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## PAIN, CONFLICT AND LOGISTICS

By

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As logisticians, we all know what "force structure" is. It is the sum total of resources required to accomplish the mission -- in effect, it's the whole infrastructure we work with -- including, among other things, weapon systems and follow-on support.

But that's not what some people seem to think it is. In fact, more and more, there are those who equate force structure only to airplanes -- and who neglect, in the process, the follow-on support so essential for these systems to have real combat capability. In fact, they fail to understand that a force structure made up of just airplanes alone is not a force structure in reality. It's only a myth -- one which may look good on paper, but one which will not count for much in a war.

My purpose here today is not to argue so much the merits of having follow-on support -- for as logisticians, I would assume substantial agreement already exists among us on that point. What I do want to discuss with you today, however, is why force structure is so often thought of in terms of airplanes alone -- and why follow-on support is so often neglected. And to do that, I first need to talk about conflict and pain -- for they are really at the heart of the problem. In fact, it isn't so much the lack of understanding that blinds people to the need for logistics -- it's the conflict and pain associated with dealing with this reality.

If there's one thing we can all agree on, it's that conflict and pain are inescapable realities of this life. Individuals and organizations alike grow and mature to the extent that they can successfully deal with the many opposing forces surrounding them. Indeed, natural law rewards those who can cope with conflict, and bear the pain that's always been an inherent part of the maturation process.

In its most basic form, survival means dealing effectively with environmental conflicts associated with acquiring shelter and food -- and protecting oneself from one's enemies. But to a great extent, our society has advanced beyond this point. We are now primarily consumers, not producers -- meaning we no longer need bear the burden of making for ourselves the shelter we live in, or the clothes we wear -- we no longer have to find the energy we use, or the food we eat. Someone else does that for us. And to a substantial degree, someone else provides the protection we need from those who would hurt us.

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint of a speech given by General Mullins, Commander, Air Force Logistics Command, to the Society of Logistics Engineers (SOLE) at Dayton, Ohio on 23 March 1984. On 27 September 1984 General Mullins retired from the Air Force following a long and distinguished military career.

But there is something we still must do for ourselves -- and that's agree on what has to be done, and implement the means of actually doing it. Unfortunately, this is where things often come unglued -- because this is where the conflicts of life, and the pain associated with resolving these conflicts usually occur. It's not that we don't agree on the essentials themselves, for in the vast majority of cases we do; and it's not that we don't really recognize how these essentials should be acquired -- because, more often than not, that recognition is present.

The problem is that we can't find a painless way to face up to what needs to be done. In fact, rather than endure the pain, we often find ways to run away from the real issues at hand -- with the result that nothing gets done, and the problems get worse -- even to the point where they can no longer be solved with the resources that are available.

As individuals, we have developed many ways to sidestep the conflicts and pain of life. For example, we often rationalize by casting blame when things go wrong -- thereby avoiding the pain of stepping up to the real problem. How many parents, when their kids don't do well in school, tend to blame the teacher? How many businessmen, when their enterprise fails, tend to blame unfair competition? Or how many law-abiding citizens, when victimized by crime, tend to blame inadequate police protection?

The point is that they rarely focus directly on what could be the real issue -- whether it be limited talent, poor management, or the inherent inclination of man to better himself at the expense of his fellow man. And what invariably and ironically happens, of course, is that the conflict intensifies, the pain gets worse -- and in some cases, the problem becomes unmanageable.

Organizations, like individuals, also tend to skirt conflict and pain. But with groups of people, the most prevalent means does not necessarily involve specialized defense mechanisms like casting blame. Rather, quite frequently, it takes the form of plain old avoidance. For even when we, as individuals, know what's right -- even when we can admit it to ourselves -- we have a difficult time saying it to others, especially in the critical decision-making forums.

What's needed to break out of this mold is, of course, leadership -- which, in my mind, encompasses two things. First, the ability to look at a situation, and see what needs to be done -- in effect, the ability to get at what's really meaningful. And second, the personal and professional integrity to bite the bullet, surface problems for what they are, and get others to formulate and implement real solutions.

