

# Getting Off the Treadmill of Time

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PHOTO: (U.S. Army, SGT Travis Zielinski)

*If the new norm is Army force generation and cyclical deployments, then it's time for our 70-year-old promotion system to adapt to support that new norm.*

—General Martin Dempsey<sup>1</sup>

IT WOULD BE easy today to imagine an officer uttering something like this: “I really want that assignment, but I won’t have time to do it and my key developmental job, too, without putting myself at risk for promotion.” Or, as a friend once put it, talking to his training officer about the newly enacted Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986, “We’re gonna have to get passed over in order to have time to do all this.” How often have you heard similar words when it comes to officer careers and assignments?

Given the ubiquity of such observations, it may be time for the Army to stop working around the margins and seriously review, then revise, the officer promotion system, specifically, eligibility. Growing sentiment in the field suggests that officers desire to expand their horizons by taking jobs not specific to their branch, such as in training with industry; Joint, interagency, intergovernmental, multi-national assignments; recruiting; army staff; or pursuing a graduate degree and teaching at West Point, because they recognize the value such developmental assignments provide. Many consciously seek such jobs fully aware of a possible negative impact on promotion potential. While serving in developmental positions will create the well-rounded leader the Army needs, how does the Army slow down the treadmill to allow these officers the time for these assignments? We must revisit how we promote our officers in order to guarantee that our system produces the type of leaders needed to succeed in the future operational environment.

The 2009 *Quadrennial Defense Review* specifically outlined the need for force flexibility in the face of 21st-century global threats. Traditionally, our Army culture values and rewards those junior leaders who have extensive amounts of time in the tactical arena. Such positions are key to the development of great tactical commanders. In this changing world, however, our senior leadership, both military and civilian, recognizes that education and broadening experiences are instrumental to developing imaginative operational and strategic leaders, those who will master the emerging complexities. So how do we get an army with over 200 years of culture and tradition to change? Answer: make it mandatory.

**We must...become less subservient to this tyrant called time.**

All officers step onto the “treadmill of time” upon initial entry. Under our current system, they must meet fixed promotion gates without consideration for true professional development. Progressive rank comes in those precious years between fixed promotions. Our officers must try to balance professional growth and broadening and key developmental assignments, while maintaining their families’ and personal sanity. Myriad factors that affect their career timeline are multiple deployments of varying durations, structural growth, technology, law, policy, and our own Army culture. We must infuse flexibility into our promotion system and become less subservient to the tyrant of time.

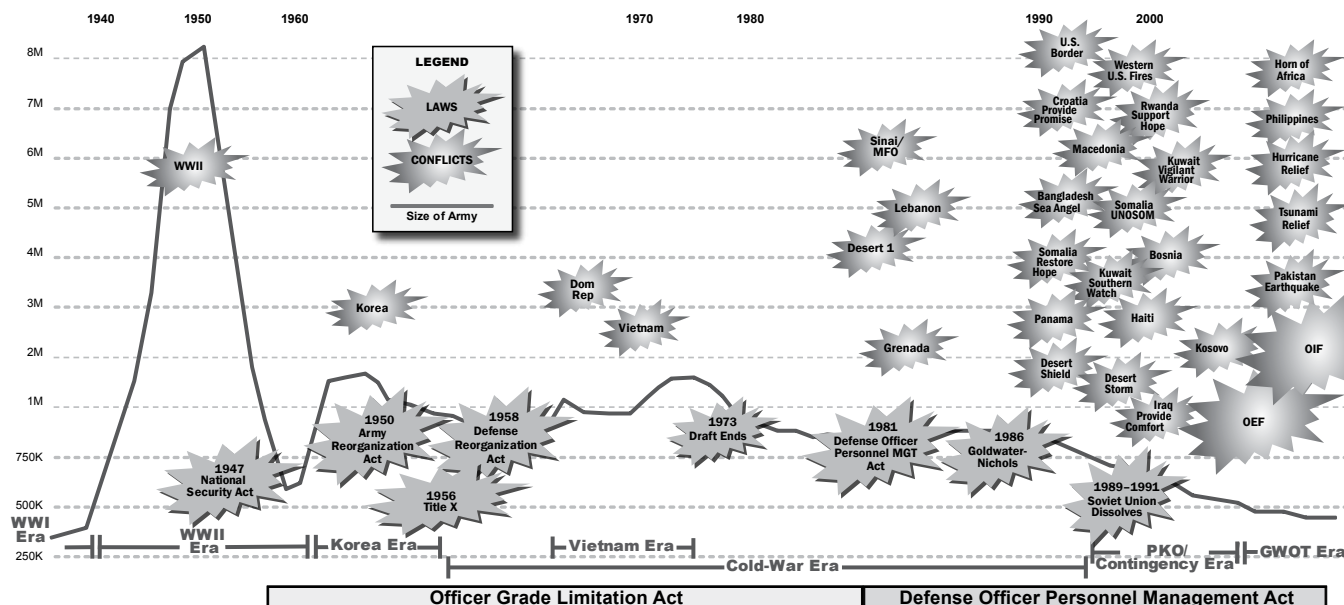
**How Did We Get Here?**

To really understand how we arrived at this juncture, we need a quick review of history. Title 10 of the United States Code contains the general and permanent laws for today’s military. Dating back as far as the Civil War, the laws that govern the management of officers have only been amended a handful of times. Title 10 codifies the few legal documents existing prior to 1956 that regulate the services, and the details pertaining to promotion have changed little since its enactment. An officer’s

career timeline is prescriptive; the gates to meet to receive a promotion have remained virtually unchanged for the last 60-plus years.

