



Will Wartime Mobilisation Address Peak Oil?

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21
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I frequently hear it suggested that we need a wartime mobilisation to address the challenges we face. The most recent being in the synopsis for Lester R. Brown's new book, [Plan B 3.0: Mobilizing to Save Civilization](#):

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The world faces many environmental trends of disruption and decline. The scale and complexity of issues facing our fast-forward world have no precedent. With "Plan A", business as usual, we have neglected these issues overly long. In "Plan B 3.0", Lester R. Brown warns that the only effective response now is a Second World War-type mobilisation like that in the United States after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

What is a wartime mobilisation, what triggers one and what relevance does such thinking have to today's challenges?

In Brown's first Plan B book he described the wartime mobilisation thus:

In his State of the Union address on January 6, 1942, one month after Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt announced ambitious arms production goals. The United States, he said, was planning to produce 60,000 planes, 45,000 tanks, 20,000 anti-aircraft guns, and 6 million tons of merchant shipping. He added, "Let no man say it cannot be done."

Achieving these goals was possible only by converting existing industries and using materials that previously went into manufacturing civilian goods. Nowhere was this shift more dramatic than in the automobile industry, which was at that time the largest concentration of industrial power in the world, producing 3-4 million cars a year. Auto companies initially wanted to continue manufacturing cars and simply to add on production of armaments. They agreed only reluctantly—after pressure from President Roosevelt—to a wholesale conversion to war-support manufacturing.

Aircraft needs were enormous. They included not only fighters, bombers, and reconnaissance planes, but also the troop and cargo transports needed to fight a war on two fronts, each across an ocean. From the beginning of 1942 through 1944, the United States turned out 229,600 aircraft, a fleet so vast it is hard to visualize.

While the aircraft industry did nearly all the assembly, the auto industry supplied some 455,000 aircraft engines and 256,000 propellers. The aircraft industry was given the job of assembling all planes to ease its fears that the auto industry would become firmly entrenched in the manufacture of aircraft and would dominate the industry after the

war.

The year 1942 witnessed the greatest expansion of industrial output in the nation's history—all for military use. Early in the year, the production and sale of cars and trucks for private use was banned, residential and highway construction was halted, and driving for pleasure was banned.

In her book *No Ordinary Time*, Doris Kearns Goodwin describes how various firms converted. A sparkplug factory was among the first to switch to the production of machine guns. Soon a manufacturer of stoves was producing lifeboats. A merry-go-round factory was making gun mounts; a toy company was turning out compasses; a corset manufacturer was producing grenade belts; and a pinball machine plant began to make armor-piercing shells.

In retrospect, the speed of the conversion from a peacetime to a wartime economy was stunning. The automobile industry went from producing nearly 4 million cars in 1941 to producing 24,000 tanks and 17,000 armored cars in 1942—but only 223,000 cars, and most of them were produced early in the year, before the conversion began. Essentially the auto industry was closed down from early 1942 through the end of 1944. In 1940, the United States produced some 4,000 aircraft. In 1942, it produced 48,000. By the end of the war, more than 5,000 ships were added to the 1,000 that made up the American Merchant Fleet in 1939.



Douglas A-26 Production Line During World War II.

The Boeing Company / Douglas Aircraft Historical Gallery

The description is undoubtedly a powerful indication of what can physically be done. How the resources of a nation can be rapidly switched from one application to another. From this, it is reasonable to propose that it is physically possible to mobilise today's resources and focus them

The US production and sale of cars and trucks for private use was banned in 1942, releasing tremendous productive capability for the manufacture of armaments. Today the production of internal combustion engine vehicles, of aeroplanes, of flat screen TVs, of Playstations and Xboxes, of tungsten filament light bulbs etc. could be banned in a similar move and in their place renewable energy generation, efficiency improvements and electrified transport infrastructure deployed. Globally, we have never had greater manufacturing capacity. The problem is that it isn't allocated to the problem at hand.

Wartime mobilisation is a way to forcibly reallocate resources, away from the allocative efficiency achieved by Smith's invisible hand of the market reflecting the optimal mix as determined by the consumers. When an economy is allocative efficient no individual can be made better off (according to their desires) without another being made at least as worse off.

Wartime mobilisation is called upon to shift resources towards a more immediate goal – preservation of the very nation state (or in the US WWII case, of European nation states with which America was aligned). Under this threat allocative efficiency is trumped, the market driven by consumer choice is replaced temporarily with a command economy until the threat is diminished. It could be argued that the market can respond to energy depletion in a way it can't to an invading army. However, due to the time scales involved waiting for the market signal leaves the response too late.

