



**Congressional
Research Service**

Informing the legislative debate since 1914

Statutory Framework for Congressional Management of DOD General and Flag Officers

Updated May 29, 2026

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

R44389



R44389

May 29, 2026

Michael J. Vassalotti,
Coordinator
Section Research Manager

Sofia Plagakis
Senior Research Librarian

Statutory Framework for Congressional Management of DOD General and Flag Officers

In the exercise of its constitutional responsibilities to shape and oversee the U.S. Armed Forces, Congress has enacted an array of laws that govern foundational aspects of military officer personnel management, including appointments, assignments, grade structure, promotions, and separations. Some of these laws are directed specifically at the most senior military officers, known as general and flag officers (GFOs). Congress periodically reviews these laws and considers amending them. Areas of congressional interest have included duties and grades of certain GFO positions, the number of GFOs, the proportion of GFOs to the total force, and compensation levels of GFOs.

Congress and the executive branch have used statutory authority to specify the grade and duties of certain GFO positions and affect the number of GFOs. As of September 30, 2026, there were 848 active-duty GFOs subject to statutory caps, 9 less than the maximum of 857 authorized by law. The current number is lower for the post-Cold War era and substantially lower than the number of GFOs in the 1960s-1980s, when the Armed Forces were much larger in size than they are today. The GFO corps has increased *as a percentage of the total force* over the past five decades. In 1965, GFOs made up about one-twentieth of one percent (0.048%) of the total force, while in 2024, they made up about one-fifteenth of one percent (0.067%) of the total force, indicating that the share of the total force made up of GFOs has increased by 40%.

Some argue that this increased proportion of GFOs is excessive and contributes to more bureaucratic decisionmaking processes. Others counter that the increased proportion is linked to the military's emphasis on joint and coalition operations; core organizational requirements; management, budgeting, and program requirements; and the employment of automated, highly lethal, and destructive weapons systems that may require fewer personnel coupled with more discernment in employment of those weapons.

Compensation for GFOs varies based on pay grade and years of service. *Regular military compensation (RMC)* includes basic pay, basic allowance for housing, basic allowance for subsistence, and the federal tax advantage associated with allowances, which are exempt from federal income tax. In 2026, the lowest-ranking GFOs may expect to make about \$272,802 per year in RMC, while the highest-ranking GFOs may expect to make about \$296,539 per year.

This report provides an overview of Congress's framework for managing active-duty GFOs in the U.S. Armed Forces—including duties, statutory controls, authorizations, compensation, and historical trends in the proportion of GFOs relative to the total force. National Guard and Reserve GFOs are not addressed in this report, except in cases in which they serve on active duty in a manner that counts against the statutory active-duty caps on GFOs. The report includes issues for congressional consideration in the exercise of its authority and responsibilities.

Contents

Background	1
The GFO Population	2
Responsibilities of GFO Positions.....	2
Statutory Controls on GFO Authorizations	3
Presidential Determination for Three-Star and Four-Star Positions.....	6
Statutorily Defined Positions	6
Regular Military Compensation for GFOs	7
Considerations for Congress.....	8
Proportion of GFOs in the Force.....	8
Historical Perspective	8
Criticisms of Increasing the Proportion of GFOs	8
Justifications for a Higher Proportion of GFOs	9
Justification for the Statutory Status Quo	11
GFO Assignments	12
GFO Management Considerations for Congress.....	13
Congress Faces Recurring Questions in Managing GFO Authorizations	13

Figures

Figure 1. Minimum Number of GFOs for Joint Positions.....	5
Figure 2. GFO Authorizations by Service	6
Figure 3. Department of Defense Budget Authority, by Public Law Title FY1948-FY2028.....	11

Tables

Table 1. Grade, Insignia, and Paygrade of General and Flag Officers	1
Table 2. Number of Active-Duty General and Flag Officers.....	2
Table 3. Maximum Number of GFOs, by Service, Excluding Joint Positions	4
Table 4. Annual Regular Military Compensation for General and Flag Officers.....	7
Table A-1. Historical GFO Levels.....	15
Table B-1. Selected Positions and Statutes.....	16

