



By Rick Chersicla

Stoicism has become a popular topic for military audiences in recent years, and for good reason. Even on this website, numerous articles and interviews have explained why it is important to [think like a Roman emperor](#), and discussed the benefits of studying stoicism for [personal progress](#). While introspection and personal development are paramount to most leaders, and the pursuit of the stoic virtues is laudable in itself, elements of stoic philosophy can also have practical applications that impact planning efforts and collaborative projects. The stoic practice of [premeditatio malorum](#) - the “premeditation of evils” - has value for planners and leaders of all fields.

Ryan Holliday, author of multiple books and one of the drivers of making stoicism more

accessible (see [The Daily Stoic](#)), uses the example of preparing for a journey to illustrate *premeditatio malorum*. Before a long journey, Holliday [writes](#), a Stoic like Seneca would outline his plans—either mentally or in writing—and mentally rehearse all of the things that could go wrong and prevent him from completing the journey. If travelling by sea, would there be a shipwreck? Could their ship be attacked? Using this tool, stoics like Seneca were “always prepared for disruption,” which enabled them to account for potential *disruptions in their plans*. For readers familiar with [the Red Team Handbook](#), *premeditatio mortem* may sound very similar to conducting a premortem analysis.

[The Red Team Handbook](#), published by the University of Foreign Military and Cultural Studies ([UFMCS](#)) at Fort Leavenworth, contains a host of tools and techniques designed to better understand complex problems, improve decision-making, and counter biases. One of the tools outlined in the handbook is essentially *premeditatio mortem* by another name—the premortem analysis. Drawing upon the work of psychologist Gary Klein, a premortem analysis is a quick mental rehearsal that can be used to find weaknesses in a plan.

The initial assumption with a premortem analysis is that the **plan in question has failed**. Taking this as the starting point, the planning team examines—first individually, then as a group—the reasons for the “failed plan,” and asks questions that probe their own assumptions and the proposed course of action (COA). Generating a list of possible reasons for failure creates focal points for the team to study and determine mitigation measures for previously unidentified risks, or faulty assumptions that don’t stand up to deeper scrutiny.

The plan has failed. This may seem to be a counterintuitive discussion topic for a planning team, but premortem analysis can help influence a general pattern of inquiry in step with *premeditatio mortem* that prevents overconfidence throughout the planning process. This “premeditation of evils,” casts a wider cognitive net than reducing adversary COAs to the most dangerous COA (MDCOA) and most likely (MLCOA); instead, this manner of thinking considers the entire operational environment when thinking through “what caused the plan

to fail.”

While the best time for using this tool is during COA development, prior to wargaming, it is useful to inculcate this technique as a routine mental exercise. Planners and leaders alike should prepare for disruption of all types, and work that expectation into their plans. While the ‘power of positive thinking’ receives a lot of traction, Ryan Holliday makes a valuable point when encouraging us to consider the “surprising value in negative thinking.”

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