

Ready or Not (?)

The Ethics of Time in Preparing for Large Scale Combat Operations: Navigate Chronos Lest We Die

Samuel L. Rico

How do we fight and win Large Scale Combat Operations (LSCO)? We must build readiness. Without readiness our Armed Forces will fail to fight and win. But the very notion of readiness itself begs this question: What do leaders mean when they say our number one priority is “readiness”? Many layers of linguistic substrata exist within the “readiness” continuum. For instance, to build readiness and project combat power, what must the Army must manage, plan, and execute, in order to dominate our adversaries? While higher echelons clarify what “readiness” entails, I argue that we must devote ourselves to a more pressing planning factor: Time.

In a monthly message to the DoD, the Secretary of Defense, Patrick Shanahan, stated the DoD completed their “first full financial statement.”¹ According to the Secretary of Defense, the extensive audit supported the main line of effort within the National Defense Strategy: Enhance the lethality of the Joint Force.² While proper resource management maintains a vital role for increasing the military’s lethality, time is, (as they say), of the essence. Resources stitch the fabric of military operations, and time is the seamstress.

Chronos (Not on Our Side)

*Time in his avarice steals so much away:
Men call it Fame; 'tis but a second death,
And both alike are strong beyond defense.
Thus doth Time triumph over the world and Fame.*

—Petrarch *from* Triumph of Time³

Generally understood, we operate in three dimensions, composed of length, width, and depth. Some physicists envision a fourth dimension: time. Time, the unseen and yet utterly inescapable dimension, binds us and confines us. Time sets a pure linear course outside of human convention or intervention. Time has no allies or foes. It devours all equally. The Ancient Greeks appear to have envisaged time in this regard. Greek mythology personified Time as the god Chronos. Chronos was not man’s friend. In some versions of the Greek mythos, he ate his children. The ancient Greek writer Petrarch captures Chronos’s consuming and eroding nature, when avers, “Time doth triumph over the world and fame.” In such a schema, the immediate implication of Time was constraint and consumption, not liberty. The Army doctrine publication *The Operations Process* shares a fraternal connection to Greek mythology’s notion of time when it cautiously remarks, “The defining challenges to effective [military] planning are uncertainty and time.”⁴

The Greeks did not construe Time as a resource. Chronos was not something to be managed, but something to be dreaded. (Time may have been on the side of Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones, but the Greeks were more cautious and realistic.) Time was not on their side. It was against them. One had to make the most of

one's finite amount of time, and this did not necessarily imply that one must do as much as they could in one day. The ancient Greek personification of Time may benefit us. They would beckon that we understand "time" as a persistent constraint, rather than a resource.

In addition to time, leaders state that Soldiers and funding are our most valuable resources. The latter two are a resource, in the sense that the U.S. government procures and manages them. For instance, when the DoD requests more funding and more Soldiers, congress may or may not approve these requests. Time, however, stands alone. We cannot submit a line item to buy more time, nor can we legislate a 25th hour addendum to the clock. Time wrests itself free from the will of the State. We cannot manage time, it forces its will upon us. Accordingly, "time management" is a misnomer. Rather than contemplating time as a resource to manage, commanders and staffs must consider time as a persistent limitation that we must navigate. We cannot control time, it controls us.

Understanding time as an independent force, rather than a resource, allows planners to recalibrate expectations for what units accomplish within their allotted time. Given the Armed Forces' overextended state of resources and personnel, it is time to embrace a paradigm shift about time. For, if we strain to accomplish everything well, we may well accomplish nothing at all. The more commanders try to defy time constraints, the more time will set its will to devour. The Armed Forces should avoid factoring time as a resource, instead we should envision time as a constant constraint and limitation. Commanders and staffs often fall prey to the illusion that time is their resource. No plan occurs in a vacuum, and therefore we cannot underestimate the governance of time.

Is Our Use of Time an Ethical Issue?

Given the stakes of what our military stands for, namely, the interests of American people, how we navigate and use our time is, by implication, an ethical issue. How we steward our time is commensurate with how we remain accountable to those who depend upon us to fight and win. Given the complex world we live in, and the potential for singular catastrophic attacks that adversaries may deliver, we must steward our time well to be ready and lethal.

The ethics of artificial intelligence in LSCO, trans-human discussions, and warfare in megacities, potentially prods curiosity more than discussing the ethics of time. However, I believe the ethics of time transcends all others. For, winning requires lethality, and lethality requires readiness. Readiness requires training, and training requires time. In light of the gravity of our mission, time is more than a mission or operational variable. The interests of the American people hinge on whether or not the DoD views its use of time as an ethical issue.