Appendixes

Appendix A. Historical GFO Levels	15
Appendix B. Selected Positions and Statutes	16

Contacts

Author Information..... 23

Background

The Constitution provides Congress broad powers over the Armed Forces, including the power “to raise and support Armies,” “to provide and maintain a Navy,” and “to make Rules for the Government and Regulation of the land and naval Forces.”¹ It also provides the Senate the authority to provide “Advice and Consent” on presidential nominations of “all other Officers of the United States,” including military officers.² On the basis of its constitutional authority, Congress has passed laws that govern important aspects of military officer personnel management, including appointments, assignments, grade structure, promotions, and separations.

The most senior officers in the Army, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Space Force are called general officers. The most senior officers in the Navy are called flag officers.³ The phrase “general and flag officers,” or “GFOs,” refers to all officers in pay grades O-7 through O-10 and include all one-, two-, three-, and four-star officers. At the highest level, O-10, GFOs hold the most visible and important military positions in the Department of Defense (DOD), which is “using a secondary Department of War designation,” under Executive Order 14347 dated September 5, 2025, including the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the chiefs of the five military services, Chief of the National Guard Bureau, and the combatant commanders. At the lowest level, O-7, they hold positions that span an array of roles, including commanders, deputy commanders, and key staff roles in defense and service-level departments and agencies.

Congress has developed a statutory framework applicable to GFOs and considers amendments to these laws as it deems appropriate. Congress also periodically reviews the number, duties, and compensation of GFOs. References in this report to specific grades (ranks) within the GFO corps use the appropriate capitalized title, insignia, or paygrade as indicated in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Grade, Insignia, and Paygrade of General and Flag Officers

Grade (Army, Air Force, Marine Corps and Space Force)	Grade (Navy)	Insignia	Paygrade
General	Admiral	four-stars ****	O-10
Lieutenant General	Vice Admiral	three-stars ***	O-9
Major General	Rear Admiral	two-stars **	O-8
Brigadier General	Rear Admiral (Lower Half)	one-star *	O-7

Sources: Grades from 10 U.S.C. §741; insignias from Department of Defense, available at <https://dod.defense.gov/About/Insignias/Officers/>; paygrades from 37 U.S.C. §201.

¹ U.S. Constitution Article I, Section 8.

² Article II, Section 2. This section also provides that “the Congress may by Law vest the Appointment of such inferior Officers, as they think proper, in the President alone, in the Courts of Law, or in the Heads of Departments.”

³ The Coast Guard uses the same rank structure as the Navy. While the Coast Guard is one of the Armed Forces, it is not covered in this report, as it normally operates under different statutory authority (Title 14) than the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Space Force (Title 10).

The GFO Population

Table 2. Number of Active-Duty General and Flag Officers

As of September 30, 2025

Grade	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force	TOTAL
General/Admiral	8	9	3	12	4	36
Lieutenant General/Vice Admiral	53	32	22	33	4	144
Major General/Rear Admiral	84	69	30	65	11	259
Brigadier General /Rear Admiral (Lower Half)	134	109	37	116	13	409
TOTAL	279	219	92	226	32	848

Source: Department of Defense Active Duty Military Personnel by Rank/Grade and Service, September 30, 2025, available at <https://dwp.dmdc.osd.mil/dwp/app/dod-data-reports/workforce-reports>. Includes GFOs in Service and Joint assignments.

Responsibilities of GFO Positions

Congress has specified the functions or duties for some key GFO positions, such as members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff,⁴ the top two officers of each service (i.e., service chiefs and vice chiefs),⁵ the combatant commanders,⁶ the Commander of U.S. Special Operations Command,⁷ the Commander of U.S. Cyber Command,⁸ and the Chief and Vice Chief of the National Guard Bureau.⁹ This leaves the majority of GFO positions undefined in statute. In these instances, DOD uses the following criteria for determining whether a general or flag officer should fill a position:

- nature, characteristics, and function of the position;
- grade and position of superior, principal subordinates, and lateral points of coordination;
- degree of independence of operation;
- official relations with other U.S. and foreign governmental positions;
- magnitude of responsibilities;
- mission and special requirements;
- number, type, and value of resources managed and employed;

⁴ 10 U.S.C. §§151-154.