During the Civil War (1861–1865), officers obtained promotions only within their regiments, creating a top-heavy service. Approximately 80 years later, in 1947, the Officer Personnel Act attempted to correct these promotion practices by imposing what we now know as “up or out.” The term “up” established that the Army track officers by years of service, and officers competed for promotion to the next higher grade against members at the same set service years. Conversely, “out” applied to those passed over twice for promotion to the next grade and, after a certain number of years, depending upon their particular grade, separated and retired, if eligible. The Officer Grade Limitation Act of 1954 imposed statutory limitations on the number of regular and reserve officers who could serve in the grades of major and above. Title 10, U.S. Code, combined all laws then in existence that were permanent and of general applicability to the armed forces, thereby incorporating the Officer Personnel Act and the Officer Grade Limitation Act.

Jumping forward 30 years to 1980, the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act and the Reserve



**Factors affecting Officer Professional Development System.**

Officer Personnel Management Act addressed how the military should train, appoint, promote, and retire its officers. The act's core "up-or-out" promotion system directed that officers would move through the system in "cohorts/year groups," originally determined by the year of commissioning, and compete for promotion to the next higher grade against other members of their cohort. The processes prescribed were constrained to the limited computing power of the day. Inevitably, time and the need to meet specific gates for promotion became the driving factors in an officer's career timeline.

While the laws were sufficient during a time of peace with relatively fixed assignment patterns, their lack of flexibility hinders our current Army's ability to balance increasing professional developmental demands with maintaining a continuously deployed force.

The implementation of Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 was another watershed event (stemming from problems with inter-service cooperation and interoperability during Operation Urgent Fury in October 1983). The services were hesitant to embrace a joint military culture, so Congress forced the issue by holding them accountable to fill a specific number of "Joint" positions. This resulted in specific training in the service schools, establishing accountability through annual reports back to Congress, and certification boards and requirements for general officers, all intended to force interoperability. The services did it. Twenty years later, we are comfortable with Joint operations. But we only did it because Congress made it mandatory.

## So Where Are We Now?

*We're trying to jam too much into a 20-year career. Officers enter the Army with a year group tattooed permanently on their arm. The Army creates this artificial timeline; they have a shot clock ticking on them . . .*

—Lieutenant General David P. Valcourt<sup>2</sup>

Our era of high operational tempo is producing a generation of exceptionally talented tactical leaders, but this has come at the expense of broadening assignments and education, resulting in officers who lack the skills and education required to be

more effective leaders in an increasingly complex strategic environment.

A retired senior leader recently referred to a picture of the Army mule as he spoke to a group of students at Fort Leavenworth. "See this donkey?" he said, echoing and paraphrasing Frederick the Great's famous remark about relying on experience alone: "He has been to every conflict, but he is still a jackass."<sup>3</sup> The point was and is that there is no substitute for education. You cannot make up for the lack of such experience with deployments. The Army recognizes the importance of education and broadening assignments, but in our system, these opportunities are not mandatory. So, what is mandatory for promotion? Surprisingly little. Our officers only have to complete an officer basic course and obtain a bachelor's degree to become a captain. The next *legal* requirements are three years' time in grade for major or lieutenant colonel, Joint Professional Military Education Level 1 (JPME 1) to attend Senior Service College as a colonel, and JPME 2 to obtain the rank of general officer. Our Army culture dictates everything else.

We have been reluctant to codify any additional requirements to avoid disadvantaging anyone. Instead, we have relied upon the culture of the board process to communicate the importance of education and broadening experiences. In the past, when promotion rates were lower, this approach worked. Then deployments became more frequent and longer, and promotion rates increased to support structural growth. Well-meaning commanders in deploying brigade combat teams extended officers serving in key developmental positions through deployment and unit reset. In some cases, officers were held "hostage" in positions for multiple rotations with the same unit, delaying educational and other developmental opportunities. Because education and broadening experiences were not mandatory, they became unimportant. Our culture fulfilled the immediate requirements and rewarded those with the most deployment experience: now the Army may suffer for this.

The Department of Defense recognizes a need to fix the promotion system. In November 2008, in a report to Congress backed by the Commission on the National Guard and Reserve,

***We're trying to jam too much into a 20-year career.***

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates directed service secretaries to determine the requirements to implement a more flexible promotion system based on the achievement of competencies (knowledge, skills, and abilities).

