



The current operational tempo (OPTEMPO) is detrimentally affecting the force. It may impede the service's ability to fulfill its core mission of providing ready, responsive, and sustained land dominance as part of the joint force. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Dustin D. Biven)

# Addressing Unsustainable OPTEMPO

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**T**oday's operational tempo (OPTEMPO) exceeds the demands of the war on terrorism and critically challenges the Army (Fraser, 2023). OPTEMPO refers to the frequency at which units participate "in military activities, including contingency operations, exercises, training, and deployments" (Cornell, n.d.).

The current OPTEMPO is detrimentally affecting the force and may impede the service's ability to fulfill its core mission of providing ready, responsive, and sustained land dominance as part of the joint force.

## Past and Present

Approximately 20 years of counterinsurgency efforts and nation-building in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere increased the Army's global engagement during the war on terrorism. This period required extraordinary flexibility and endurance, but it highlighted the challenges of preserving a manageable OPTEMPO.

High OPTEMPO can improve tactical abilities while straining physical and psychological stamina. Additionally, it risks putting long-term operational effectiveness and

servicemembers' well-being in conflict. In 2023, then-Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael Grinston stated that the Army placed an enormous strain on Soldiers by being "busier now than we ever have been" (Fraser, 2023).

Currently, the Army grapples with sustaining global influence while addressing concerns about OPTEMPO's impact on members' well-being and strategic readiness. This era's ongoing global commitments have exposed the Army to personnel retention issues and emphasized the need for a strategy that maintains operational effectiveness without compromising the force's health (Fraser, 2023).

## Issues and Challenges

Strenuous OPTEMPO produced significant challenges for the Army. Continuous deployments cause fatigue among servicemembers. The duration, nature, and frequency of recurring deployments also test Soldiers' willingness to serve longer than required. A sustained high tempo greatly influences the Army's holistic well-being, especially concerning retention.

### Retention

Soldiers' educational aspirations, civilian employment opportunities, and familial responsibilities can serve as a counterbalance to continued military service. These factors and the

accelerated pace of Army operations may undermine the force's capacity to serve effectively (Ashwell, 2020).

Soldiers cope with an ever-increasing workload, often encroaching on civilian and familial obligations and contributing to conflict on a personal level. This persistently high mission rate erodes the force's readiness and requires a critical evaluation of force burnout related to OPTEMPO.

### Physical and Mental Health

Increased OPTEMPO affects more than retention. It also has implications for individuals' physical and mental well-being, posing additional challenges to the Army's resilience.

Relentless demands from training, overseas rotations, and deployments significantly affect servicemembers' physical and mental health, leading to wellness issues and influencing military readiness. Continuous operations without adequate recovery intervals worsen stress-related illnesses, causing a hazardous balance between duty and health.

Mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are widespread in sustained operations without adequate downtime. Proactive mental health initiatives, wellness programs, resilience training, and counseling services are essential in this high-stress climate (Godby Vail et al., 2023).



High OPTEMPO can improve tactical abilities while straining physical and psychological stamina. Additionally, it risks putting long-term operational effectiveness and servicemembers' well-being in conflict. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Master Sgt. Matt Hecht)



Addressing these wellness needs is compassionate care for servicemembers. It's also a strategic imperative for the force's enduring strength and readiness.

### **Strain on Family Life and Personal Relationships**

Military readiness is connected to servicemembers' and their families' well-being. Prolonged work stress can significantly impact family life and personal relationships.

Military personnel encounter challenges such as repeated separations, reintegration stress, and the need to maintain connections with loved ones. These stressors can gradually diminish the family support system, which is crucial for fostering resilience.

This decay challenges Soldiers' continued military service, as work stress impacts personal relationships. The Army must implement practical strategies to ensure Soldiers' well-being and the force's operational sustainability.

### **Mitigations and Recommendations**

The Army's current OPTEMPO is unsustainable for its Soldiers, families, and resources. The Army needs to consider both temporary relief methods and long-term resilience.

#### **Policies**

According to Linick et al. (2023), the Army must effectively manage the balance between personnel welfare and mission accomplishment to mitigate the risk of strategic overreach. A thorough evaluation of requirements and personnel allocation versus strategic plans is necessary.