⁵ Specifically, the Chief of Staff of the Army (10 U.S.C. §7033), the Vice Chief of Staff of the Army (10 U.S.C. §7034), the Chief of Staff of the Air Force (10 U.S.C. §9033), the Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force (10 U.S.C. §9034), the Commandant of the Marine Corps (10 U.S.C. §8043), the Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps (10 U.S.C. §8044), the Chief of Naval Operations (10 U.S.C. §8033), the Vice Chief of Naval Operations (10 U.S.C. §8035), the Chief of Space Operations (10 U.S.C. §9082), and the Vice Chief of Space Operations (10 U.S.C. 9083).

⁶ 10 U.S.C. §164.

⁷ 10 U.S.C. §167.

⁸ 10 U.S.C. §167b.

⁹ 10 U.S.C. §10502 and 10 U.S.C. §10505, respectively.

- forces, personnel, value of equipment, total obligation authority;
- geographic area of responsibility;
- authority to make decisions and commit resources;
- development of policy;
- national commitment to international agreements;
- impact on national security and other national interests; and
- effect on the prestige of the nation or the armed force.¹⁰

Statutory Controls on GFO Authorizations

Congress has established a statutory framework for GFOs that limits GFO numbers by grade, requires presidential appointment to many three-star and four-star positions, and specifies the grade and/or duties of certain key positions. This framework provides for congressional oversight of the most senior GFO positions, while providing latitude to the executive branch in the management of the remaining GFO positions. Combining the maximum number of service and joint GFO statutory authorizations, the maximum number of GFO positions authorized is 857.

Positions to which DOD is required, or may choose, to assign a GFO may be designated as joint duty assignments. Those joint duty positions typically reside in joint activities (e.g., the Joint Staff, combatant command staffs).¹¹ Other positions normally reside in the respective services' organizations (e.g., the Army Staff, division, wing, or higher commands).¹²

The FY2017 National Defense Authorization Act (FY2017 NDAA; P.L. 114-328) included a provision, codified at 10 U.S.C. §526, to reduce the number of GFOs authorized to be on active duty for more than one year, effective as of January 1, 2023. The conference report that accompanied the bill highlighted congressional concerns that the military departments had not demonstrated a willingness to implement GFO reductions directed by then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in 2011 and noted the context of significant reductions in personnel strength that occurred in the calendar year 2011-2016 timeframe.¹³

¹⁰ Criteria provided by Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Legislative Affairs, May 12, 2015. In a 2021 congressional hearing, Clifford L. Stanley, Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, provided similar criteria. See Testimony of Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness Clifford L. Stanley, in U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Personnel, General and Flag Officer Requirements, 112th Cong., 1st sess., September 14, 2021, S.Hrg. 112-258, p. 62.

¹¹ 10 U.S.C. §526. For GFO billet management, these positions reside in "The Joint Pool." For detailed information on DOD GFO management, see *Chairman of The Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction 1331.01E*, March 31, 2022, at <https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Library/Instructions/CJCSI%201331.01E.pdf>.

¹² 10 U.S.C. §526.

¹³ The conference report that accompanied the FY2017 National Defense Authorization Act stated, "The conferees note that despite two decades of Congressional concern the Department of Defense and the military departments have not demonstrated the willingness to implement even the reduction in the number of general and flag officer positions directed by the Secretary of Defense's Track Four Efficiencies Initiatives decision of March 14, 2011. In the context of the Department of Defense's continued requests to reduce military end strength, especially in the Army and the Marine Corps, reductions that Congress has cautiously considered and authorized, the time has come for the Department to rigorously evaluate and validate every general and flag officer position. The conferees believe that an additional 10% reduction in the number of general and flag officer positions may be appropriate by downgrading or eliminating positions in addition to the 110 positions required to be eliminated under this provision are achieved. The conferees expect that the Department of Defense and the military departments will improve efficiency by eliminating bloated headquarters and staffs while preserving the necessary number and grades of positions for general and flag officers who (continued...)"

