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Addition by Subtraction: Reviewing & Reducing Requirements to Increase Readiness

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Overview

The opportunity is ripe for a “less is more” mandate with a business-minded President-elect Trump and bureaucratic-averse Defense Secretary nominee who can reduce or eliminate burdensome administrative and training requirements that have been levied upon the services, units, and service members. Viewed individually, most of these types of requirements (e.g. Anti-Terrorism/Force Protection, Human Trafficking Prevention, and everyone’s favorite—Cyber Awareness) are relatively innocuous and have merit. However, placed in the context of all of the other routine requirements—often uncoordinated, duplicative, and from multiple different departments and entities—there are simply not enough hours in the day or months in the year to meaningfully accomplish all of them. There may be more attention and concern related to the literal bandwidth of our IT systems than the figurative bandwidth of our operators and commanders.

*Time is the only resource that cannot be added to the “topline”;
it can’t be created, only thoughtfully and forcibly taken back.*

As others have argued, this can force lower level military leaders into an ethically precarious position while also taking time away from activities that are higher priorities. Beyond the ethical dilemmas, some of these requirements linger solely due to bureaucratic inertia and are not linked to a demonstrated important outcome. To put it in economics terms, marginal return is now negative: fiscal, physical, and cognitive resources need to be freed up to ensure our warfighters are putting effort towards what is most important—increasing combat readiness.



Issue

The last 15 years of war have fatigued and stretched thin our fighting forces. As the military ventured into new places, engaged new enemies, developed and executed new concepts of operations, it has levied a growing number of training and administrative requirements on men and women in uniform without adequately thinning out existing requirements. The topic of “requirements creep” as it relates to the acquisition process or Combatant Commander operational plans enjoyed lengthy if not fruitful discussion. The “requirements creep” of the more administrative, day-to-day, cyclical unit-level or personal requirement incur two types of burdens: functional and ethical.

In an [April 2016 piece](#), MAJ Crispin Burke pointed out a 2002 U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute study that added all of the required annual training for a typical company commander, subtracted weekends, holidays and leave, and determined that the company commander was oversubscribed by 41 days—and that didn’t even factor non-required training or real-world events. A similar report out of Fort Leavenworth in 2015 yielded an even more alarming

“training deficit of 258 days—so nearly 20 months of annual mandatory training crammed into a 12-month calendar year.”



This functional burden of making tradeoff decisions has an unintended consequence of forcing ethical burdens. Junior level leaders are being asked to make impossible decisions that have, through no fault of their own, eroded the integrity of the service member (including this author) and the process. In the military culture, where the perceived value of mission accomplishment trumps methods, leaders only get in trouble when something bad happens and the inevitable investigation discovers that some corners were cut. With these functional burdens, no officer or command in any service can pass the microscope test of an incident investigation because it is mathematically impossible.

We are exhausting our personnel with impossible-to-attain training and administrative tasks—some of questionable value—which also has a side effect of depriving senior leadership of the innovation and or creative problem-solving approaches that could bubble up from lower echelon, more operational commands.

A frequent mistake made by new administrations (in any organization) is searching for optimization or efficiencies by adding programs/processes or undergoing structural reorganizations that often result in an even greater burden as their effects snowball down the chain of command.

