



Primer: Improve Military Readiness By Polishing Down the Brass

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A Presidential Memorandum could reduce the number of general officer and flag officer positions in the US military, improving decision-making and accountability in the DoD.

Summary: The lack of civilian oversight in the promotion process for general officer or flag officer (GO/FO) positions has allowed an increasingly bureaucratic Department of Defense (DoD) to metastasize, leading to excessive overhead and an aversion to decision-making and accountability. A reduction in the number of GO/FOs would begin to alleviate these problems. This reduction may be accomplished through a Presidential Memorandum outlining the desired decrease and the process and criteria by which DoD would provide proposed nominees for promotions to the President for White House review.

Introduction

Observers of the US military often note that there seems to have been a significant increase in GO/FO positions over the last several decades. While this is, in part, a subjective observation, analysis supports it. A report by the Congressional Research Service provides empirical evidence, finding that between 1965 and 2018 the share made up of GO/FOs increased by 44 percent.¹

Growth during this period at the most senior GO/FO levels is even more pronounced. Four-star officers increased their share by 114 percent, and three-star officers saw a 149 percent increase from 1965 to 2018.² One-star and two-star GO/FOs as a percentage of the total force increased less, but still saw noteworthy growth at 31 percent. One might also note, using a different analysis based on force numbers, that during WWII there was one GO for every 6,000 troops while in 2017 that ratio increased to roughly one GO for every 1,400 troops.³

In 2011, Secretary of Defense (SecDef) Robert Gates proposed the reduction of GO/FO positions after a review by the Defense Business Board concluded that the SecDef could be more than 30 levels removed from the tactical operator on the battlefield. While it has taken more than a decade to implement the proposed reduction from Secretary Gates, the 2017 National Defense

¹ Lawrence Kapp, "General and Flag Officers in the U.S. Armed Forces: Background and Considerations for Congress," Congressional Research Service (February 21, 2019).

² Kapp, 4.

³ Gregory C. McCarthy, "Are There Too Many General Officers for Today's Military?" *Joint Force Quarterly*, 87 (October 1, 2017), <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Publications/Article/1325984/are-there-too-many-general-officers-for-todays-military/>.

Authorization Act (NDAA) mandated a reduction of 111 from the previously approved 963 GO/FO positions, for a total of 852 starting in 2023. While this may seem like a significant reduction, it is only slightly more than 10 percent, and that is only on paper, because of the timing with which the branches of the armed services fill GO/FO positions: More than 30 percent of the 111 GO/FOs positions that have been cut are already unfilled, thus the actual reduction of active officers is much closer to a little more than 5 percent.

From a readiness perspective, a reduction in the number of officers reduces the horizontal number of components and organizations within DoD, not the vertical number of ranks from top to bottom. The coordination costs internal to large and complex bureaucracies such as DoD are immense, and they slow everything down without appreciably adding value. With fewer officers, there are fewer rival bureaucratic components clamoring for voice, influence, turf, and input, and greater clarity and speed. Unity of effort becomes easier, and tasks do not need to be split into many fractions in order to ensure that each officer has a piece of the problem over which to exercise their command.

A new administration can directly influence a reduction in GO/FO positions to bring about this boost in readiness. A reduction would reduce costs, both in personnel and administratively, while increasing efficiency by reducing current layers of military bureaucracy.

Reducible Complexity

Proponents of the increase for GO/FO positions (largely the services themselves) contend that this growth is a response to increased military complexity, both in terms of organizations and weapon systems. The reality, however, is that organizations with more senior people cost more to run and are generally much less efficient than flatter (or less top-heavy), more agile ones. While the military contends it needs more GO/FOs in decision-making roles or in its approval processes, the truth is there is little real difference between the effectiveness of, for example, a three-star general versus a two-star general, except the priority and status it provides in the enterprise that encourages the very inflation of these positions. Four-star officers induce additional GO/FO slots because, in order to justify the existence of the four-star role, there must be junior GO/FOs to report to it (in fact, four-star GO/FOs reporting to other four-star GO/FOs is too commonplace to cover here, but is a real issue). The Government Accountability Office found that between 2001 and 2012, Combatant Command (CCMD) staff costs doubled, and that this was a direct corollary to increased staffing, relating to inflated hierarchical CCMD headquarters.⁴

Title 10 of the U.S. Code outlines the roles, responsibilities, and missions of the US military while establishing certain limitations on the number of GO/FOs. Specifically, Code 525 and Code 526 under Title 10 establish the limits in terms of the number of GO/FOs that any respective service or officers serving under joint coding can fill.⁵ In addition, Code 152 and 153

⁴ US Government Accountability Office, “Defense Headquarters: DOD Needs to Periodically Review and Improve Visibility Of Combatant Commands' Resources,” GAO-13-293, May 15, 2013, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-13-293>.

⁵ 10 U.S. Code § 525, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/10/525>. 10 U.S. Code § 526, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/10/526>.

designate that certain roles must be filled with a General or Admiral at the O-10 grade (four-star). These positions include the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and Service Chiefs, along with combatant commanders, but other than that, the law leaves it largely to the services to determine.

