

This is an overview of the \*patterns\* part of the practical discipline of

***systems-thinking-informed human-organization theory.***

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So far, this discipline contains two large sub-topics:

1. Social patterns.
2. Emergent effects in human networks.

The emergence sub-topic is less developed; I am writing about it separately.

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This work needs a home base that will support an active, multidisciplinary development community. If you can suggest such a venue, please email me:

[melconway.com/resume.pdf](https://melconway.com/resume.pdf)

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I'm going to present a sequence of three real-world applications of the patterns part by progressively expanding two generic models.

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Here are the applications. Note their diversity, which suggests the power of the approach.

1. Big Oil and the unstoppable of fossil-fuel extraction.
2. The capitulation of Paul Weiss to the White House executive order.
3. The unstoppable of the F-35 procurement.

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## TWO GENERIC PATTERNS

### **1.The Optimization Trap**

In 2021 I tweeted a reaction to Milton Friedman's 1970 doctrine on the "social responsibility" of corporations:

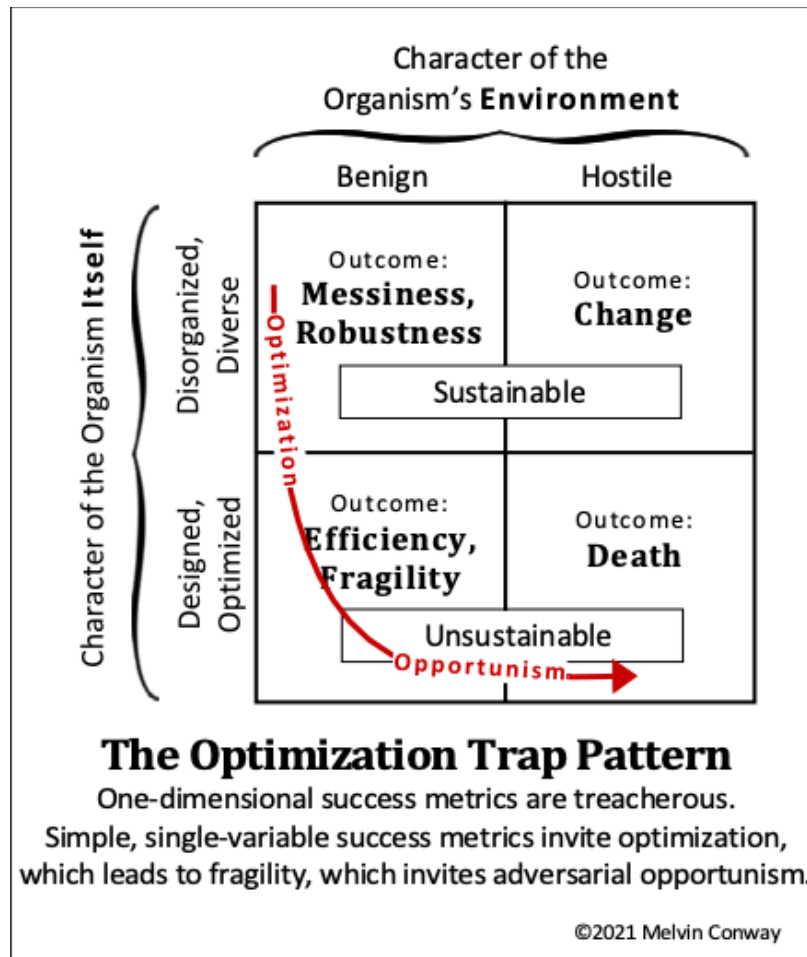
"The social responsibility of a corporation is to increase return to its shareholders."

<https://www.nytimes.com/1970/09/13/archives/a-friedman-doctrine-the-social-responsibility-of-business-is-to.html>

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Convinced that this was a partial-system oversimplification, I replied with a 2x2, the first of the two generic patterns. I call this “The Optimization Trap”.



The red path is the line of least resistance to those who choose to optimize a one-dimensional metric.