Recommended Changes

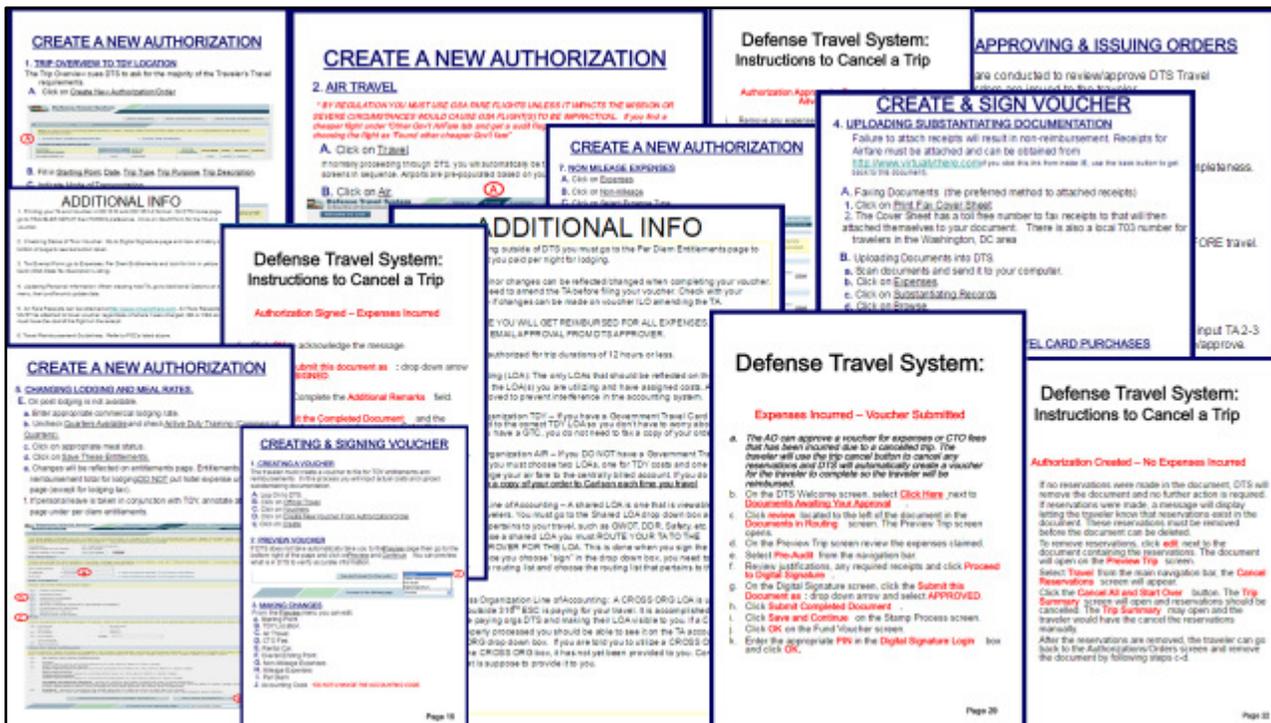
Over the past 8-10 years, leaders in the Department and on the Hill have initiated and supported several “rightsizing” initiatives, including the 20% headquarters reduction, Joint Forces Command closure (which Gen Mattis supported while he was the commander), and a reduction in the annual Congressional reporting requirements. On a micro level, a similar requirements review can be applied by and to the services, warfare communities, supporting agencies, and lower echelon commands. Now is a moment of opportunity. The incoming President, Secretary, and Chairmen of the Armed Services Committees all appear to be willing to battle the bureaucratic status quo to make informed, reasonable, and strategic cuts. This idea of reviewing, then revising or retiring requirements is not a new or revolutionary concept but a revisionary one. In any large organization, *revolutionary* change has proven to be very hard. In DoD today, *revisionary* change may be more appropriate, realistic, and effective. Three such proposed changes follow.

Establish a “Pay Go.” Similar to budget offsets, each new requirement would need to include how long it is expected to take to complete, and a proposed cancellation of an existing requirement that is of equal or greater length.

Authorize and Empower a Review Team. Appoint a recently or soon-to-be retired 4-star to lead a short-term but invasive and thorough examination of current mandatory training and administrative requirements. With the aid of a small staff of uniformed officers and management consulting team, cultivate and recommend a list of proposed deletions or alterations, publicize them for a period of review and comment, and then work with the appropriate service secretary or chief to execute. Nominally, these would all be changes that do not require legislative relief, but beneficial to include the appropriate staffs and members in the process and share in findings.

Crowdsource and Incentivize. Utilize the 1 million-plus service members who all have ideas or opinions on how to cut training and administrative burdens and increase operational effectiveness. Give out modest rewards and awards for ideas that are ultimately adopted.

Last week at CSIS, former Defense Secretary Harold Brown stated that change sometimes “requires a push from the top.” There is a new stable of leaders coming who will be ready to push.



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