

# Civil War Logistics: A Study of Military Transportation

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## Review

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**Hess, Earl J.** *Civil War Logistics: A Study of Military Transportation*. LSU Press, \$45.95 ISBN 9780807167502

The Pentagon dictionary defines logistics as “the science of planning and carrying out the movement and maintenance of forces,” (Department of Defense, *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* [Joint Publication 1-02], 12 April 2001), page 248). It then further qualifies the details as “a. design and development, acquisition, storage, movement, distribution, maintenance, evacuation, and disposition of materiel; b. movement, evacuation, and hospitalization of personnel; c. acquisition or construction, maintenance, operation, and disposition of facilities; and, d. acquisition or furnishing of services.” The army’s official logistics historian James A. Huston preset that broader definition in *Sinews of War; Army Logistics 1775-1953* (Washington, DC, Office of the Chief of Military History, US Army, 1966) admitting that the subject “covers a vast range of subjects” that “one could not hope to cover them all “in a single volume (page vii). Indeed, the perceptive and widely published Civil War historian Earl J. Hess embraces Huston’s latter thought by maintaining logistics is really about military transportation (his subtitle) and that the war can be aptly studied through that lens. Decrying any sterility of the subject (to most people), Hess populates his study with speculative analysis and insightful comments from contemporary practitioners through a variety of original and published sources (although he seems to have missed Huston’s book while citing only a shorter piece by the same scholar). He seems to prefer Steve R. Waddell, *United States Army Logistics: From the American Revolution to 9/11* (Santa Barbara, CA, Praeger Security International, 2010) as an update to Huston.

So, transportation it is as Hess constructs a series of separate essay-chapters on select topics. They include logistical heritage to the centrality of quartermasters in Union and Confederate war efforts. Predictably he addresses river and rail but also, coastal shipping, wagon trains, pack trains plus cattle herds and foot power. He then explores troop transfer operations and enemy interdiction of these various conveyance systems. Some readers will recognize well-treated subjects in Civil War literature like railroads, others not so much (river and coastal shipping) despite their parallel importance. The rest have been hidden in plain view (through either *Official Records* reports and regulations or unofficial memoirs, letters and diaries) but perhaps less synthesized. Hess’s prodigious research and commentary weaves a welcome blend of fascination, utility, and readability. If this is not a book about battles and generals or tactics like his earlier revisionist *Civil War Infantry Tactics* (2015), for instance, Hess seems perfectly comfortable dissecting this absolutely indispensable key to understanding other military aspects of the conflict. His basic point has been understood for some time. The United States

government and its organization, infrastructure, and human managerial capital proved vastly superior to the protean and besieged Confederate resourcing system for waging modern, industrial war. But, Hess, uses transportation as an explanation thus adding to the more familiar body of knowledge on central state structure and functions, philosophical underpinnings of two governmental systems and the critical role of individual leaders from different backgrounds.

Hess like too many Civil War historians seemingly marginalizes the simple fact that the Union enjoyed sanctuary for its journey into the modernity of the industrial age; the Confederacy did not and had to await a New South (with no little help from a victorious north) for doing so. From Lincoln down the chain of command, the Union side displayed both the veracity and the resolution to pursue creative destruction not only of fighting forces but transportation infrastructure as part of the Confederacy's socio/economic fabric for what today would be termed nation-building. Hess tantalizingly broaches that thought in numerous places and one links his more formalistic topical treatment with, say, Yael A. Sternhell's *Routes of War: The World of Movement in the Confederate South* (Harvard, 2012). None of this should discourage us from applauding his essential treatment or regarding it as a stepping stone to Huston's comprehensive treatment of logistics. It definitely belongs in all Civil War libraries. If Hess seems a little thin on the role of gender and ethnicity for modern Civil War studies, he opens an avenue for further exploring America's passage into industrial mobilization for Great Enterprise and Endeavor. Beyond the glare of brass and gleam of bayonets lie seemingly prosaic themes and topics which, when touched by the fire of participants' words and actions, hold rewards for today. Earl Hess proves the task can be rewarding and we await his next foray into the familiar and unfamiliar of Civil War history.

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