

The “Clausewitz” of Logistics: Henry E. Eccles

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

The influence of strategists and military theorists ebbs and flows over time based on an array of factors. For example, the seminal work of Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, was relegated to relative obscurity from the late 1800s until the end of the Vietnam War when the U.S. military “discovered” its value. Writings about military logistics, especially from a theoretical perspective, are prone to quickly lose influence and relevance because of changes in technology, operational support concepts, the nature of military operations, and the perceived technical nature of logistics.

We offer that this is not the case with the writings of Navy Rear Adm. Henry E. Eccles.

Eccles enjoyed a long and remarkable career, serving as a line officer in combat against the Japanese during World War II, then as a logistician, a strategic planner, and ultimately a key faculty member of the Naval War College in Rhode Island. After his retirement in 1952, Eccles remained active as a writer, strategist, and supporter of the Naval War College until his death in 1986. Shortly before Eccles’ death, the college named its library in his honor.

Eccles’ ideas have remained relevant through the years and his most important work, *Logistics in the National Defense*, contains insightful frameworks and concepts applicable today. In fact, the book is remarkable for both its scope and its historical references to World War II and Cold War logistics challenges that could be recontextualized for current operations in Afghanistan.

Our short column offers no chance to describe or even summarize the

many important ideas and insights from Eccles’ writings. However, we want to offer an appreciation of some of the ways that his thinking presaged how military logistics would evolve in later decades.

In 1959, *Logistics in the National Defense* was the first significant attempt to describe the relationship of logistics to strategy and tactics. Eccles’ writings illustrate what we call today the operational level of war and outline the complex interrelationships that exist across the government, the services, and the force generating components of the enterprise.

Eccles’ deep and clear understanding of these relationships makes his derivative concepts useful today. The most important aspect of his synthesis is the recognition that all of the relationships combine—and must be managed—to produce the required outcome: effective support to the combat force. Eccles is credited with perhaps the most powerful idea in all of military logistics theory: logistics serves as the bridge between a nation’s economy and its forces and defines the operational reach of the joint force commander.

Eccles also depicted the “spectrum of conflict” relevant enough that it could come out of a freshly printed operational doctrine manual today. One of the most interesting concepts that Eccles developed was the metaphor of “the logistics snowball,” which illustrates that the larger the size of logistics forces forward, the more self-consuming they become. This is the reason that today we seek to keep a small logistics footprint forward. Similarly, his writings described the now-ubiquitous disci-

pline of supply chain management—more than 20 years before the term was first used—as a central aspect of military logistics.

Eccles’ time in the academic community gave him the freedom to develop much of the work and many of the ideas he is known for today. We urge our senior logistics officers to follow this calling. It may well be that some officers’ greatest contributions to our future can be made after they finish their military service.

We ask the logistics community to think about who might be the Henry Eccles of today. It is clear that we will need him or her to face the challenges that await us and, more importantly, the next generation of logisticians in the years ahead.

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Editor’s note: Eccles’ book *Logistics in the National Defense* is available online as *Marine Corps Fleet Marine Force Reference Publication 12-14*, <http://www.marines.mil/Portals/59/Publications/FMFRP%2012-14%20Logistics%20in%20the%20National%20Defense.pdf>.

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