Other examples of rank inflation include the current structure under the organize, train, and equip function of the services, specifically the equip function in the acquisition structure. The current head of Air Force Material Command and Army Material Command are both four-star generals. The Navy, organized in a different fashion, could equate the positions of Naval Sea Systems Command and Naval Air Systems Command to the Air Force and Army roles and have a Vice Admiral, (O-9) heading each of those commands. Meanwhile, the head of Marine Corps Systems Command, the equivalent of those roles in the Air Force, Navy, and Army, is only a one-star general. While the other services do have larger budgets and organizations than the Marine Corps, the systems the Marines procure and operate are no less important. Is there really a difference in how an individual executes and assures responsibility and accountability for \$50 billion versus \$500 billion? Accountability and responsibility should remain the same regardless of dollars expended, and it is clear a one-star can adequately perform the role.

The effect on acquisitions and research can be subtle but profoundly damaging. The bureaucracies in headquarters staffs and in the military services expand to accommodate an excess number of GO/FOs in these chains of command. A higher office and larger staff is then needed in order to coordinate across the fractured problem set. Problems in operations or acquisition become over-managed and solutions become too complex to execute. Each officer and their subdivision of the staff want to influence strategy or requirements, leading to overwrought operations, weapons systems that are too complex to deliver on time and at cost, or research programs that are so over-specified they can never be transitioned to operational systems. Excess requirements and paperwork eliminate the ability to procure from normal commercial suppliers, and overly elaborate weapons systems end up being enormously expensive to procure and operate while also being difficult to produce at scale and speed.⁶

A further issue created by inflation of officer grades to GO/FOs is the expansion of the staffing positions that cross the line from military strategy into foreign policy. Foreign policy is largely the domain of the President, the State Department, and political appointees. Advocating for foreign policy objectives strays into a domain of policy making that is inappropriate for uniformed military officers. Engaging in undirected mil-to-mil diplomacy outside the aegis of the White House, State Department, and defense civilian leadership likewise can stray beyond the traditional military role into an area that is the proper reserve of political appointees. Inflation of officer grades has led to an expansion of regional billets in five staffs in the Joint Staff, CCMDs, and Service staffs, billets that end up providing political and foreign policy advice to senior military leadership. In order to reduce the potential for uniformed military to engage in their own

⁶ Edward Luttwak, *The Pentagon and the Art of War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985): Chapters 6-7.

foreign policy apart from the Commander in Chief, officer corps reductions should target those GO/FO billets that stray into foreign policy lanes.

Another example of rank inflation is the superintendent position at the three military academies. This position is headed by a three-star officer at each academy and in fact does not count in the total number of GO/FOs in the military service. While the position is to remain “independent” from the service chain-of-command, why does this require a three-star officer? In the buildup to WWII, West Point, the Army’s renowned service academy, was headed by a two-star. Were the officers produced by West Point then any less capable than officers produced today? By simple numbers, in terms of people and dollars, the service academies would barely rate a one-star. There is no obvious rationale for the academies to be headed by a three-star and even less rationale for these positions not to be counted in the total number of GO/FOs in the respective service.

Commander in Chief

A reduction of GO/FOs in the DoD has been identified for decades as necessary. The reality is that it takes a president to make it happen.

An additional consequence of the growth of the GO/FO corps has been the steady transmogrification of the behavior of GO/FOs from that of military practitioners and strategists of defense policy to political and defense industry actors. The reality is that GO/FOs select GO/FOs, meaning generals and admirals choose within their own ranks who will become generals and admirals and be promoted within the hierarchy. This tends to create a pool of GO/FOs that behave as “yes-men” and politicians. It also tends to create “echo chambers” of thinking because human nature and predisposed bias naturally encourage promotion or advancement of those who agree with you.

The recent abysmally executed withdrawal from Afghanistan and the behavior of the past Chairman of the Joint Chiefs reflected this mentality. Senior generals at the highest level of the Joint Staff and COCOM leadership behaved as “yes-men,” allowing one of the most tragic, embarrassing, and incompetent military actions ever undertaken on behalf of the US to occur. Further, because of the groupthink or conformity of these senior GOs, not a single one has been held accountable for what transpired. Not a single one was removed or reprimanded. Responsibility and accountability within the GO/FO officer corps have dangerously eroded and yet the process continues to foster undesirable subjectivity in selection and political behavior.

It is, of course, difficult to know how someone will behave given a particular situation, but as with the selection of political appointees, an administration could attempt to mitigate the irresponsibility of the brass with much more direct action in the promotion process than has become customary. With the reduction of GO/FOs, those selected should undergo a more disciplined and rigorous process than the current hand-waving perfunctory approval that occurs. The DoD will insinuate the existing process is laborious and thorough, with numerous stages of vetting occurring in the military service, Office of the Secretary of Defense, White House Military Office, National Security Council, and White House Chief of Staff review, but promotion lists for GO/FOs are reviewed in a cursory fashion for derogatory information or

behavior, not for actual value in terms of military worth. That vital assessment is left almost entirely to the chain of GO/FOs that selected the individual in the first place.

