it's unpopular] and really motivate his team to be successful. And say "Hey you know what guys this may not be as sexy as you thought it was going to be. But think about the gravity of this—we are on the cusp"... We just deal with the hand that was dealt and then just try to make the best of it. I think that's the art of leadership.

[Seal Informant #12]

It is important to emphasize how, in the above quote, SEAL leaders default communication strategy is not Command and Control, but rather to embrace the emotional complexity that accompanies their range of mission assignments. One senior SEAL described this complex process as simply “building teams”, and the aim is for each individual to find his own way to successfully contribute:

When people think of the SEALs and how successful they are—yes, we’ve established ourselves on the battlefield and that prowess as a warrior, and it makes great movies and all that other crap. But I think the real secret is we build teams. We call ourselves “The Teams”.... It’s not “I’m a SEAL”. It’s “I’m in The Teams”...We put the team and mission about self. We start that in BUD/S where they start hammering into you—your buddy. You are responsible for your buddy. In fact, you better be more responsible for your buddy than you are for yourself. If you let him go adrift, you are out of training. So from the very start of the program there is this sense of—you are responsible for someone else, you must contribute to the team.

[Seal Informant #10]

In addition to the creative and emotional aspects of Agonistic Governance another surprising finding of this study, particularly given the arduous reputation of their training, was that most SEALs prioritized mental talents over physical prowess when describing important job skills. For example, every informant mentioned aspects of dedication, determination, motivation, and resilience as critical to SEAL success. And, like this experienced SEAL Lieutenant, not one informant mentioned physical attributes such as running speed, swimming endurance, or weight lifting strength as essential:

People usually think being a SEAL is this intense physical challenge, which there certainly are components of. But most guys who graduate from BUD/S are not physical specimens. I mean, they are above average physically. But all the guys who I went through training with who were the fastest runner, the fastest swimmer, the strongest—all of the really elite athletes—college quarterbacks, Olympic athletes....Those guys usually dropped out fairly early in the program and it wasn’t at all because they

were physically exhausted or challenged...What I think that points to is more mental characteristics than physical.

[Seal Informant #3]

Similarly, another senior officer described his attitude when he first attended BUD/S training: “The class started with 106, we finished with 20 originals. To this day, all of us are like I never ever thought of quitting, no matter what...Quitting was never an option” [Seal Informant #11].

A senior SEAL training officer described how a willingness to experiment is encouraged early in SEAL training, paradoxically, through repeated exposure to failure:

The way we inculcate a [SEAL] mindset and ethos is through failure. We are allowed to fail, in a controlled environment. You know the old expression: you learn more from your failures than your successes? That’s very much part of the culture. You fail a lot [laugh]. And you’re intended to fail. Because part of it is, how do you measure up? Can you bounce back from it?

[Seal Informant #10]

Learning from failure implies a willingness to take risks and unconventional thinking; another important skill reported by nearly every informant. As one senior SEAL officer characterized it, “The ability to look at a situation and say what can go wrong?” [Seal Informant #10] and then build potential solutions. For example, one informant recalled:

Most SEALs are adaptable and this is one of the greatest qualities of the SEAL community above other special operations units and above conventional units. That is, given just a completely different environment and a set of tools and circumstances, SEALs will more quickly adapt, more quickly organize and solve the mission—and accomplish the mission, than any other force. I say that confidently, just having observed it and dealing with our joint partners and uh, having trained with a whole group of guys and then going overseas. And they say, “Oops, we need to send half of your platoon to Afghanistan; a third of them are going to Yemen and the other—

the remainder is going to hang out in Iraq. But we're going to marry you up with an east coast SEAL team and you guys are just going to have to figure it out". So I think SEALs adapt well and it is one of our greatest strengths to think outside the box and deal with anything.

[Seal Informant #12]

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

We suggested at the beginning of this paper that if leadership scholars want to learn about leading in complex situations, they might examine those professions that lead in the most extreme forms of complexity. Work environments where, in yet another paradox, the ability to learn from failure – the other F-word - in training is encouraged because making too many mistakes in the field is not just unfortunate but possibly lethal. Our analysis of the empirical material gathered in this study suggests that the contradictions and ambiguities of the situation are often refracted and reflected in the decision-making skills of Navy SEALs and capture the notion of Agonistic Governance that we previously elaborated on.

Agonistic Governance has implications for those that think collaborative Leadership is always the answer, as well as those that think the world can be fixed through the Management of expert systems and big data (Morozov, 2014), and for those who routinely call for 'strong leadership' (Command) (c.f., Brown, 2014), for none of these, on their own, is likely to be able to cope with this level of complexity of decision-making. Yet the assumption that more than one model of decision-making is necessary runs contrary to those seeking 'consistency' of decision-making and also works against the notion that promotion is based upon the execution of a particular approach that is favored by the cultural climate of the organization.