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024 (FY2024 NDAA; P.L. 118-31) realized a set of legislative actions begun in the FY2017 NDAA, to reduce congressionally mandated limits on the number of GFOs on active duty, with some exceptions.¹⁴ Section 512 of the FY2024 NDAA amended 10 U.S.C. §10505 to require that the Vice Chief of the National Guard Bureau be appointed to serve in the grade of general and that the Secretary of Defense designate this position as one of the general officer positions to be excluded from the limitations of Section 526(a) of Title 10 of the *U.S. Code*. Per the *Conference Report to Accompany H.R. 2670* (H.Rept. 118-301), the conferees “authorized the permanent increase in general and flag officer authorized strengths [in Section 501, by one per service] to accommodate the congressional requirement for a general or flag officer to serve as the lead special trial counsel, and [added] an increase of an additional Marine Corps general officer to address safety needs in the Marine Corps.”¹⁵ The FY2026 NDAA (P.L. 119-60 §502) amended 10 U.S.C. 526 to increase the maximum number of GFOs in the Space Force from 21 to 24 and reduce the maximum number of Air Force GFOs from 171 to 168. **Table 3** summarizes the statutory upper limits by grade for service-specific GFO positions.

Table 3. Maximum Number of GFOs, by Service, Excluding Joint Positions

Grade	Army	Air Force	Marine Corps	Navy	Space Force	TOTAL
GFO Maximum for all grades	219	168	64	150	24	625
2-star maximum	90	73	21	49	6	239
3- and 4-star maximum	46	44	18	34	7	149
4-star maximum	8	9	2	6	2	27

Source: CRS analysis of 10 U.S.C. §§525 and 526.

Note: Neither 10 U.S.C. §525 nor §526 specifies an exact limit for 3-star GFOs, rather, they specify the total not-to-exceed number of 3- and 4-star GFOs combined.

There are certain circumstances under which a general or flag officer does not “count” against the GFO caps (e.g., after retirement approval).¹⁶ The President has authority under Title 10, Section

are responsible to train and lead our Nation’s forces in battle and to bring them safely home again.” H.Rept. 114-840, p. 1013. A copy of the *Track Four Efficiency Initiatives Decisions* memo by Secretary Gates is available at <https://dodprocurementtoolbox.com/cms/sites/default/files/resources/2021-12/20110314-Track%20Four%20Efficiency%20Initiatives%20Decisions.pdf>.

