

## Reducing Number of Four-Star Generals/Flag Officers

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### BACKGROUND

Currently, there are 41 positions authorized to be filled by four-star general/flag officers, of which 39 are currently filled (39 in DoD, 37 filled; 2 authorized and filled in Coast Guard).

Many analyses have shown that the ratio of generals to troops has been increasing over time, that is, generals have commanded fewer and fewer troops on average. For four-star generals this ratio has declined from 74,000 in 1965 to 34,000 today.<sup>1</sup> As Benjamin Freeman of the Project on Government Oversight testified, "The top officer ranks, general and flag officers, have grown faster than lower officer ranks, and three- and four-star positions have increased faster than all other components of the DoD's force of uniformed personnel—a phenomenon we call star creep. . . . This progression towards a more top-heavy force is a burden for taxpayers and military commanders. . . . Additionally, some military personnel experts say unnecessarily top-heavy organizations hinder military effectiveness as they slow decision cycles."<sup>2</sup>

This kind of analysis may not be an entirely fair as the U.S. military has become increasingly capital intensive and reliant on government employees and contractors. Generals command

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Kapp, *General and Flag Officers in the U.S. Armed Forces: Background and Considerations for Congress*, CRS Report 7-5700 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, February 18, 2016), Table 3, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44389.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Freeman, testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Personnel, *General and Flag Officer Requirements*, 112th Cong., 1st sess., September 14, 2011, <http://www.pogo.org/our-work/testimony/2011/ns-wds-20110914.html>. The Project on Government Oversight (POGO) has done a series of such analyses stretching back to the 1980s, for example, "Officer Inflation: Its Cost to the Taxpayer and Military Effectiveness," 1984, and "More Brass, More Bucks: Officer Inflation in Today's Military," 1997.

more than just troops. Since 1965, for example, the number of troops per four-star general has declined by half but the defense budget per four-star general has increased by about 30 percent (from \$12.1 billion to \$15.7 billion). Moreover, general and flag officer pay (though not retirement) is currently capped at the two-star level; those at the three- and four-star level are thus not creating a greater direct burden on taxpayers. Nevertheless, the belief is widespread that there are too many generals.

The SASC notes that the number of generals has increased recently, driven particularly by additional joint billets associated with overseas operations. As the SASC bill summary explains, "This provision was also based on analysis of the historic growth at each general and flag officer level across the force, which was relatively higher among three-star and, to a lesser extent, four-star officers when considered in relation to the overall reduction in military end-strength."<sup>3</sup>The increases have been modest—the number of four-star officers in DoD going from 36 in 1965 to 37 today—but this has occurred as the size of the forces has been cut in half. The number of four-star generals/flag officers appears set by the nature of the armed forces (global reach, multiservice, capital intensive) rather than by the size of the forces.

The number of generals is associated with the amount of overhead. To carry out their duties, generals need staff and the more senior the general, the larger the staff. Although eliminating general/flag officers does not eliminate an organization or a staff, typically the position is retained but downgraded, just downgrading a general's billet would reduce headquarters size. Less senior officers have smaller and less senior staffs. Less senior officers also have less support in aircraft, vehicles, and official entertainment. In fiscal terms this does not save much money, but it does save senior military staff positions and might make processes operate more quickly.

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017*, <http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FY17%20NDAA%20Bill%20Summary.pdf>.