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I use the word “trap” specifically as a signal from the systems world to the non-systems world to pay attention to the possibility of being caught up in a specific structure with invisible, and possibly dangerous, side effects.

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This pattern generalizes this lesson we learn from Nature:

Diversity in a population might be seriously inconvenient to that population in the short run but could mean its survival in the longer run.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plagues\\_and\\_Peoples](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plagues_and_Peoples)

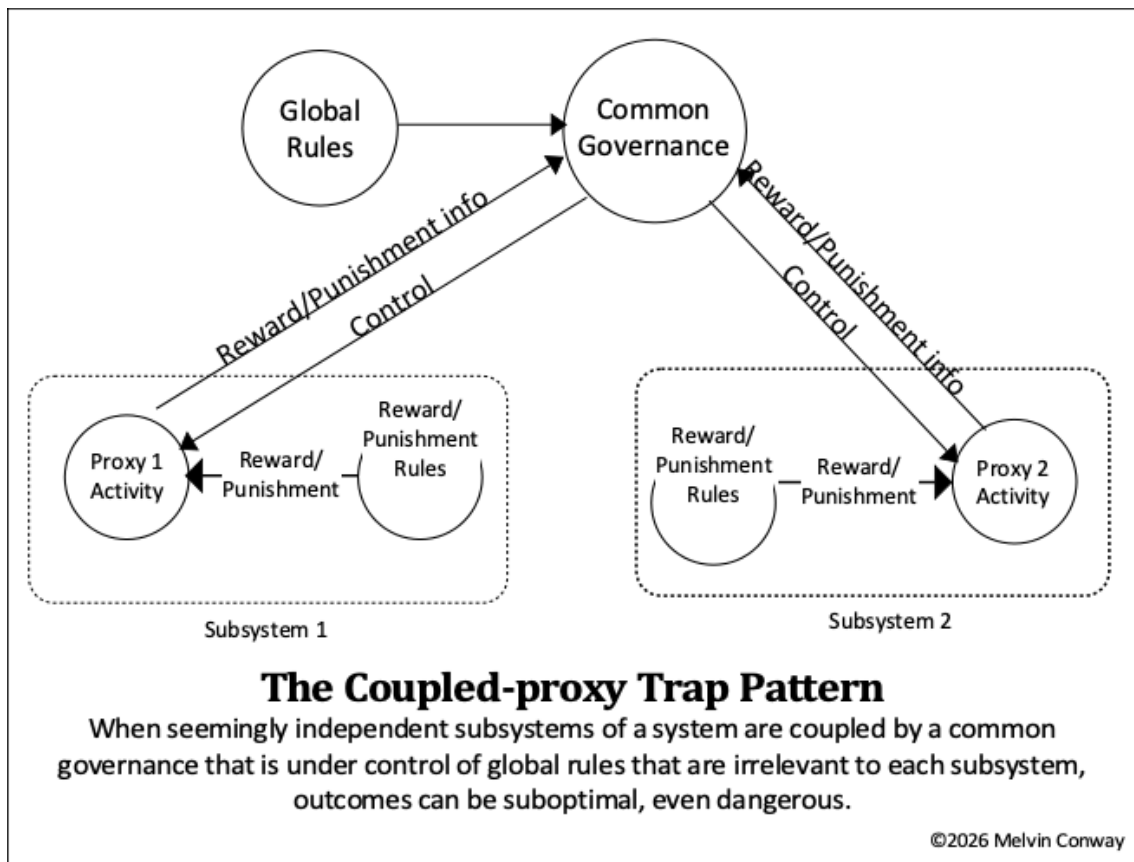
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## 2.The Coupled-proxy Trap

This pattern captures the essence of tragedy:

When seemingly independent subsystems have a common governance that is subject to global rules that are irrelevant to the subsystems, surprisingly adverse outcomes can occur.