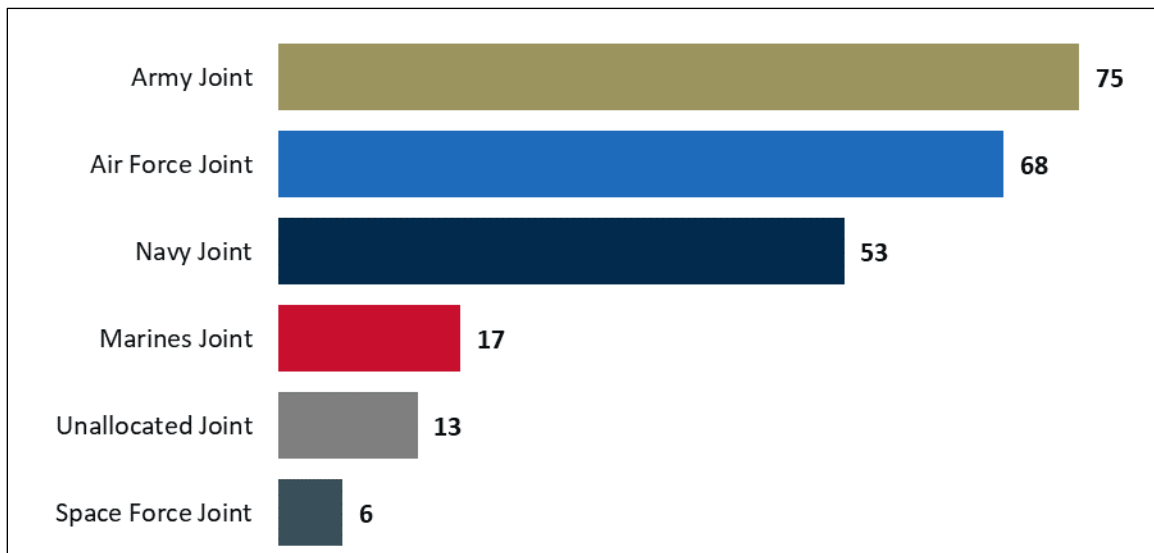
¹⁴ The FY2017 National Defense Authorization Act (FY2017 NDAA; P.L. 114-328 §501) included a provision, codified at 10 U.S.C. §526, to reduce the number of GFOs authorized to be on active duty for more than one year, effective as of January 1, 2023. The conference report, H.Rept. 114-840, p. 1013, that accompanied the bill highlighted congressional concerns that the military departments had not demonstrated a willingness to implement GFO reductions directed by then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in 2011 and noted the context of significant reductions in personnel strength that occurred in the calendar year 2011-2016 time frame. The John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 (P.L. 115-232 §596) required a “report on general and flag officer costs.” William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 (P.L. 116-283 §501) provided for accounting for the number reserve GFOs, required a plan for downsizing the number of active GFOs among other purposes. The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022 (P.L. 117-81 §501) provided authority for transferring GFO billets among the Armed Forces. The James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 P.L. 117-263 §501) excluded lead special trial counsel of each Armed Service from the GFO strength limits.

¹⁵ H.Rept. 118-301, p. 1042.

¹⁶ Active-duty GFOs excluded from the caps include those within 60 days of retirement and GFOs transitioning (continued...)

527, of the *U.S. Code* to suspend the operation of the caps in time of war or national emergency declared by Congress or the President. Section 526(b) of Title 10 of the *U.S. Code* further authorizes the exemption of 232 GFOs in joint positions from the limitations of Section 526(a). The FY2026 NDAA did not specify any changes to the minimum number of joint GFOs. Unless the Secretary of Defense determines that a lower number is in the best interest of the department, the GFOs serving in the 232 authorized joint positions “shall be” at least those illustrated in **Figure 1**.¹⁷