**Table 1: Remarks from Congress and Administration**

<b>SASC</b>	<b>HASC</b>	<b>SECRETARY CARTER/ ADMINISTRATION</b>
<p>Reduce from 41 to 27. Many specifics about where remaining billets should go.</p>	<p>Reduce COCOM service component commanders from four stars to three. (Would affect five billets.)</p>	<p>Carter supported reducing the number of four-star generals, particularly service component commanders in the COCOMs. SAPs: Support some reduction but not statutory goals.</p>
<p><b>Senate NDAA 2017 S.2943, Section 501 (Quote from Bill Summary):</b></p> <p>"The committee reduced the number of four-star officers, which would be limited to: the Chairman, Vice Chairman, and other members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, including the head of the National Guard Bureau; the Combatant Commanders; the Commander of U.S. Forces–Korea; one additional joint billet . . . for a four-star joint command (such as the current mission in Afghanistan); and three additional four-star billets each for the Army, Navy, and Air Force to be filled as they choose. The resulting 27 four-star billets would represent a significant reduction from the current authorized level of 41."<sup>4</sup></p>	<p><b>H.R. 4909, Section 910:</b></p> <p>"The grade of an officer serving as a commander of a service or functional component command under a commander of a combatant command shall be no higher than lieutenant general or vice admiral."<sup>5</sup></p>	<p><b>SAP on Senate NDAA:</b></p> <p>"While the Administration supports simplifying and improving command and control of the military, it objects to section 501. . . . Reductions to the number of general and flag officer positions should be made deliberately after reviewing the role of each position and analyzing the impact of the reduction on the force."<sup>6</sup></p> <p><b>SAP on House NDAA:</b></p> <p>"While the Administration supports simplifying and improving command and control of the military . . . it objects to section 910. . . . The Administration intends to reduce the number of four-star positions and across-the-board mandated reductions are unnecessary."<sup>7</sup></p> <p><b>Carter Statement:</b></p> <p>"The Defense Department will look to simplify and improve command and control where the number of four-star positions have made headquarters either top-heavy, or less efficient than they could be."<sup>8</sup></p>

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017*, <http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FY17%20NDAA%20Bill%20Summary.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. House Armed Services Committee, 114th Congress (2015-2016), *H.R.4909-National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017*, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/house-bill/4909/text>.

<sup>6</sup> Executive Office of the President, Office of Management and Budget, *Statement of Administration Policy: S. 2914, National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017*, June 7, 2016,

[https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/legislative/sap/114/saps2943s\\_20160607.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/legislative/sap/114/saps2943s_20160607.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Executive Office of the President, Office of Management and Budget, *Statement of Administration Policy: H.R. 4909, National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017*, May 16, 2016,

[https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/legislative/sap/114/saphr4909r\\_20160516.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/legislative/sap/114/saphr4909r_20160516.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Ash Carter, "Remarks on 'Goldwater-Nichols at 30: An Agenda for Updating,'" U.S. Department of Defense, April 5, 2016, <http://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/713736/remarks-on-goldwater-nichols-at-30-an-agenda-for-updating-center-for-strategic>.

## ASSESSMENT

The administration, SASC, and HASC all agree that some reduction is needed. The discussion will be about how many and how much latitude DoD has in implementation. The SASC cuts a lot more than the HASC or Carter. Further, the SASC is specific about where the billets should go, and, by implication, where the cuts should come from. The SASC's judgments about the billets are not unreasonable. However, DoD is customarily reluctant to accept this kind of direction, preferring to identify areas for cuts itself. The SAP on the House NDAA reflects DoD's desire for flexibility in implementation. Although the House did essentially what Carter had recommended, the SAP nevertheless objected to making the reductions statutory.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A WAY FORWARD

- There is agreement among the Senate, House, and the administration that some four-star positions can be downgraded. This is consistent with broader policy goals to reduce overhead and the size of management headquarters.
- The argument for downgrading the service component heads at combatant commands is particularly strong because the services appear to be in a kind of "arms race" with each trying to maintain its relative position by increasing the seniority of its representative.
- The way forward, then, would be to accept the House proposal and eliminate five four-star positions. This would reduce the total to [36], the number in 2000 before the current conflicts began.
- However, the active duty force is about 70,000 service members smaller than in 2000. To maintain the pre-war (2000) ratio of four-star generals-to-troops (1:40,000), the number would need to be cut to 34.
- To assess the value and impact of further reductions, the NDAA should include a provision for an independent study of SES/Flag/General Officers, including four-star positions, and the staff support provided to those positions. Particular care must be taken in this area to avoid simply redistributing staff to other jobs, rather than actually enforcing cuts, as with the 2011 disestablishment of Joint Forces Command. With the results of this independent assessment, the committees can take appropriate action in a future NDAA.



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