In talking tactical operations center reality, Army training development often pays lip-service to time. For subordinate echelons to organize and resource training, Army doctrine requires locking in a six-week training calendar. However, higher echelons often (either out of necessity or trying to do too much) inject short suspenses, which derail six week calendars. Additionally, Army planning doctrine promotes the 1/3-2/3 rule as it applies to the time commanders and staff should give units, in order to ensure that subordinate units have sufficient time to conduct Troop Leading Procedures. Unfortunately, most leaders and staffs call the 1/3-2/3 ratio a myth. The degree to which we neglect such doctrinal standards, we both disrupt our ethics and erode our integrity before the America people.

Time to Train: Are We Ready?

Are we ready to conduct Large Scale Combat Operations? Significant voices answer no. the Army Times recently referenced a National Defense Strategy Commission's specter of LSCO if the U.S. Military faced a near-peer: "If the United States had to fight Russia in a Baltic contingency or China in a war over Taiwan, Americans could face a decisive defeat."⁵ We may be tempted to argue that such comments are simply

attempts to procure funds for the Armed Forces. Perhaps the authors employed language of “if” and “could” to scare money their way? The procuring money hypothesis may have a hue of validity, until we observe that “a congressionally mandated, bi-partisan review” formulated the grim analysis.

In order to be ready, we must be well trained. Being well trained requires vigilant efforts directed at prioritizing the time. The Secretary of the Army (the Honorable Mark Esper) has rolled out many Army Directives to reduce training requirements to prioritize readiness and lethality. The Reducing Requirements on Brigade and Below initiative suggests the Army wrestles over the ethics of prioritizing time, so that we will be ready to fight and win the nation’s wars. Are leaders acting upon the Secretary of the Army’s golden opportunity to reduce requirements listed in the Directives? The degree to which we reduce requirements correlates to the degree we adhere to the intent behind these Directives, namely, to prioritize lethality. If we fail to reduce requirements, we will rob units’ time to train lethality. If we do not navigate time, we will train a sub-lethal force that is not ready.

Does compliance to complete all Army Regulation 350-1 *Army Training and Leader Development* (AR 350-1) tasks (and other such training requirements) prepare us for LSCO? Are we truly prepared to meet our enemies where they might have overmatch on us? Field Manual 3-0 *Operations* (FM 3-0) states that in some domains of battle the enemy is equal to, and in some cases, superior to our capabilities.⁶ As noted earlier, ethical inquiries such as artificial intelligence on the battlefield and bio-enhancement are no doubt interesting, but they remain of secondary importance if we are not “ready” to fight. Our greatest risk to increasing readiness for LSCO is ultimately not the enemy, but ourselves, and our commanders’ ability to be bold, assume risk, reduce requirements, and prioritize training that makes our Army more lethal (i.e., ready to win).

Even the four characteristics of the offensive, namely, surprise, audacity, concentration, and tempo all operate within the overarching control measure of time. Time and LSCO do not honor bureaucracy. They will not wait for an Operational Needs Statement to acquire a resource. The threat of LSCO faces us and snorts, “Ready or Not (?)” We must ready, and we must be lethal. To build readiness and maximize lethality, we must continually conduct thorough reviews of our training and administrative requirements. Baldly put, it is time we overhaul our training requirements and administrative processes.

Time to Calibrate Training and Administrative Requirements

Years ago I spoke with a First Sergeant at Fort Leonard Wood about the monthly requirements that piled on us like a landslide. Shaking his head, he mused, “Chaplain, just give me a Soldier who can do physical training and fire his weapon, and I’ll win your wars.” If we do not take a hard look to see ourselves, we may be overlooking a serious insider threat: the adversary of training and administrative requirements. Cutting programs and streamlining the flood of administrative paperwork and logistic processes could free up millions, if not billions, of dollars.⁷ These monies could then be funneled to new equipment, updated facilities, and perhaps the most inspiring of them all, Soldier pay-raises commensurate with the Employment Cost Index.⁸

Calibrating requirement inspires Soldiers, because they will have ample time to train and recover. Commanders must exercise the mission command principle “accept prudent risk.” Leaders ought to take a hard look at requirements and ask, “Will this task get us ready to deploy, engage, and destroy the enemy in close combat?” In order to leverage time and consolidate gains on future battlefields, which are complex, contested, and congested, we must not allow an unmanageable body count in combat to trigger our efforts to prioritize requirements. Prioritization needs to begin at home; it begins with training and recovery. If leaders do not submit to time, LSCO will be won by attrition rather than commanders driving the operations process.