Figure 1. Minimum Number of GFOs for Joint Positions

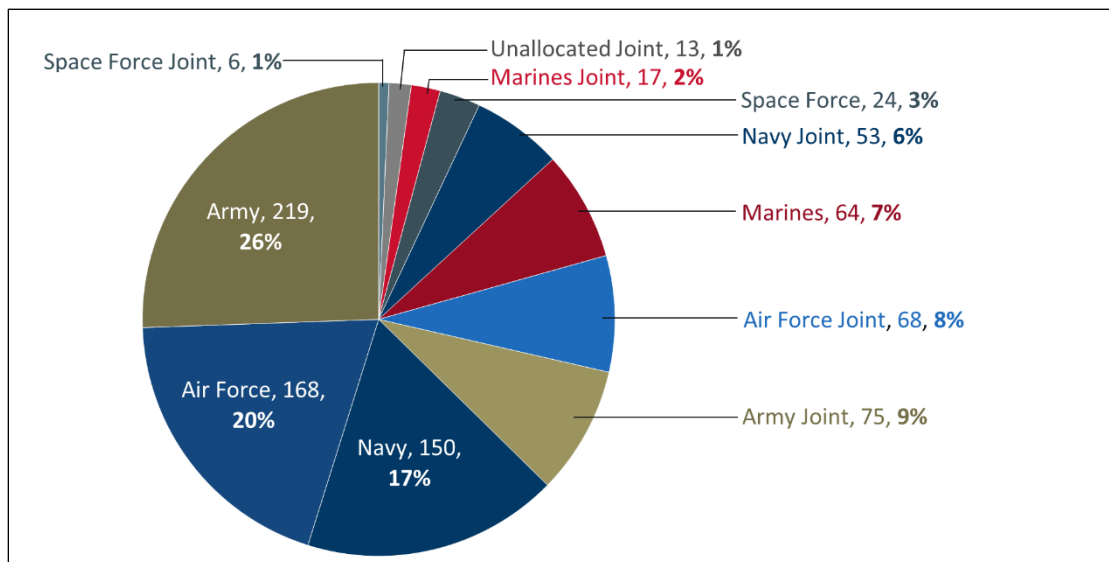


Source: CRS analysis of 10 U.S.C. §526(b)(2).

Note: 10 U.S.C. §526 allocates only minimum positions per service, not all positions.

between certain positions for up to 60 days. The Attending Physician of Congress is counted in addition to the number otherwise permitted for the officers’ armed force in grades above O-7. Certain reserve component GFOs serving on active duty for limited periods of time are also excluded; see 10 U.S.C. §§525 (d)-(g) and 526(c)-(g).

¹⁷ 10 U.S.C. §526(b)(2).

Figure 2. GFO Authorizations by Service

Source: CRS analysis of 10 U.S.C. §§525 and 526.

Notes: 10 U.S.C. §526 allocates minimum positions per service within the total of *joint* assignments. Percentages in the graph illustrate portion of GFOs by service within the entire GFO population. Percentages are rounded and may not sum.

Presidential Determination for Three-Star and Four-Star Positions

Section 601 of Title 10 of the *U.S. Code* provides that “[t]he President may designate positions of importance and responsibility to carry the grade of general or admiral or lieutenant general or vice admiral.... An officer assigned to any such position has the grade specified for that position if he is appointed to that grade by the President, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate.” Thus, except for those so designated in statute, all three-star and four-star positions are to be designated as such by the President. Congress may review the rationale for this designation as part of its oversight function. The Senate retains the power to confirm or withhold confirmation of the nomination of an individual to fill such a position. The authority of the President to designate such positions is also limited by the strength caps on GFOs found in 10 U.S.C. §§525 and 526.

Statutorily Defined Positions

Congress has established in law certain GFO positions with specified grades, designated duties, or both. Those GFOs named in 10 U.S.C. §151, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the commanders of unified and specified combatant commands constitute most of these positions. Title 10 U.S.C. §152 specifies that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff holds the rank of General or Admiral (O-10) “while so serving.”

Appendix B provides excerpts of the statutorily required responsibilities, duties, or functions of certain GFO positions. Congress may change these duties. For example, Section 512 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2012 (P.L. 112-81) specified that the Chief of the National Guard Bureau is a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, whose duties include “the

specific responsibility of addressing matters involving non-Federalized National Guard forces in support of homeland defense and civil support missions.”¹⁸

Regular Military Compensation for GFOs

Military personnel, including GFOs, are compensated in three main ways: cash compensation (pay and allowances), noncash compensation (benefits), and deferred compensation (retired pay and benefits). This report discusses only the compensation elements that make up *regular military compensation* (RMC). RMC is a statutorily defined measure of the major compensation elements that every servicemember receives periodically, and excludes non-cash benefits and deferred compensation.¹⁹ Certain GFOs receive a “personal money allowance” as well, which is not part of RMC.