So what of peak oil? We recognise that peak oil is a serious problem. It appears that mitigation is not possible from the allocation of resources arising from today's consumer choice leading many, including Lester Brown, to suggest a wartime mobilisation. Wartime mobilisation is rare however, it only happens at times of war. The cold war's space race could be considered a wartime mobilisation of sorts.

Is peak oil a war? Can it command the same resources that built a quarter of million aircraft, developed the atomic and hydrogen bombs and put a man on the moon?

I don't think peak oil does look like a war, at least not to the people for whom it needs it to look like one to trigger mobilisation. Only the heads of states and their immediate circle, with support of their military, can mobilise a country for war and they are only likely to do so when immediately threatened by loss of their nation states. Herein lies the problem, maybe peak oil doesn't represent the absolute loss of the nation state, just the degradation of it.

Wars are primarily targeted at the leaders of a country with collateral damage usually regarded as an unfortunate consequence. This is the exact opposite of peak oil, which through increased energy and resource costs, disproportionately affects the poorer people in society.

Imagine ranking all the countries in the world by some criteria of affluence, countries in Western Europe, North America etc. would be near the top and the countries of sub-Saharan Africa near the bottom. I suggest that the impact of peak oil on these affluent countries will be to slide them down this scale, closer to the less affluent countries. This continuum might not be a gentle slide as the complex and fragile systems employed by affluent countries may not degrade gracefully. However, the critical point is that **affluence is eroded from the bottom, not the top**. The leaders of some of the poorest countries of the world still live in luxurious houses, ride in Mercedes cars and have their own private planes. Their 'elite' position is maintained so there is little incentive for 'wartime' mobilisation to address the problems in their countries. This has been painfully apparent in Zimbabwe recently, whilst the economy crumbles Zanu-PF, the military and the police seem to retain a degree of affluence.

The same could happen to affluent countries facing energy depletion – whilst the ruling elite's position is maintained the majority population's quality of life can deteriorate significantly without

Lester Brown's mobilisation being triggered. Remember we are already seeing the impact of peak oil today, expressed as \$140+ per barrel and increased fuel poverty yet there is no sign of wartime mobilisation.

That's my case for peak oil not triggering wartime mobilisation. But what could do it?

The majority population could become annoyed with their deteriorating situation to such an extent that the incumbent ruling class are ousted. The threat of such revolution could lead to mobilisation. However wartime mobilisation needs cooperation from the population and with revolution in the air this cooperation may not be available.

If some aspect of peak oil didn't have the characteristic of 'degradation from the bottom up' but instead hit the potential instigators of wartime mobilisation as acuity as the lower classes we might have found a sufficient trigger.

Electricity's binary nature, it's either available for all or not available for anyone, could be such a trigger. If energy depletion renders a nation's electricity provision unreliable everyone is affected and popular support would be forthcoming. Peak oil and electricity shortages are different. Scarcity, pricing out an increasing proportion of the population, creating demand destruction, is different to all-inclusive power cuts.

In the UK at least, electricity supply will be under serious pressure during the coming decade as legacy nuclear infrastructure is decommissioned, North Sea gas supplies deplete and environmental legislation threatens to close some coal-fired infrastructure.

South Africa is today experiencing such electricity problems, are they moving to a wartime footing to address it? Maybe even blackouts aren't as threatening as an enemy at the gates.

A final thought, the command economy that wartime mobilisation represents is likely an inefficient way to doing things. An energy intensive approach historically only employed by energy rich nations. In the 1940s the US was awash with cheap energy. Since the nature of our problem is energy shortage, addressing it with an inefficient process has to be questionable!

Conclusion

Wartime mobilisation of available resources can go a long way towards mitigating the problem of peak oil. However, peak oil is unlikely to present itself in a way that triggers a national mobilisation on a wartime scale. The leaders will be somewhat isolated from the threat and the necessary popular support will be lacking. Peak oil erodes affluence from the bottom, not threatens the top like a war does. Nations just become poorer, affluent countries sliding down towards the less affluent countries of today.

Whilst this may be the case for peak oil, considering the wider energy depletion picture electricity provision stands out. It doesn't have the 'bottom up' characteristic and as such could trigger an energy led wartime mobilisation of resources.

Electricity could be more problematic than liquid fuel supply in the UK, potentially a good thing if electricity shortage is more able to trigger the massive reallocation of resources our situation requires than peak oil itself.



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