A few years ago, in private confab with an agile, smart, and seasoned Field Grade Officer, he gazed pensively at the wall and said, “Chaplain, we are not ready to fight.” I couldn’t say that I disagreed with him. His statement broke my heart. I watched the staff work hard to develop products amidst a steady barrage of short suspenses. They worked tirelessly, sacrificing time away from loved ones and much needed rest. While we can be tempted to keep pushing, continuing to drive a car on a flat tire will destroy the wheel beyond repair. Running on a broken leg might be tough, but it turns the Soldiers into rubble.

Streamlining tasks and actually maintaining fidelity to a priority list will take effort. The mounting requirements strain company level echelons to lock in a six-week training plan. Leaders must provide subordinates predictability, and they must ensure that Soldiers have task and purpose. If higher echelons regularly drop short suspenses upon lower echelons, the subordinate echelons unlearn the value of planning. At best they will plan, but they will be cynical about planning. At worst, they will lose the will to plan effectively. Superiors lose the trust of their subordinates, when subordinates spend significant effort planning only to have higher consistently render their planning ineffective beyond 48 hours meaning much needed training and coordination suffer.

Ask any company commander about their thoughts on the six-week training plan, and they’ll snicker that it is a thing of legend. We live in a dynamic and complex world that forces us to reorient our plans. Yet this should not preclude leaders from seriously striving to protect subordinate units’ training plans. While it is true that any changes within our dynamic and complex world alter military plans, the impacts may affect one dimension or level of war greater than others. Such impacts should not inherently entail changes to lower echelon calendars unless it directly affects the unit or the unit’s mission.

Army Times recently published a foreboding article, which probed the ethical state of Special Forces. In the article, Greg Walker comments that Operators, “don’t get the time to decompress, they don’t get the time to heal up from whatever injuries that are not anything that puts them in a hospital.”⁹ Walker continued, “the demands on the force overran attempts to address individual troops.”¹⁰ This notion applies to the military at large, and especially the Army.

FM 3-0 avers that “Large-scale combat operations are intense, lethal, and brutal. Their conditions include complexity, chaos, fear, violence, fatigue, and uncertainty.”¹¹ Preparing for modern battles demands that we be utterly lethal. Preparing for brutality requires that we be strong. Instead, many units’ qualification status is sloppy, and Soldiers are not strong. They are strung out. If we attempt everything, we will succeed at nothing.

Time Constrains Leader Development

Lieutenant General Michael Lundy states, “Doctrine is only one factor in how we fight. Of greater importance is our training and leader development.”¹² If our aim to win LSCO decisively requires leadership, we must grant leader’s time to execute immersive leader development plans. However, just about every leader can relate to this scenario: staring at the blue number of unread emails in parentheses adjacent to their inbox, they sigh, “I don’t have time for all this.” Unfortunately, if leaders scarcely have the time to clean out their inbox, how much time do they have to implement a quality and effective leader development program?

Current requirements have massed effects and have clogged our efficiency. The current slog of training and administrative molasses muddles leaders’ efforts like wagons driving through the mud of the Civil War. Similarly, leaders may become so ground in the mire of requirements, we leave them little white space to develop robust leader development programs. And yet, pursuant to Army doctrine the success of LSCO hinges upon leadership.

Military leadership also requires character development. In the midst of a complex extended Operational Environment, which is brutal, intense, and lethal, the actions of leaders of character will be paramount to maintain the trust of the American people (Army Doctrine Reference Publication 1 *The Army Profession*; Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-22 *Army Leadership*). The bloodshed in LSCO of the 21st century will most likely exceed that of WWI. In essence, the amount of bloodshed will be inconceivable given modern weapon capabilities, speed, timing, and accuracy. As it stands, units wage war against a torrent of requirements just to get after their Mission Essential Task List tasks, much less a block of instruction on character development.

Commands and staffs conducting Army Design Methodology during a training exercise may present a level of stress when problem framing the effects of displaced people and the dead. But when commanders and staffs confront real world factors such as, destroyed brigades alongside tens of thousands of dead Soldiers and civilians, such iterations of the operations process will look and feel markedly different than planning during a Combat Training Center exercise. In those moments our nation and the world need leaders possessed of impeccable moral character.¹³

“All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.”