The American auto industry of the mid-70s is a good case in point. Just consider that, at the time, this industry was composed of the most experienced and capable people to be found in business anywhere -- the best designers, economists, ops researchers, and marketing specialists -- along with the brightest managers -- and, of course, unequalled physical resources. But there was also a growing discrepancy between the large and inefficient cars this industry was producing, and the new political, economic, and environmental realities which demanded smaller, more efficient vehicles.

Individually the decision-makers of America's auto giants knew what had to be done -- it was obvious. In fact, the Japanese and Germans, more and more, were demonstrating the feasibility of doing it. But even with hundreds of thousands of jobs on the line -- even with billions of investment dollars hanging in the balance -- these decision-makers could not agree to do it. In fact, it took almost a decade before they would finally step forward and lead the way back to competitiveness.

For years, those in the industry wouldn't admit that American designs and products were becoming outdated -- because doing so was just too painful. Yet, ironically, the consequences of not doing so ultimately proved far more painful -- and not just for those in the auto industry, but for virtually the entire American economy.

Now this brings me to Professor Jerry Harvey and the phenomenon he calls the "Abilene Paradox." He coined that name after several members of his family impulsively decided one hot Texas afternoon to make the 100-mile trip to Abilene and back for lunch.

It was a trip that had no real purpose -- a trip that none of the family members individually wanted to make. But it was a trip they went on anyway, because none of the members would take the risk of speaking out beforehand -- none of the members would willingly endure the pain so inherent in being a leader. In fact, it was only after experiencing hours of heat and dust, along with the side effects of a greasy meal in Abilene, that the individuals dared to speak out. But even then they followed the classic pattern of casting blame toward one another for the misery they had senselessly endured.

Simply stated, the Abilene Paradox says that organizations frequently do things contrary to their best interests -- even when the individual members know that what's being done runs counter to all the evidence at hand.

And, as in the case of the American automobile producers of the 1970s, these organizations tend to achieve precisely the opposite result of what they were designed to achieve. Our auto industry was in business to make money -- that's why its manufacturers and dealers existed. But because of its inability to face reality -- because no one was willing to step up to the challenges facing the industry, it wound up losing more money than virtually anyone in the business ever thought possible.

For those of us in the business of defending this nation, however, the Abilene Paradox is an even more sobering concept. Because, to the extent that we ourselves have fallen victim to such pain avoidance phenomena, the capability of the military and the security of this country and the free world has been and is being endangered.

Unlike the American auto industry, the foreign competition we have to face is much more deadly. Indeed, failure of the United States armed forces to face up squarely to the real problems at hand and compete effectively in the international arena would not just mean jobs and money lost -- it would mean the forfeiture of our democratic freedoms and quite possibly an end to the free world's survival.

To effectively cope with the challenges we face, it's first necessary to take a step back -- to realize that the American military is, in many respects, simply a reflection of the people it's charged with protecting. As such, it mirrors both society's strengths and weaknesses. And that's very significant, since any tendency among Americans today to see the "average" as being good enough would not leave the military untouched.

But what are the facts? Has American society been seeking out only the image of superiority? Have we compromised substance and standards, constrained creativity and enthusiasm, confused seniority and quality, and institutionalized an insidious acceptance of mediocrity?

Just take American education as an example. Once the U.S. was in a class by itself when it came to education. It was here the best ideas were born and nurtured -- it was here that the exemplar of public education could be found -- it was here where great universities attracted and challenged the top minds of the world.

What about today? Does mediocrity now characterize our educational system? Many believe that it does, pointing to signs which have been clearly visible for some time now: the steady decline in scholastic aptitude test scores -- a high school dropout rate of 25 percent -- fewer students studying physics, chemistry, and calculus -- and reports that perhaps 30 percent of the 18 year olds in our country are illiterate.

Last May the National Commission on Excellence in Education issued a damning indictment of what we've been doing -- one which claims that we set our standards too low -- effectively putting the U.S. at risk from a rising tide of mediocrity. And just a couple of months ago, a Dallas study found that, compared with other industrialized countries, our youngsters were last in math and nearly last in science.