Table 4 details the notional RMC that GFOs may receive in 2026. It assumes that all GFOs receive a basic allowance for housing (BAH) rather than living in government-provided housing.²⁰

Table 4. Annual Regular Military Compensation for General and Flag Officers

As of January 1, 2026

Grade	Basic Pay	Basic Allowance for Housing	Basic Allowance for Subsistence (Flat Rate)	Federal Tax Advantage	RMC
General/Admiral	\$227,999	\$48,092	\$3,942	\$16,507	\$296,539
Lieutenant General/ Vice Admiral	\$227,999	\$48,172	\$3,942	\$16,410	\$296,523
Major General/ Rear Admiral	\$227,999	\$48,145	\$3,942	\$16,443	\$296,528
Brigadier General / Rear Admiral(Lower Half)	\$204,958	\$48,229	\$3,942	\$15,673	\$272,802

Source: Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, *Personnel and Readiness, Directorate of Compensation, Selected Compensation Tables, 1 January 2026*, p. B3. On file with the authors.

¹⁸ P.L. 112-81 §512.

¹⁹ Statutory definition contained in 37 U.S.C. §101(25): “the total of the following elements that a member of the uniformed services accrues or receives, directly or indirectly, in cash or in kind every payday: basic pay, basic allowance for housing, basic allowance for subsistence, and Federal tax advantage accruing to the aforementioned allowances because they are not subject to Federal income tax.” For more information on Regular Military Compensation, see CRS In Focus IF10532, *Defense Primer: Regular Military Compensation*, by Kristy N. Kamarck.

²⁰ About 19% of GFOs lived in government-provided housing as of January 1, 2024, according to DOD reporting, and, therefore, seemingly did not receive BAH. While this lowers the cash compensation received, they received free housing instead. For the purposes of **Table 4**, the value of the free housing is assumed to be equivalent to the BAH of their GFO peers. The calculation of the proportion living in government-provided housing was made using Selected Military Compensation Tables (OSD Compensation Greenbook, 2024), Table A-7, Number Of Military Personnel... Receiving Cash Allowances, and Table A8, Number Of Military Personnel... Receiving Quarters In Kind by Pay Cell, PDF pp. 7-8, available at <https://militarypay.defense.gov/Portals/3/Documents/BlendedRetirementDocuments/GreenBook%202024%20-%205.2%20percent%20-%20rev.pdf?ver=-pvWgAk1QWQ4cU-5B-nkgg%3d%3d>.

Notes: RMC is Regular Military Compensation. Totals may not sum due to rounding. Members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Combatant Commanders receive \$48,412 in BAH and \$16,122 in Federal Tax Advantage. The Federal Tax Advantage is computed using the standard deduction and 2026 tax rates, including the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC).

Considerations for Congress

Proportion of GFOs in the Force

Historical Perspective

A summary of the number of active-duty GFOs and the proportion of GFOs relative to the size of the active force over the past five decades is provided in **Appendix A**. A review of GFO levels indicates a 13.9% increase in the number of four-star officers in this period (36 on September 30, 1965, versus 41 on September 30, 2024, the end of the fiscal year) and a 39.5% increase in the number of three-star officers (119 versus 166), with variations over time related to contemporary events. Over the same time period, the number of one-star and two-star officers decreased by 41.9% (1,129 versus 656).

During this time, the size of the active force dropped by approximately 51.9%, from 2.66 million on September 30, 1965, to 1.28 million on September 30, 2024. Thus, a more salient measure may be the proportion of GFOs to the total force.

Looking at the data from this perspective, GFOs have generally made up a small percentage of the active force; however, the GFO corps has increased *as a percentage of the active force* over the past five decades. GFOs made up about one-twentieth of one percent (0.048%) of the total force in 1965, whereas they made up about one-fifteenth of one percent (0.067%) of the total force in FY2024, indicating that the share of the total force made up of GFOs has increased by 39.6%. This historical trend is more pronounced with respect to four-star officers (which grew from 0.0014% of the total force to 0.0032%, a 128.6% increase) and three-star officers (which grew from 0.0045% of the total force to 0.013%, a 189% increase). One- and two-star officers as a percentage of the total force increased 20.5% (from 0.0425% of the total force to 0.0512%).

These increases occurred while the size of the officer corps in general increased as a percentage of the active force. As indicated in the last column of **Table A-1**, between 1965 and 2024, the officer corps increased from 12.8% of the active force to 18.2%, indicating that the share of the active force comprised of officers increased by 42.2%.

