

THE RISK APPROACH OF ADMIRAL SIR JOHN FISHER



ABOUT THE RISK APPROACH SERIES

This study is part of THE RISK APPROACH series which examine the risk attitude of naval leaders. The objective of this series is to uncover elements that shaped these leaders' risk approach, understand their philosophy towards risk and draw lessons for today's leaders in any sectors of activity.

ADMIRAL SIR JOHN FISHER 1841-1920

Admiral Fisher was a British naval officer who rose through the ranks and reached the highest level of responsibility in the Royal Navy. He was First Sea Lord of the Admiralty, the professional head of the navy, during 1904-10 and 1914-15.

An indefatigable reformer and a hard driving officer, Fisher was recognised for his strong opinions, his intolerance for inefficiency, and his farsighted reforms that transformed the Royal Navy at the beginning of the XXth century.

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*[g]reat decisions cannot be obtained
without high risks.*

(War Plans ,1907)

Admiral Sir John Fisher

A NAVAL CAREER MASTERING RISKS

Fisher took substantial risks when he reformed the Royal Navy from 1904 onwards. In particular, he introduced a revolutionary ship in 1906, HMS *Dreadnought*, which rendered obsolete all battleships in the world, including those in the British fleet.

He also reduced overseas squadrons to reinforce the fleet in home waters and scrapped 154 ships that he considered outdated. These radical reforms significantly changed the footprint of the Royal Navy worldwide and reduced the tonnage and number of ships in service.

Although risky in nature, these reforms proved pivotal in preparing the Royal Navy for the challenges to come during World War I.



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A RISK TAKER AT A LARGE SCALE

Fisher engaged in an all-encompassing restructuring of the navy. Nonetheless, if these reforms would have failed, the effects on Britain's sea power would have been catastrophic. To ensure the success of the navy when taking risks, Fisher insisted on its preparation and readiness. He also insisted on its ability to cope with unthinkable scenarios and continuously adjust its plans to changing circumstances.

- 1 GETTING PREPARED
- 2 ADAPTING PLANS
- 3 STAYING VIGILANT
- 4 OVERCOMING UNPREDICTABILITY

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1

GETTING PREPARED

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The danger that is eternally present to the Navy is over confidence in our preparedness for war.

(The Scheme, 6 December 1904)

Being prepared in advance is an absolute necessity to deal with future events. However, the level of preparedness has to be constantly challenged by the leadership to avoid complacency.

2

ADAPTING PLANS

“

Circumstances alter cases! That's the answer to the charge of inconsistency.

(19 October 1904)

Each risk materialises in a unique way. In the event of incident, the situation will keep evolving and even the most comprehensive plan will require a certain level of customisation and adaptation to the situation at hand.

3

STAYING VIGILANT

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[i]n the first place, the men, like the ships, should be permanently available at instant notice; and, in the second place, they should be prepared to face risks.

(War Plans, 1907)

An organisation has to maintain a high level of alertness and be ready to react swiftly in case of incident. If an incident occurs, a response most probably entailing risks would be necessary.

4

OVERCOMING UNPREDICTABILITY

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‘It is the unexpected that happens!’ and as Nelson said (so truly) ‘the infernal enemy never will do exactly what suits you, or what you may have best prepared for!’

(Naval Necessities, 1905-06)

Not all situations can be predicted and even the best prepared organisations have to be ready to face a large range of scenarios. Risks considered improbable should not be ruled out too soon.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

André Fournier is a risk management practitioner and naval historian with more than 25 years of professional experience. He is a risk researcher and the founder of MARITIME STRATEGY RESEARCH.