Clearly, the Army values more deployment experience and places priority of fill to deploying units even at the expense of the generating force itself. For the first time, promotion boards are telling us we as an Army are promoting tactical colonels. We recognize that education and broadening experiences bring balance to the development of the officer and the institution as a whole, but this is not a priority. Our cultural mind-set continues to be “if it’s not mandatory, it’s not important.”

We cannot accomplish all that we need to do inside of our fixed promotion timelines. We have to create some space; otherwise, the institution itself is going to break. There is a way to incorporate all that we desire in our future leaders by adjusting the time treadmill.

## Building a Better Treadmill

*The Army’s officer management system must be flexible, responsive, and focused on developing officers with functionally relevant competencies to meet the needs of the Army and Nation throughout the 21st Century.*<sup>4</sup>

—AR 600-3

There is no low-hanging fruit when it comes to adjusting the promotion system. This is hard work and will require the Army to utilize numerous levels of government simultaneously. We propose the following for consideration and as a point of departure:

**Legislation.** Deliver to Congress a set of proposed modifications that will add flexibility in the promotion timeline. We need to move away from a rigid to a flexible time-based promotion system that will allow the achievement of competencies while still maintaining the goodness in “up or out.”

We will always select officers for promotion based upon performance and potential. This won’t ever change. Thus, to achieve flexibility in timing, the focus must be on promotion *eligibility*, moving away from time-based eligibility to achievement-based eligibility.

We propose a system similar to obtaining a college degree. In order to obtain a degree, regardless

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of the field, there are always core courses and electives. What is important is obtaining the degree, not the time it took to complete it. For example, most people complete a bachelor’s degree in four years. Some high achievers can do it in three, while others, due to various circumstances, may take five to seven years. If it goes out to eight, dad or someone is probably going to cut off the money.

Let’s see how this same approach could apply to officer promotions. For example, to attain the rank of major, the “core” requirements could be completion of the captain’s career course, successful completion of a key developmental assignment in accordance with Department of Army (DA) Pamphlet 600-3, and, as an “elective,” a minimum of one year in an institutional assignment. Upon completion of these assignments, you can become eligible for promotion to major. It could take three years, or it could take seven, the flexibility is yours. For a lieutenant colonel, the “core” class could be completion of Intermediate-Level Education, 24 months of key developmental time in accordance with DA Pamphlet 600-3, and, as an “elective,” at least one joint, interagency, intergovernmental, or multi-national assignment. It will finally afford officers more time to achieve personal, education, and developmental goals. This effectively forces the Army to ensure that its officers do what it requires them to do to become effective leaders, while giving them the time to develop the competencies the Army desires in its most-senior leaders.

**Army policy changes.** The Army reacts to the results of promotion and selection boards. To create the desired change at senior level boards (colonel and colonel command selection), retired senior leaders recommend that an extra day be added to the boards. A day for briefings by nationally recognized futurists and strategists, about the world environment 10 to 15 years from now and the type of leader that can operate effectively in that environment. The intent is to inform the board members about

what type of officer is required for the future. This may require a legal hurdle, as it may be considered an undue influence on the board. We need to work through such potential legal issues to ensure that we are selecting the right leadership for the future.

**Evaluation.** The Army should leverage technology to better manage our talent and thus move away from the antiquated approach of year group management. Commissioning an independent research project to evaluate this proposed approach to statistically validate its feasibility and search for and assess any potential impact (e.g., longer careers) might influence its desirability one way or the other.

**Career intermission.** The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2009 instituted a pilot program that stops or pauses an officer's career timeline; the Navy refers to this as an "off ramp." This provides an opportunity for a sabbatical. This one- or two-year time away with no impact on an officer's career allows for child bearing or caring for an immediate family member, in addition to taking advantage of other opportunities. The Canadian Army does this as well. We recommend that the U.S. Army immediately write and implement policy to support this program.

## For Its Own Good

The Army should seek congressional support to move from a time-based promotion system and implement a system that ties eligibility to individual competency development. This effort will affect the institution on several levels and thus will not happen overnight. There is too much cultural

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baggage associated with maximizing troop time to overcome the inertia of the status quo.

In spite of its cultural tendencies, the Army, in time, can and will build a solid bench of officers with the requisite skills needed for the future. As the system moves away from time-based eligibility, it will finally afford officers more time to achieve personal, educational, and developmental goals.

Many officers fear taking a broadening assignment because they run the risk of the Army passing them over for promotion. They fear that, because they did not complete a key developmental assignment in a timely fashion, they will not be competitive. We can fix this problem by adjusting the speed on the treadmill of time. These adjustments will allow new generations of officers to have more say in their career development and management and further support an all-volunteer Army. **MR**

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### NOTES

1. General Martin E. Dempsey, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command.
2. Lieutenant General David P. Valcourt, Deputy Commanding General and Chief of Staff, United States Army Training and Doctrine Command.
3. "A mule may have made ten campaigns under Prince Eugene and not be a better tactician for all that." *Frederick the Great on the Art of War*, ed. and trans. Jay Luvaas (New York: Da Capo Press, 1999), 47.
4. AR 600-3, Army Personnel Development System.