Stephen King’s Jack Torrance set out for a noble enough purpose: to write a play. At some point, the arduous work required to write a play drove Jack to madness. (His moral decline made cinematic history). In fear of stretching the analogy too far, a modern military proverb might read, “All work and no white space makes leaders bad boys at play.” Subsequently, when we misuse time and cram requirements in the calendar like stuffing a week’s worth of clothes in luggage meant for a day, a sobering reality has emerged amongst our leaders’ character: ethical and moral failure. In the past decade the Armed Forces has witnessed an unprecedented rise in the ethical disintegration of its senior leaders. The amount of time it takes to meet mission requirements forces leaders to spend inordinate time away from their families, and lowers the threshold for mistakes made due to various types of fatigue.

Ready or Not, it is Time to Stop “Lying to Ourselves”

The article “Lying to Ourselves” unearthed the “ethical fading” that misted over leaders under the “deluge of mandatory training requirements”?¹⁴ And yet, what lasting impact did it have upon how the Army manages training and administrative requirements? For instance, do we really need *annual* Cyber Awareness training, *annual* Managing People with Security Clearances, or *annual* Equal Opportunity training? Is there any way to measure their effectiveness? Are the yearly and quarterly Sexual Harassment/Assault Response & Prevention requirements building the ethics of the Army? Rather than add layers of porous “preventive” techniques, we need to leverage the tools we have (e.g., Uniform Code of Military Justice exists to maintain good order and discipline).

Consider the stumbling pace of our administrative processes. Think of submitting awards 120 days out from their presentation date, and the multi-page pamphlet that is the leave packet. The latest administrative system (i.e., GEARS) may someday help us consolidate gains by way of time, but for now administrative delays grind commanders and staffs. Unfortunately, our misuse of time has extended to military ceremony as well. For instance, one morning I was riding my bike back to the office after physical training, and I noticed enlisted Soldiers standing at the ready in ascots. When I asked what they were doing, someone informed me they were rehearsing for a Command Sergeant Major’s change of responsibility. Soldiers bundled in ascots for a Change of Responsibility—is that an efficient use of a Soldier’s time?

Regarding the deleterious effects of requirements, by way of analogy, John Bolton says it best when he argues that Mission Command systems inhibit Mission Command. He quips, “Our system promises simplicity but delivers staff-crushing complexity.”¹⁵ Current training and administrative requirements have

exceed flood stage. An officer once said to me, the Army is good at adding one to two requirements per year, but never takes any way.” As Bolton also avows, “Rather than creating dilemmas for the enemy, we often create them for ourselves instead.”

How about the Officer Evaluation Report writing process? The pseudo-Freedom of Information Act word-on-the-street states that board members scan an officer’s file in 2-4 minutes. The eyes of each board member will scan each Officer Evaluation Report for a minute. So why must we spend 10-15 hours of our lives crafting an Officer Evaluation Report support form, when only a portion will appear on the final Officer Evaluation Report. Moreover, what is the point when rumor has it that board members look at the Department of the Army photo, and then they scan left to quantify Most Qualified-Highly Qualified ratios?

A few years ago, in a Subway line at a mini-Post Exchange, the TV flashed scenes of ISIS soldiers dressed in black climbing ropes and conducting weapons training. At the time, ISIS had just begun their campaign of brutalizing and beheading. I turned to a Specialist next to me, and nodding my head towards the TV, I asked him what he thought. In a sober tone, he said, “I don’t know. It’s going to be rough facing them. Seeing them jump over those logs and stuff, they look ready.”

We need to scale the requirements down and focus on lethality. It should matter little what caliber of enemy our Soldiers see on the screen, they need to be confident they can and will kill and defeat any enemy in close combat. Army leadership needs to ensure that happens. Slides, colors, and metrics do not measure the will to fight; indeed they cannot. They cannot measure boldness in battle. Let us hope the true test of our readiness does not come in the midst of battle.

How do we build resilient Soldiers? Give them a consistent calendar. Give them time to conduct their warrior tasks and drills. Ensure they have requisite time to rest. What has happened to our organizations when staff cannot even qualify on their weapons a mere two times a year? And why can’t they qualify?— They don’t have time. Meanwhile, they lurch in their chairs beautifying a story board or power point slide, all the while developing carpal tunnel with bones ossifying in place.

