

The Sci-Fi of Force Development and Prospects for Real-Time Adaptation

■ By Christopher R. Paparone and George L. Topic Jr.

The business of predicting the future has always been questionable, from the days of reading animal entrails and consulting oracles to the present day in which we realize we never get it right. Nevertheless, military force management circles experience a strong demand to predict the future, and this has a significant impact on how we plan, program, and use our resources within the Department of Defense.

Long acquisition lead times coupled with surprises in ongoing regional conflicts make it very difficult to make decisions that we know will affect our ability to defend the nation in years to come. This tension is a strategic issue. Our message is that, as logisticians, we should be very wary of adaptations that depend on the unreliable foretelling of the future and instead err on the side of the present.

For decades the U.S. military has relied on creating narratives (often called “futures concepts”), prospecting on how it would have to ready itself, and then spending billions of taxpayer dollars to realize these guesses of our future needs. Examples of such narratives include the Capstone Concept for Joint Operations and the Army Operating Concept. These documents, impossible to update fast enough to keep pace with current events, might be better characterized as science fiction.

We find it perplexing that our institutions on one hand quite reasonably espouse that the future is unknowable and on the other publish an account of circumstances set over a decade from now, especially since that account will drive significant resourcing decisions. Our issue is that by defining our needs based on such accounts, we are going

to be wrong; hence, we are inevitably sponsoring wasteful costs to taxpayers.

We suggest that many of our most successful modern military logistics adaptations are attributable to a timely response to current events rather than a response to unreliable narratives. The fielding of a 1940 prototype of the P51 Mustang (arguably the most effective World War II fighter aircraft) happened just over three months after the signing of its research and development contract.

The creation of the Defense Supply Agency in 1961 was a major organizational change toward efficiency vested in the availability of electronic automation and communication systems that emerged in the late 1950s. More recently, in response to the “long wars” in which we experienced the need to rotate logistics units and headquarters, the Army quickly reorganized its logistics structures in significant ways. The adage “necessity is the mother of invention” seems to be a valuable heuristic argument for effective force development.

So what is a viable alternative to our current approach? We have several recommendations for becoming more flexible in how we organize.

Before settling on a method, we must first embrace the governing organizing principles of near-real-time adaptation. Management writer Warren Bennis referred to this form of organizing as “adhocracy” (also known as network organization). Be an organization that is adaptive to unique situations at hand; do not have preconceived bureaucratic structures.

We need to increase our attention to the present through “postmortem” analysis. We should deliberate about things that are not working and serve

to define the necessity for invention.

We must assume things are more complicated than they seem, so one-way causality is doubtful, as are our existing authoritative categories (such as “doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, and facilities”) and the existing rules that typically frame problems.

We should assume that, in a complex world, what is learned is ephemeral and not to be viewed necessarily as lessons learned or best practices.

We should imagine an organization as an adaptive organism. Consider using biological metaphors and avoid our usual physics, machine, and building analogies when framing problems.

If logistics provides both the “farm” as well as the “market” to “feed” future operations, logistics may work best if shaped by adhocracy values—those that emphasize less bureaucratic, more resilient, networked structures to permit “weathering” of the unexpected “storms.”

Every situation and operation has unique, emergent features that cannot be foreseen in long-range accounts of the future. We need to spend as much effort on developing adaptive organizations as we do on creating adaptive leaders, and long-range forecasts are not required for such initiatives.

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