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## APPLICATIONS

### 1. The Public Corporation

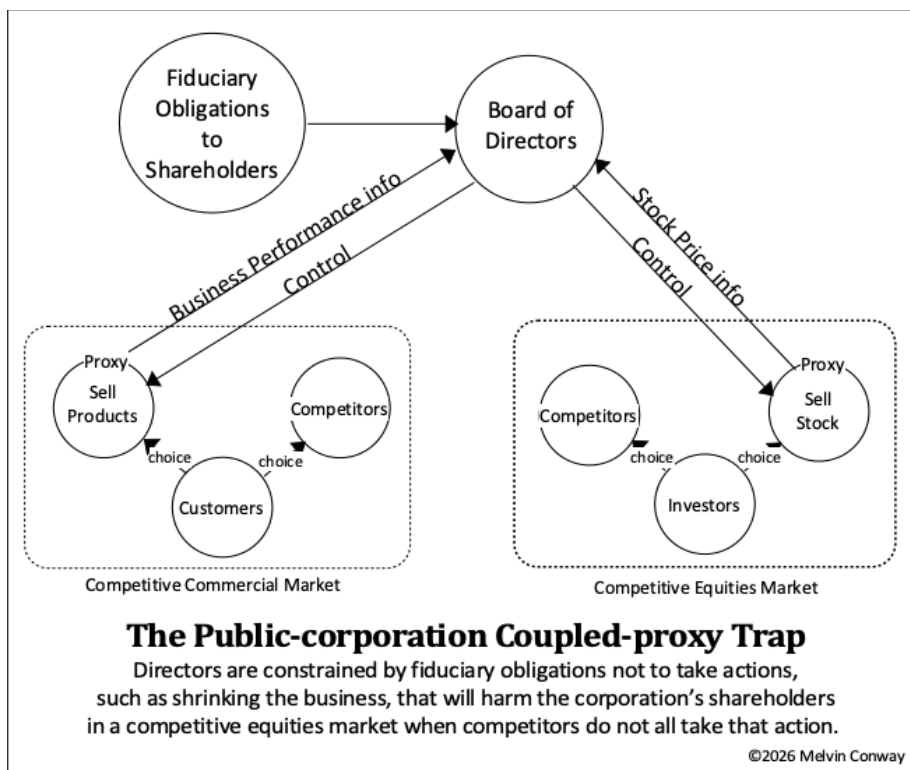
Major public corporations in a competitive environment are not permitted to shrink voluntarily; the Global Rules are the fiduciary obligations to shareholders of the Directors.

(See <https://melconway.com/Home/pdf/UbiquitousConnectivity.pdf> pages 31-end.)

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A public corporation has proxies in two distinct, competitive markets: a commercial market and a capital market, in each of which consumers are free to choose alternatives.



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These two corporate proxies are coupled because a business choice in the commercial market can affect share price in the equities market. In the reverse direction, share price affects the ability to raise capital, which can affect business decisions.

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In the case of Big Oil, the coupled-proxies trap implies sustaining fossil-fuel extraction and is leading us all into a climate catastrophe.

The public response ignores these larger legal and economic structures and resorts to conventional morality, blaming individuals.

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A MAJOR TAKEAWAY from this work:

In intraconnected systems such as these, governance rules that are based solely on classical law and morality governing individual behavior only might well lead, not only to suboptimal, but to destructive, global outcomes.

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The work on emergence reveals unfamiliar mechanisms behind these dynamics.

They must be understood in order to develop intervention and repair strategies that go beyond current conventional thinking.

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## 2. The Paul Weiss Capitulation

The capitulation of Paul Weiss is described in this investigative article in the New York Times by Michael S. Schmidt and Jessica Silver-Greenberg:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2026/08/02/us/politics/paul-weiss-trump.html?smid=url-share>

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Paul Weiss is a victim of both of the above traps. Its choice to move toward the profit-per-partner metric moved it toward the lower-right quadrant of the optimization-trap 2x2. Under normal circumstances this might make business sense.

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But the existence of the Trump retribution campaign perversely created a coupling between Paul Weiss's executive-order response and the welfare of its corporate clients.