Integrating initiatives that prioritize people into the Regionally Aligned Readiness and Modernization Model is crucial for promoting unity, minimizing stress, and enhancing the force's preparedness and effectiveness (Linick et al., 2023).

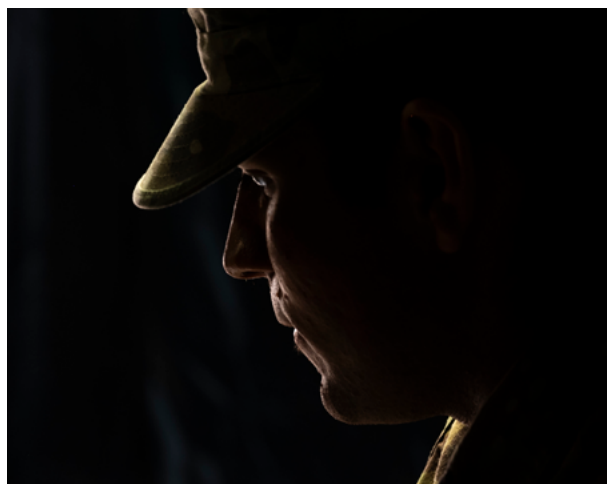
The Department of Defense (DoD) established a dwell time policy stating that active-duty troops spend at least three years at home for each year of deployment. For National Guard and Army Reserves Soldiers, the ratio should be five years at home for each year of deployment (Myers, 2021).

Any deviation from this policy must force leaders to drop another Army requirement as a compliance mechanism. This proactive approach emphasizes the importance of mental health in operational effectiveness and strategic readiness.

#### **Investments in Soldier Mental Health**

To ensure the Army's continued preparedness, it must invest in sustaining Soldiers' physical and mental well-being. Improving health and wellness programs and focusing on preventive treatment can reduce long-term health care costs and strengthen overall readiness.

This approach includes providing Soldiers with robust



Mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are widespread in sustained operations without adequate downtime. Proactive mental health initiatives, wellness programs, resilience training, and counseling services are essential in this high-stress climate. (U.S. Army Photo by T. T. Parish)

mental health care and instituting campaigns aimed at eliminating the stigma associated with receiving such care.

Expanding the Army policy known as the Brandon Act enabled Soldiers to request mental health evaluations through their commanders and quickly connect with clinical care resources. This policy applies to regular Army, Army National Guard, and Army Reserve Soldiers on active duty for more than 30 days (U.S. Army Public Affairs, 2023).

Proactive policies such as the Brandon Act help transform military culture by allowing Soldiers to seek mental health assistance without fear of stigma. This situation fosters a healthier, more resilient workforce, but there is also work to do in family units.

#### **Support for Families and Work-Life Balance Initiatives**

Work-life balance plays a crucial role in improving employee performance (Isa & Indrayati, 2023). The Army can implement family support mechanisms to mitigate sources of personal stress and enhance operational efficiency.

Examples include flexible schedules, telework privileges, providing leave alternatives, and expanding family initiatives during deployments and demanding training periods. Some new programs, such as on-post universal prekindergarten, align with the parental leave policy of 12 weeks of nonchargeable leave for servicemembers welcoming a child into their family (Department of Defense, 2023).

These measures support Soldiers by alleviating burdens associated with family life. Strengthening Soldier and family well-being ensures the Army remains a resilient and effective force capable of meeting national defense demands.



A Soldier and his wife hold hands during a ceremony after returning home from a 10-month deployment. Military personnel encounter challenges such as repeated separations, reintegration stress, and the need to maintain connections with loved ones. (Nebraska National Guard photo by Spc. Lisa Crawford)

## Conclusion

The Army's current OPTEMPO surpasses the demands of the war on terrorism era and creates significant challenges to the force. This unsustainable pace threatens Soldiers' physical and mental well-being, which threatens the Army's ability to achieve land dominance.

As high OPTEMPO continues, retention, mental and physical health, and personal relationships are at risk. The Army must take a proactive approach

to safeguard these areas.

This strategy includes addressing work-life balance, facilitating more mental health support, and examining policy changes to alleviate repetitive deployment schedules. Implementing these measures strengthens the Army's primary weapon — its people.

By prioritizing Soldier well-being, the Army will uphold its duty to maintain its critical role in national defense as the world's most dominant land force. ■

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