In effect, success in the military might seem to require success in crises (the Command of Critical Problems), promotion in an engineering firm might appear to require demonstrable technical success (the Management of Tame Problems) and promotion in an organization facing interminable complexities should support those with skills in egalitarian collaborations (the Leadership of Wicked Problems). Such a model supports Prototyping arguments (Hogg and van Knippenberg, 2003) in which the individual that exhibits the skills and characteristics most associated with the organizational culture is likely to achieve the leadership position. In short, the archetypal accountant will lead an accountancy firm, the 'perfect' teacher becomes the Head Teacher, and the stereotypical soldier becomes a general. The demonstration of such skills might be appropriate for securing the formal authority over an organization but is the deployment of contextually normative decision-making sufficient when the environmental norm no longer prevails? What happens, for example, when skill in Command is insufficient in a military situation because the traditionally authoritative commander does not actually know what to do? In this situation, we argue, an Agonistic Governance process might be more appropriate.

Intriguingly, military elite groups seem to exhibit precisely these characteristics when faced with situations beyond the norm. Indeed, they seem to require a rather different, and much more complex, set of skills and styles that seems to undermine the military command and control prototyping model. In fact, it suggests at an individual level, a rather more sophisticated approach to Wicked Problems might also carry an answer to the problem of consistency. To put that another way, we typically assume that success derives from internally consistent ('Elegant' in the terms of Douglas, 2003, 2008) approaches to problem solving but if

part of the problem is the cultural norms that operate to prevent us seeing beyond those cultural norms then perhaps part of the solution is to engage an approach that consciously goes beyond the cultural conventions and embodies counter-cultural models and techniques into their conventional approach – so called Clumsy approaches (Verwiej, 2006 et al). So that, for example (to adopt Douglas's division between Egalitarian, Individualist and Hierarchical cultures), a traditional hierarchical organization that is primed to deploy greater levels of hierarchical coercion when faced with failure might consider adopting egalitarian *and* individualist approaches, not in place of, but in addition to, hierarchical approaches.

This does not mean that success is derived in some kind of contingency approach – that an analysis of a particular situation will facilitate the appropriate use of a particular decision style (Leadership, Management or Command) for a specific situation (Wicked, Tame or Critical Problem) but rather that when faced with a Wicked Problem success might be based upon using an approach that mixes these decision styles up and uses all three at the same time. In effect, the agonistic frame implies that the contradictions of decision-making in complex situations are precisely the key to explaining success: the search for a logical, elegant, unilinear answer is the problem not the solution. Being comfortable within a confused situation, not relying upon tried and tested procedures, and being reliant on one's own resilience and learning requires an acceptance that, ironically, the antinomies of the situation and your own Agonistic Governance is your friend not your enemy because the very same confusions will probably inhibit the ability of your competitor, opponent or enemy to respond appropriately. In this sense the model is not restricted to the military or even those employed in emergency services but might serve all kinds of

leaders well who struggle to address Wicked Problems in their own organizations because they are looking for a rational, unilinear and logical solution that may not exist; or to finish with Keats (1817), we would do well to acquire negative capability: 'that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.'

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **US Navy SEAL Interview Guide**

**Do you have any concerns or questions about the release form?**

**I am interested in studying the strategies that people like you use to help make sense of an unusual situation and how you determine a course of action as events unfold in situations that are unclear. I have about twelve questions to ask, if you're ready to get started?**

1. Can you please describe a timeline of your career?
2. How did you get started in this line of work?
3. What do you think are the important skills required to be excellent at your job?
4. What are the aspects of your job that you really like?
5. What are some negative aspects of your job?
6. Has it changed over time?
7. I'd now like to talk about the difference between a routine and unusual day in your work?
  - a. I'll provide an example: Las Vegas Scenario
8. Can you relate to this type of example?
9. Can you provide an example of how a routine day turned into an unusual situation?
10. How did you know something unusual was occurring?
11. When was it clear risks were escalating?
12. How did you feel about this challenge as it was occurring?
13. Later, when you things settled down and you had time to reflect, how did you feel about this experience?
14. As the saying goes jobs like ours can feel like 'hours of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror'. Can you relate to this feeling—has this happened to you?

#### **Conclusion**

1. Is there anything else you'd like to add?
2. Who else would you recommend that I talk with? (snowball sampling)
3. Is there anything in particular I should ask them?

**REV: 10/1/13**