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## Reflections on Reading

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## REFLECTIONS ON READING

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**T**he advent of social media has provided many platforms on which writers can express their ideas, often to very wide audiences. Weblogs (known as blogs) exist to promote ideas on subjects ranging from gardening to romance. Some focus purely on entertainment, but others play a more serious role. I long have been impressed by a blog called *From the Green Notebook* ([fromthegreennotebook.com](http://fromthegreennotebook.com)), founded and edited by Naval War College alumnus Joe Byerly, a serving officer in the U.S. military. The focus of the blog is on developing leaders, and the concept of professional reading is at the heart of many of its discussions. A recent post entitled “Why We All Need to Develop a Daily Habit of Reading” is one of the best arguments I have ever read on the value of professional reading, and the paragraphs below are an abridged version of the larger article.

When it comes down to it, the purpose of a military is to fight and win its nation’s wars. And war is complex. When lives or national interests are at stake the outcome is never certain, and events can unfold in a manner that no one foresaw. This level of complexity requires military leaders to possess a certain level of aptitude when stepping onto the battlefield. So, let’s back up a bit and do a quick thought experiment.

Imagine if someone told you that a year from today you would be required to take a test in which every wrong answer would result in the loss of a human life. How would you approach studying for the test? Would you study for twenty to thirty minutes every night, or would you wait until a week before the test and start cramming? You probably think this is a no-brainer, and that you would spend a year studying in small increments so you’d get a perfect score and nobody would die.

While the logic is clear-cut in this scenario, it is lost on many leaders in their professional military careers. Many go their entire careers without dedicating

time to the study of war and warfare. Let's be honest, the military places little extrinsic value on self-study. We don't get rewarded on our officer and NCO evaluation reports for spending time on self-development. Some leaders even go twenty years without reading a single book outside of professional military education—and boast that they were promoted to brigade-level command.

The problem is that, as time marches forward in our military careers, we run the risk of the professor walking through the door and handing us the test when we least expect it. The test is a practical exercise called “war.” The questions are hard and the stakes are high. If we aren't prepared, the results can be devastating. That brigade commander might not take his unit into combat, but he could get promoted to general officer when the next war comes along, and by that point there's not enough time to start reading books on war.

But we don't have to waste lives needlessly by approaching the test cold. Author and habits expert James Clear points out in his book *Atomic Habits* that time can be either an enemy or an ally, magnifying the margin between success and failure. In other words, how we choose to spend—or not spend—our time has consequences. So when it comes to professional reading, we can make time either an ally or an enemy. When we look at it through this lens, three truths regarding time come into focus. First, there is a cumulative effect when we invest small amounts of time in reading. Second, there also is a cumulative effect when we neglect it. And finally, once time is gone, there is no getting it back.

In the documentary *Bookstores: How to Read More Books in the Golden Age of Content*, blogger Tim Urban points out that if the average person spent only thirty minutes a day reading (that could be fifteen minutes before work and fifteen minutes before bed), he or she could read a thousand books in a lifetime. Imagine how many insights we would gain from making those minor daily investments—and how much better prepared for war we would be. In doing so, we make time our ally.

Unfortunately, many in the military, throughout their careers, do not invest time in self-study. Then when the time comes, many of these leaders fail to perform at the required level because they neglected their own development. They may survive as platoon leaders, company commanders, even battalion commanders, but none of these individuals thrive, because they approached each assignment with a limited perspective.

Neglect has a cumulative effect. When we fail to prepare ourselves mentally for combat we increase the risk of failure and, even worse, of losing members of our own teams. We can't wait until the eleventh hour to start cracking the books open.

Out of all the commodities we are given in life, time is the only one we can't get back. This importance of time also was recognized by Napoléon Bonaparte, who wrote in a letter, “Space I can recover, time never.” Once time has passed, it's gone

forever. It doesn't do a colonel with twenty-four years of service in the Army any good to look back on a career and wish he or she had read more when earlier in life. Many start cramming, but by then you cannot make up for lost time.

There is one more insight I've picked up over the years. The outbreak of war typically catches a nation and its armies by surprise. None of us knows if or when we will be called upon to lead formations in battle. That's why time is so critical. We need to make it our ally.

So, start today. Pick up a book and spend ten to twenty minutes reading, highlighting, and taking notes. It's a small investment, with a great return!

Thank you, Joe, for reinforcing the argument that the Reflections on Reading series has sought to make for the past forty-seven articles!

JOHN E. JACKSON