

By Admiral James Stavridis '76, USN

Time

As Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) responsible for all NATO military operations and dual-hatted as Commander, U.S. European Command, I have come to realize, again, how valuable time is for all of us. In the end, it is the most important resource we have.

I've always tried hard to manage my time carefully and to use small bits of time to chip away at important things. If you wait until you have six hours to sit down and write an article, the odds are that you'll never find the time. But if you write a page or a paragraph here and there, eventually you'll have a good piece. Do that in an organized way over a year, and you'll have a book. What seems like a big commitment in time is so often just a series of small steps.

I try to budget my time in big strokes. I learned this from former Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Vern Clark, who is a disciplined and focused manager as well as a strong leader. He always talked about dividing your time into the three big things you do—in my case, I've generally broken it down into five:

People. No surprise this is at the top of the list, and I think it is the most important thing I do every day. It spans the gamut from counseling and guiding my team, to recruiting new talented people, to focusing on quality of life issues. I get a lot of help, of course, from my personnel experts and my senior enlisted leaders, but in the end, I'd put this at the top of any leader's time budget.

Learning. One of the key skills any leader must have is the ability to constantly learn. I think it is important as well to invest in learning languages, so I typically spend an hour each day studying a language. This also includes time to read, both non-fiction and fiction books—in other words to get up above the day-to-day intelligence and staff reports, as important as they are.

Messaging. A big part of what I do is strategic communication. In this, I include the roughly 100 speeches and presentations I do each year, from think tanks to town halls, from testifying in front of Congress, to briefing the North Atlantic Council. I also try to write about five articles each year for publication, focusing on a wide variety of journals and media outlets

as well as social networking sites, a blog and other forms of outreach and communication.

Operations.

My job as SACEUR is essentially the Operations Officer for NATO; and

along with my U.S. European Command hat, we are constantly conducting operations around the region. It, therefore, stands to reason that I'd spend a fair amount of time in this area. This really consists of briefings, meetings and actual engagement in the conduct of operations.

Innovation. I try very hard to block out time to work on innovative ideas. This includes spending time just thinking and writing about new ways of doing things, from how we process information to creating new centers for everything from counter-narcotics to disposal of dangerous ordnance. In the end, if I am enslaved by the process of the day-to-day—as important as it is—I think I'm missing the chance to move my enterprise in a dramatic way forward.

Obviously, what I don't include in the time above is my family, friends and workouts. In everything, balance is key, and I find time for leave, family time and physical fitness; perhaps not as much as I would always like, but in general I think I am "in balance."

The final point I would make about time management is simple but often overlooked: I measure how I'm doing on my time budget. Every month or so, I'll review the schedule with the team. Some months we'll miss the target, other months we'll pretty much be on target. But the key is that by measuring how we're doing, I'm able to maintain some accountability to myself for the really big ticket items that can easily be swept away. ☺

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Admiral Stavridis participates in a Humanitarian Logistics Plenary Session in Davos, Switzerland. Photo by Sergeant Intisar Sabree, U.S. Army