While the lists of nominated GO/FOs would still come from the services, an actual interview and formal review of the record may occur through a joint White House and Office of the Secretary of Defense review. Individuals should be considered based on a record of accomplishment and assessed additionally by officials outside of the GO/FOs promoting them. While the law requires three and four-star nominees to meet members of the SASC committee, those at the one and two-star level are not required to do so, even though this is the very pool of GO/FOs from which the senior three and four-stars are pulled.

In addition to an assessment of military performance, a deeper review of social media, email, and behavior should take place to consider inappropriate partisan behaviors as well (18 USC Chapter 29, UCMJ Art 88, DODD 1344.10). Regardless of the administration, the GO/FO officer corps should be non-partisan, both in their actions and desire for additional promotion. Their personal partisan leanings must not interfere with their implementation of the President's lawful agenda. GO/FOs should not be acting as agents of political parties one way or the other and should not be advocating for partisan positions or candidates internally or externally. Any personal partisan leanings must not interfere with implementation of their official duties. And a commitment to wokism should be evidence of partisan leanings. The system too should encourage and reward those willing to innovate and be held accountable. The US military needs leadership that is more than a rubber stamp for each other in terms of GO/FOs.

The Operation Plan

The president is responsible for nominating military personnel for GO/FOs positions and any proposal to reduce the number of GO/FOs in the next administration must directly involve the president. A potential method for downsizing and ensuring greater civilian oversight of GO/FO promotions is:

1. All currently filled GO/FOs billets should be provided to a designated lead of the White House review team, potentially in the Presidential Personnel Office (PPO), for review moving forward and alignment of reductions. Additional team membership should be comprised of representatives from National Security Council (NSC) – Defense, White House Military Office, PPO, as well as the Offices of Management and Budget (OMB) and Office of Personnel Management (OPM). This should be done in coordination with the SecDef's team (immediate staff, Service Secretaries, and Office of the Under Secretary for Personnel and Readiness (OUSDP&R)). Immense pushback internal to the Department should be anticipated. Individuals with understanding of roles and responsibilities within DoD will need to help with reviewing individual billets. Billets across services should be considered in terms of parity in roles (for example a two-star in the Navy and a two-star in the Army with the same responsibilities) as this will be an issue in the services. The review will need specific targets and deadlines to avoid being sandbagged to death, and these should be outlined in a Presidential Memorandum detailing the following:

- a. Criteria for selecting options for nominations;
 - b. How many options should be provided;
 - c. Specify what staff at the White House should review the nomination package, and who transmits nomination scroll to Congress.
2. Except for four-star positions mandated by law, all additional four-star positions should be reduced to three-star roles with a waterfall effect across the DoD. For example, the Air Force currently has nine officers serving or nominated to serve in four-star positions, not including joint billets. Aside from the chief of staff and vice chief of staff, which must be filled by a four-star per Title 10, the president should no longer nominate Air Force generals to a four-star position.⁷ Command of Air Combat Command (ACC) is currently filled by a four-star general, but the president would nominate the next ACC commander as a three-star. This reduction of rank would flow down and nominations would be managed by the White House team, following the Presidential Memorandum.

The president is directly responsible for nominations and there is no requirement in law for a minimum number of specific GO/FOs ranks (except those mandated by law such as the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), but rather a minimum number of GOs in total. The current minimum number in law is 240 GO/FOs, more than 600 positions less than the maximum allowed by current law. There is significant room for reduction.

Remarkably, no E.O. or Presidential Memorandum formalizing the process for the nomination of military officers exists. A lesson learned from the Trump administration was the most recent iteration on the subject was from George H.W. Bush's administration, which reduced White House review of officers from all GO/FOs to just three and four stars.

3. As the reduction is introduced through the president's nomination process, the coordination team should review positions currently filled by one-or two-star GO/FOs that could be filled by an O-6 (Colonel or Captain). These positions would be identified, and the President would no longer nominate a GO/FO for the role.
4. In addition to the minimum of 240 GO/FOs, current law allows the SecDef to reduce the number further if deemed appropriate (Title 10, Code 526).
5. The president's administration should initiate a discussion and "buy-in" from Congress and specifically from the House and Senate Armed Services Committees. The Senate Armed Services Committee is directly responsible for confirmation of the president's military nominations. The goal of the reductions along with minimal and easily mitigated impacts should be presented.

Conclusion

⁷10 U.S. Code § 9033, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/10/9033>. 10 U.S. Code § 9034, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/10/9034>.

It will take strong, self-initiated political appointees under an aggressive administration to induce policies that overcome decades of promotions and outmoded thinking done in the echo chamber of our GO/FO corps. With these policies implemented appropriately, there will be a graceful degradation of the number of GO/FOs in the Department of Defense without negative impact on military preparedness. These policy changes, while not eliminating “political actors” in the GO/FO corps completely, will mitigate and reduce the effects of unwanted behaviors. Moreover, they will help return the focus of officers seeking promotion to military strategy and effective and efficient execution of their functions, mindful that the foremost mission of the DoD is to defend our nation and to protect the security of the American people.