

Practical Drift and Logistics Policy

Practical drift can contribute to unexpected events in logistics operations. Logisticians must be aware of this possibility and consciously work to avoid it.

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One of the questions most often asked by logisticians and military leaders in general is, “Why on earth are we doing that?” Many times the answer is unsatisfying, yet we accept and implement the guidance we are given; that is our job. On the other hand, it is our hope that this short piece will encourage readers to consider this question more deeply and not staunchly follow “rules” without questioning them.

Although obviously the entire national security policy is built—and depends—on laws, rules, policies, processes, procedures, and other guidance, it is important to understand the original reasons they were adopted. In his remarkable book *Friendly Fire*, Scott A. Snook, a retired Army colonel and now a senior lecturer of business administration at the Harvard Business School, explains the 1994 accidental shooting down of two Army Black Hawk helicopters by Air Force friendly fire as a matter of “practical drift,” which is the eventual collapse of sensibility about established rules.

Snook explains that as military units rotated in and out of theater, the original no-fly-zone order’s good sense, which was intended to tie no-fly operations together, ebbed as other policies and procedures were added to adapt to evolving situations.

The rules to coordinate air traffic in a no-fly zone, which included provisions to prevent fratricide, were intricate and clear in the original order. However, over time, they became less relevant as dozens of practical, more localized adjustments caused the order to drift slowly away from its orig-

inal intent.

From this tragic event, logisticians can learn that incremental local deviation from rules—made over time by good people for good reason—can have dire consequences.

The concept of practical drift suggests that the innovative and improvised work practices of military logisticians can sometimes compete with the rules that regulate and account for activities in complex supply chains involving many actors and automated systems. Logisticians should understand this paradox and aggressively and continually search for ways to mitigate the tension between the competing values of innovation and control.

Rules that seem to hinder or significantly affect operations are formulated with the best intentions: to enforce good coordination, control costs, and ensure ethical practices among many actors in the supply chain. Nevertheless, practical drift in Department of Defense logistics policies and procedures occurs routinely as logisticians adapt to local conditions that perpetually change.

We recommend one idea that may help address the paradox of practical drift in the logistics community. Faced with rapid change and armed with advanced knowledge management capabilities, we submit that logistics regulatory procedures should be electronically linked to the following:

- A documented history of why the constraints or restraints were required and the context in which they were formulated.
- The staff action memoranda, with all staffing comments included,

that led to the approved version.

- An online collaborative environment where questions may be asked and answers provided, facilitated by the policy proponent for those rules.

In other words, a practicing military logistician should be able to not only read to understand the larger context and original intent of the rules but also participate in near-real time in adjusting them through communication with the office that mandates them.

The current guidance for developing leaders emphasizes the ability to operate comfortably in complex situations. The Army’s Leader Development Strategy asserts that “leaders must recognize that problems do not have predetermined solutions, so leader development must continue to foster creativity at every level.”

However, it does not address the obvious paradox of practical drift. Set policies and procedures in essence reflect predetermined solutions. Practicing logisticians must continue to diagnose situations and, with the knowledge of practical drift, judge when to be carefully and creatively disobedient in the application of those predeterminations.

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