

Images of the Joint Logistics Enterprise: A Brain

■ By Christopher R. Paparone, Ph.D., and George L. Topic Jr.

We have tried over the last several columns to offer the idea that there is not a single answer to the question, “What is the joint logistics enterprise (JLEnt)?” The JLEnt is perceived best through a number of different, sometimes incommensurate lenses. Thinking about the JLEnt from multiple perspectives not only offers more insightful ways of understanding the JLEnt but also helps to explain its complexity.

No single, definitive authority controls the development of and actions inside of the JLEnt. Like the “invisible hand” that political economist Adam Smith uses to describe how capitalist markets operate, complex logic and probabilistic and opportunistic forces guide enterprise learning. Such learning is a dynamic process that requires logisticians to constantly assess and communicate changes in order to adapt quickly and effectively.

In his book *Images of Organization*, Gareth Morgan discusses the concept of an organization as a “brain,” in other words, a learning system. Morgan states that when organizations face complex and uncertain situations, they can use the brain perspective and these four guidelines to gain an advantage.

First, embrace complex and uncertain situations as normal. Second, permit varying points of view among the members of the enterprise in dealing with these situations. Third, recognize that open-ended inquiry enhances the continual creation and testing of knowledge. Lastly, enhance linkages among members to enhance collaboration and understanding.

The defense logistics community is not always inclined toward these kinds of actions. One way we believe that logisticians can help the JLEnt improve

its “brainpower” is by regularly contributing to the body of knowledge in our field.

Important and insightful books and articles on military logistics have been written, but new ones have become quite scarce in recent years. In “Logistics Evolution: A Comparison of Military and Commercial Logistics Thought,” published in *The International Journal of Logistics Management* in 2012, Stephen M. Rutner, Maria Aviles, and Scott Cox assert that the knowledge discipline has been overtaken by commercial writers in recent years. (See figure 1.)

In a 2013 article published in the *International Journal of Physical Distribution & Logistics Management*, Keenan D. Yoho, Sebastiaan Rietjens, and Peter Tatham report that of 1,150 articles published in the top five logistics journals, only nine were defense related.

Increasingly, the military logistics community is using business-derived logistics science and associated technologies as a source of best practices.

Our concern is that business science analogies (borrowed terms, concepts, and so forth) only go so far in helping national security logistics, especially as we pay billions for business solutions to meet military logistics requirements.

We see little influence of thought and education involving the nexus between commercial activities and the Department of Defense’s concerns about access to strategic raw materials, military industrial base readiness, defense-unique items, and the security of intercontinental lines of communication. As part of the JLEnt’s brain, logisticians need to contribute more to the science of logistics.

Christopher R. Paparone, Ph.D., is a dean at the Army Logistics University at Fort Lee, Virginia.

George L. Topic Jr. is the vice director of the Center for Joint and Strategic Logistics at Fort McNair, Washington, D.C.

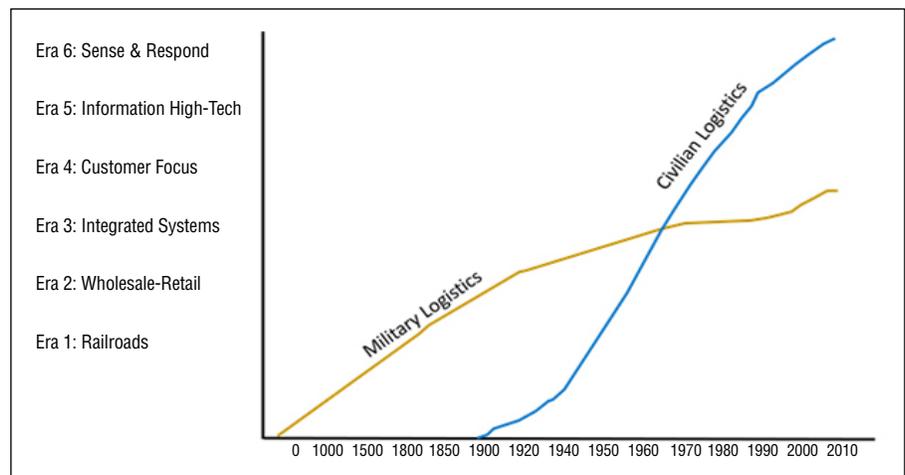


Figure 1. *The relative dominance of thought-leading with respect to “eras of logistics.” (Adapted from “Logistics Evolution: A Comparison of Military and Commercial Logistics Thought,” by Stephen M. Rutner, Maria Aviles, and Scott Cox)*