Exercises with partners are essential, but if they become too time consuming and fail to build real capabilities for us and our partners, they are not worth defeat. The accomplishments of higher echelon’s bulleted in Officer Evaluation Reports may be necessary for promotions, but they are not worth the death of Soldiers. Career advancement is necessary, but it is not worth the disintegration of the interests of the American people if we are not ready to fight and win their wars.

Conclusion

Time management is a misnomer. We do not manage Time, he manages us. At best, we navigate Time. In our running estimates and in the quadrant of every quad chart, under constraints and limitations, we would do well to put time on every slide. The Honorable Mark Esper has given us a gift: reduce requirements. It is time to overhaul training and administrative requirements. If we do not, the dreaded Chronos will steal American’s sons and daughters as well as her way of life. It is time to prioritize. It is time not to just realign programs and reduce requirements, it’s time to gut them.

Why do commanders hesitate to reduce requirements? No doubt commanders want to make sure Soldiers are ready. But, it may be that an anxiety broods over them that if “accept prudent risk” and reduce (too many) requirements, they jeopardize their careers if they did not turn all the red bubbles green. Fear of reducing requirements, equals failing to maximize lethality. As Chaplain (Major) Bailey averred, “Fear is the foundation of failure. Of all the principles of mission command, perhaps “accept prudent risk” reigns as the pinnacle of command. Commanders must accept they do not have time to do everything. The Army must navigate Chronos lest we die. Overhauling training and administrative requirements is risky business, but it will be business well-risked insofar as it makes our Soldiers resilient and lethal.

When a Soldier finds himself or herself immersed in trench warfare, or positioned in a defense in depth, or poised to assault, it will matter little if they are green on 350-1 training. But, it will matter immensely that he or she fires their weapon precisely and accurately, and if necessary, boldly take a bullet. We must identify that leveraging time is not simply a mission or operational variable. To seize the initiative, the Army must rethink not only what, but also how, it prioritizes. This begins by recognizing that navigating time is an ethical issue. Only when Army leaderships submits to the constraints of time, will it truly be ready. Constrained by time, let us not wait for the enemy to make us prioritize our efforts. We owe it to our Soldiers, we owe it the American people, and we owe it our posterity. Ready or not (?).

End Notes

- 1 Secretary of Defense, Patrick Shanahan, “November Monthly Message to the DoD,” email Newsletter, November 30, 2018, 4:25PM.
- 2 Ibid. See also General Miley’s six modernization priorities, one is “Soldier Lethality.” This study asserts that our use of time directly relates to increasing Soldier Lethality (i.e., training our Soldiers’ lethal capability takes time).
- 3 David Auerback citing Petrarach’s “Triumph of Time,” at <https://www.waggish.org/2013/father-time-chronos-and-kronos>, accessed March 19, 2019.
- 4 ADRP 5-0, para. 2-11.
- 5 National Defense Strategy Commission, Nov. 14, 2018 in “The Army Times,” 20, December 3, 2018.
- 6 FM 3-0, forward.
- 7 An analysis detailing what requirements the Army should overhaul exceeds the scope of this article’s thesis. However, a few the Army might consider eliminating (or scale back) are Master Resiliency Training (MRT), the Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST), and the Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness program (CSF2). While these programs have noble ends, little quantitative data exists to measure the effectiveness or performance of these programs (i.e., have they improved Soldier and Family readiness?).
- 8 See “Military Pay Chart 2020, <https://www.navycs.com/charts/2020-military-pay-chart.html>, accessed March 19, 2019: “The releasing of the ECI by the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics is an eagerly awaited quarterly economic indicator for those in the stock market and politics; but what makes this morning’s release important to our military is that it is the first indicator used to determine the actual pay raise amount for 2020. For 2020, unless a separate action is taken by President Trump or Congress, the statutory pay raise would be 3.1 percent based on law indicated in U.S.C. Title 37, Chapter 19, § 1009.”
- 9 SFC (Ret.) Greg Walker in “The Army Times,” March 18, 2019, 17.
- 10 Ibid., 19.
- 11 FM 3-0, para. 1-4.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 See ADP 6-22, 1.
- 14 See “Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession” Stephen J. Gerras and Leonard Wong, *U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute* (February 2015), which discusses the universal acceptance of the Army as an organization lying about how it completes requirements, even in the face of logic that maintains there is literally not enough time to actually complete all that we say we do. And yet, despite the lying and the knowns of the persistent lying, the Army has yet to change its behavioral pattern of lying.
- 15 John Bolton, “Overkill: Army Mission Command Systems Inhibit Mission Command,” in *Small Wars Journal*, August 29, 2017, 5.