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The firm's leadership realized that if they opposed the Executive Order, not only would they lose favor with the White House, which they might be able to tolerate, but they would be putting their corporate clients on an Enemies List, which would be intolerable.

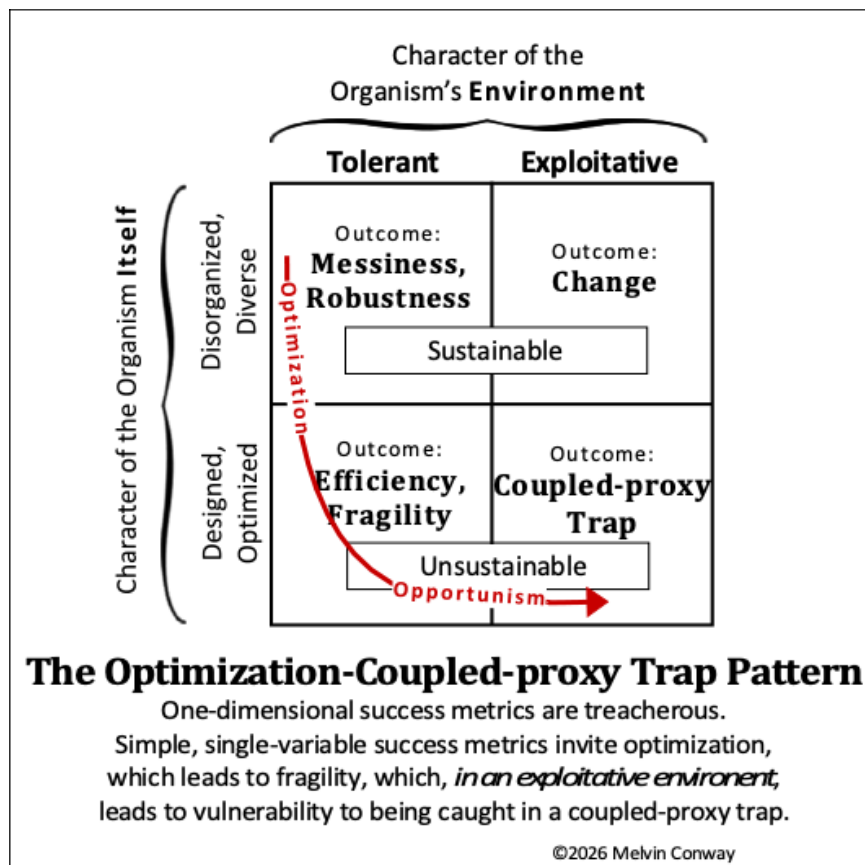
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In my view, the leadership of Paul Weiss did what they had to do. There is general disagreement with this view, which I attribute to a widespread failure to see the above coupling.

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The Paul Weiss case requires that we combine our two models. We do this by embedding the Coupled-proxy Trap in the lower-right quadrant, and relabeling the columns.



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### 3. The Unstoppable F-35 Procurement

The F-35 example is particularly interesting because the Optimization-Coupled-proxy Trap has been knowingly used as a political tactic to extract wealth from the U.S. Treasury.

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In 2013 I gave a keynote on the F-35 weapons system procurement at a workshop on empirical validation of Conway's Law.

[melconway.com/keynote/Presentation.pdf](https://melconway.com/keynote/Presentation.pdf)

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I suggest that you read this paper, especially the conclusion I draw beginning on page 38. Its message:

***In Design, Complexity is Toxic.***

Conway's Law connects this history to current events.

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This message suggests a comparison between the F-35 program and the way Ukraine is changing warfare today. Anne Applebaum, a scholar and Atlantic writer, characterizes Ukraine as a "bottom-up society".

This affects the way it has designed its war strategy.

<https://www.anneapplebaum.com/2026/06/07/ukraine-is-not-losing-russia-is-not-winning/>

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That is how de Tocqueville described America two centuries ago. But America (hence its government) has since moved toward top-heavy complexity. As Conway's Law suggests, this change shows up in the Government's artifacts, the F-35 being an extreme example.