But is American education the only example of our society's embracing institutionalized mediocrity as a means of avoiding pain and conflict? Or are there more cases where we've been propping up the less capable, and holding back the more capable -- and in the process, blurring those essential distinctions among our people. In fact, have we, as a society, come to more readily accept the mediocre as our standard of success? And like awarding a high school diploma to an illiterate student, have we focused less on achieving excellence -- and more on achieving only the image of excellence?

We've always known that achieving excellence, not just having the image of it, provides the real foundation of our society's great strength. We know that innovation, quality, and productivity are what give this country its real edge in the international arena. And we know that other countries are going all out to become more competitive. Yet, there are pitifully few who speak up -- who step forward and challenge mediocrity when they see it.

As I mentioned earlier, the military has not been untouched by all of this. In fact, in many ways, we've basically followed suit. Like the rest of our society, we've continued with many of our old ways of thinking. Not unlike both the auto industry and education in this country, we've ignored the dynamic changes going on around us -- and although we say all the right

words, we've proven by our past actions that we really haven't faced up to the demands of today's "come as you are" military environment.

In fact, to a disturbing extent, we've fallen into the same trap American education did -- in our case, accepting the image of having combat capability as being good enough. But it would be a superficial image of excellence we'd be pursuing -- unless we have supportable, new weapon systems.

As just one example, think about such front-line weapons as the F-15 in Europe -- just minutes away from hundreds of Soviet fighter bombers. Think about the fact that sustaining this airplane in combat requires support kits with thousands of items -- many highly skilled maintenance personnel -- and elaborate, sophisticated, environmentally-controlled support facilities.

And think about how effective our F-15's will be, with their bases, spares kits, support personnel, and avionics shops under constant aerial bombardment -- possibly even with chemical and biological weapons. And even if these bases were not attacked, what would the effect be of years of inadequate funding for such support items as spares, engines, and repair parts? For even with our increased funding during the past three years, several more years will be required to recover from that neglect. And remember -- without the F-15, there's no air superiority -- without air superiority, there's no airlift -- and without airlift, for us, the war is over.

Scenarios like this convince me that our strategy, tactics, and logistics must be geared to the world as it is today -- to the challenges we may really face, not to those we might hope to face. Yet the cold, hard truth is that our strategy and tactics will only work to the extent that logistics will allow. The weapon systems that make our strategies feasible -- that permit our tactics to be effective -- these systems depend absolutely on logistics support -- on such things as fuel, munitions, spare parts, and maintenance.

That's why, given the reality of modern, rapidly-accelerating, high-intensity warfare -- for our combat forces to be effective -- adequate quantities of all these things to sustain operations until the industrial base can be fired up, must be on hand when the conflict starts.

That's why the pattern of deferring the procurement of requisite logistics support to some later period in order to field weapon systems, or do whatever else it is we might have in mind, just doesn't make good sense anymore. For this pattern was conceived during the period following World War II, at a time when we were intoxicated by a great victory -- when we were taken in by our sense of unlimited power -- when we had been seduced by the conviction that we would always be able to mobilize and win.

That's why we modified this pattern of behavior -- because since then, for us, things have changed. Technology has changed them. International realignment has changed them. And our own neglect has changed them. No longer can we control every resource -- no longer can we exert absolute political, economic, and military influence -- and no longer can we afford to accept the degraded capability of weapon systems which can't be sustained in combat. For too long we've avoided the pain of facing up to this harsh reality -- for too long we've remained silent although we clearly knew better.

The painful fact of the matter is that our current logistics system cannot yet fully support the strategy and tactics we now rely on. High vulnerabilities, long lead-times, extended supply lines, a withered industrial base, immature and outdated weapon system technologies, and inadequate funding -- all these serve to exacerbate the problem of maintaining true combat capability in the modern, military environment.