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The F-35 procurement program has been unstoppable because the prime contractor, Lockheed Martin, had placed subcontractors with well-paid employees, who vote, in (at the time of the talk) 45 states.

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This political exploitation of the Coupled-proxy Trap created an effective coalition between the business interests of Lockheed Martin and the political interests of Congress that assures continuous funding.

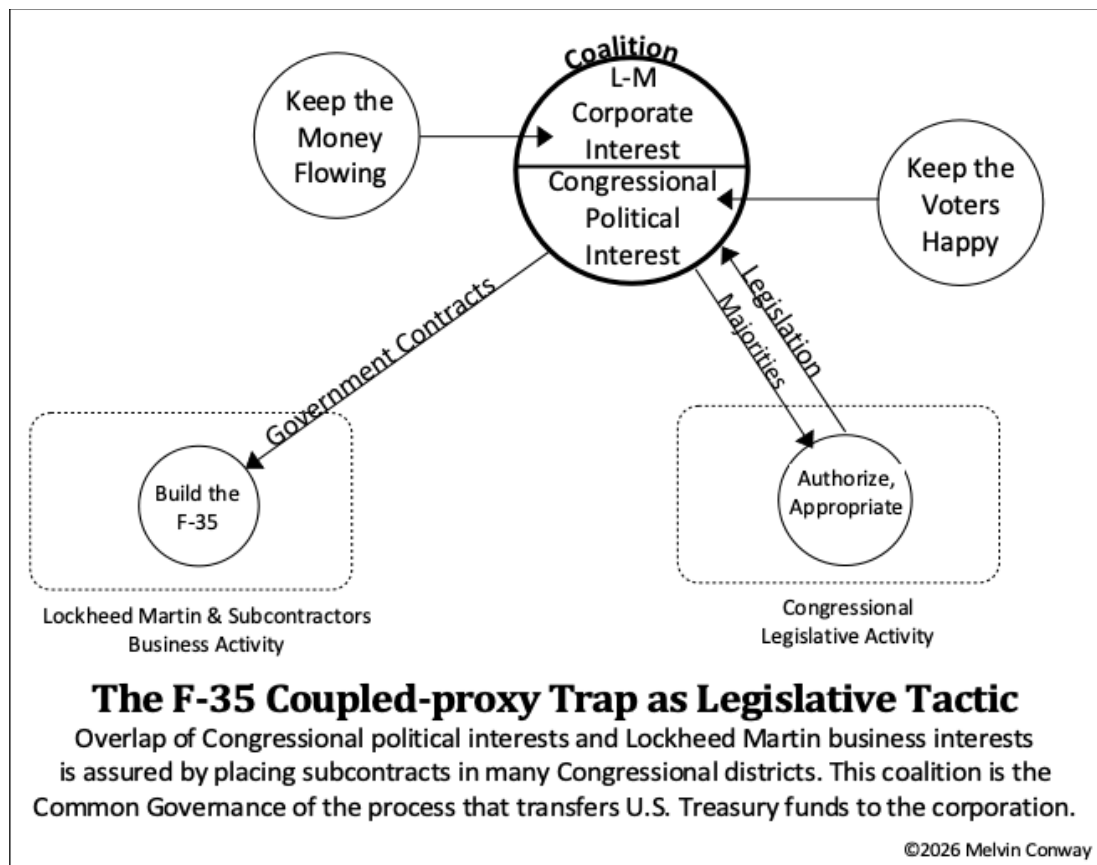
<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-02-22/flawed-f-35-fighter-too-big-to-kill-as-lockheed-hooks-45-states> (Paywall. Sorry, but read the URL instead)

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Here is the model showing the resulting governance coalition. It might look simple, but in view of the controversies of the program, it must have taken a lot of work. I suspect that this was the focus of the coalition:

[www.navair.navy.mil/organization/F-35-Lightning-II-Joint-Program-Office](http://www.navair.navy.mil/organization/F-35-Lightning-II-Joint-Program-Office)



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