This is especially true given that "come as you are" reality we must be ready for. Because, if our national security requires us to enter unforeseen conflicts in the far-reaches of the globe -- and if these conflicts do, in fact, grow to very intense levels within hours -- given such a scenario, our present logistics would surely prove inadequate -- especially in terms of sustaining our combat forces.

Without doubt, we in the logistics community must shoulder some of the blame for the situation we find ourselves in today. Because for years now we've collectively advocated the allocation of supplies based on maximizing fill rates, even though it wasn't clear that focusing on fill rates alone would satisfy the most urgent wartime and peacetime requirements.

For years now logisticians have been advocating and allocating maintenance resources based on optimally workloading existing and planned organic maintenance facilities -- even though this would not necessarily maximize the mission-ready status of the inventory.

For years now, we've relied on a hunt-and-find supply system -- one which, given modern realities, might not work reliably in a stressful environment. And we did this even though the high-stress wartime environment is the one place our logistics would have to be reliable.

And for some time now, we've more or less passively accepted reduction in the resources needed to procure goods and services -- even though this would likely result in less-than-optimum return on our investment, and could potentially lead to significant overpricing.

Furthermore, the logistics community, along with everyone else, has acquiesced in repeated decisions to defer the procurement of spares -- and has also, by passive acceptance, been a party to decisions emphasizing other operational parameters at the expense of supportability in weapon system design . . . decisions that would result in higher costs for goods and services -- less ability to maintain these systems in combat -- and, in the final analysis, fewer available systems to provide the combat capability this country must have.

Nevertheless, we've time and again gone along without complaining too loudly. I believe we did this because, like those who have taken other trips to Abilene, we were avoiding the inherent risk of proposing change to the established pattern of doing business.

But frankly, to the credit of the men and women of the logistics community, during the past decade, they have succeeded in doing something which many other communities have not: they're facing up to their shortcomings, and more and more successfully meeting the challenge before us -- that of providing combat capability, not just the image of combat capability.

In fact, what has been happening in logistics is that we have begun to cope with the conflict and pain of getting on track. We've recognized the avoidance symptoms for what they are -- we've freely admitted our role in perpetuating a system that was simply not working -- and we've stepped forward, confronting others with the challenge to do the same.

Within the last year or so, others have also begun to do something about the problem. And that, in my mind, is a landmark achievement for the military and this nation. In fact, we've now embarked on the long, arduous road out of the past -- in effect, laying out the course for the future -- mapping the way to solid logistics support for the defense forces of the United States.

But being on the right track is only a start -- because you can still get run over, even on the right track, if you sit still, or don't move ahead fast enough. And, of course, there is always the danger of backsliding -- returning to the old ways of doing business: putting rubber on the ramp without regard to whether it can be supported or not -- failing to buy the munitions, spares, and piece parts necessary to deter our enemies -- and failing that, to insure that if war does come, we will be able to see it through to victory. And not just "in the POM period," but now, today, this very minute. For we know not the hour or the day -- we know only that we must be ready.

We have always been in agreement that providing combat capability is our one purpose in life -- it's the only reason we, as a defense activity, even exist. But now we, in the logistics community, are realistically facing up to the problem of actually doing what we've always agreed we're here to do. Now we're beginning to collectively use the data available to tell us where we need to go, and what we need to do, to get the job done -- the only really meaningful measure of merit.

New programs to upgrade our command, control, and communications are coming on line -- functions have been reorganized, focusing on theatre war-time taskings, along with the weapon systems to accomplish that tasking . . . all to make sure that, insofar as we are concerned, the resources procured and allocated are those best calculated to achieve our national security goals.

Coping with the environment as it is, not as we would like it to be -- that's what these and other initiatives are all about. For they allow us to carefully assess the risks involved in breaking down the barrier of avoidance -- and, in the final analysis, they give us the wherewithal to do what needs to be done.

Already we're well down the road to a viable, state-of-the-art logistics system. But for us to complete the trip, we need the support of everyone else -- we need to continue working together; sharing the pain of conflict; meeting the challenges head on; and, in the process, preserving peace and freedom for this country and the free world.