Criticisms of Increasing the Proportion of GFOs

Generally, criticisms of increasing the proportion of GFOs relative to the total force fall into two broad categories. The first criticism revolves around the increased cost of employing a GFO, compared with employing a lower-ranking officer. The second relates to the belief that too many GFOs may slow down decisionmaking processes. Each point is examined in more detail below.

- **Cost.** GFOs cost more to employ than officers of a lower rank, in part due to the higher compensation they receive. For example, a GFO in paygrade O-7 (i.e., 1-star officers, Brigadier General / Rear Admiral (Lower Half)) may expect to receive about \$272,802 in RMC in 2026, while an officer in paygrade O-6 (i.e.,

Colonel / Captain) may expect to receive about \$237,978.²¹ There can be additional costs associated with GFOs such as large staffs, official travel, and security details.²²

- **Decisionmaking.** Another criticism is that increasing the proportion of GFOs may slow decisionmaking by adding additional layers of management between the highest and lowest echelons of command. In a 2010 speech, former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates criticized the impact of an increase in GFOs and senior civilians in making the DOD a top-heavy and overly bureaucratic organization. He noted, as an example, that “The Defense Business Board recently estimated that in some cases the gap between me and an action officer may be as high as 30 layers.”²³

Justifications for a Higher Proportion of GFOs

Several congressional hearings have addressed the potential benefits of having a high proportion of GFOs relative to the total force.²⁴ A 1997 congressional review of GFO authorizations describes several rationales for a relatively high proportion, including the following:

- **Coalition operations.** Forging coalitions with other nations to achieve common security objectives can generate demand for senior military leaders to conduct coordinated planning, training, and operations with peers from foreign nations. Conducting contingency operations after the end of the Cold War often involved forces from dozens of countries, including the forces of the nation in which the operations took place. Examples of these coalition operations include those in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as smaller-scale contingencies such as Bosnia, Haiti, Kosovo (ongoing), Somalia (ongoing), and Syria (ongoing). Contingency operations such as these are often commanded by a GFO, who usually has additional GFOs as subordinate commanders and senior staff officers. Both their experience and the authority inherent in their grade can be considered important elements to the success of complex operations. Political and diplomatic considerations can also be a factor, as the officers leading these operations are typically expected to interact with the senior military and civilian leadership of the participating foreign nations.
- **Organizational structure.** The relative increase in GFOs in proportion to the active force is due in part to the organizational structure of the Armed Forces. For

²¹Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, Personnel and Readiness, Directorate of Compensation, *Selected Military Compensation Tables, 1 January 2026*, p. B3. On file with the authors.

²² These costs are difficult to estimate, as noted by the Government Accountability Office, *DOD Needs to Update General and Flag Officer Requirements and Improve Availability of Associated Costs*, GAO-14-745, September 9, 2014, available at <http://gao.gov/products/GAO-14-745>. Compensation figures are from Military Compensation Tables (OSD Compensation Greenbook, 2023), Table B3, Detailed RMC Tables for All Personnel (PDF p. 94) at <https://militarypay.defense.gov/Portals/3/GreenBook%202023.pdf>.

²³ Secretary of Defense Robert Gates speech at Eisenhower Library, delivered May 8, 2010, available at <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/PDF/SiteCollectionDocuments/Reports/2010/May%202010/Day10/GateSpeech050810.pdf>.

²⁴ See the following hearings: “Flag and General Officer Strengths,” Subcommittee on Manpower and Personnel of the Senate Armed Services Committee, September 17, 1981; “General and Flag Officer Requirements,” Subcommittee on Manpower and Personnel of the Senate Armed Services Committee, August 10, 1988; “Review of General and Flag Officer Authorizations,” Subcommittee on Personnel of the House National Security Committee, April 8, 1997, in House National Security Committee Report No. 105-6; “General and Flag Officer Requirements,” Subcommittee on Personnel of the Senate Armed Services Committee, September 14, 2011, Senate Hearing 112-258.

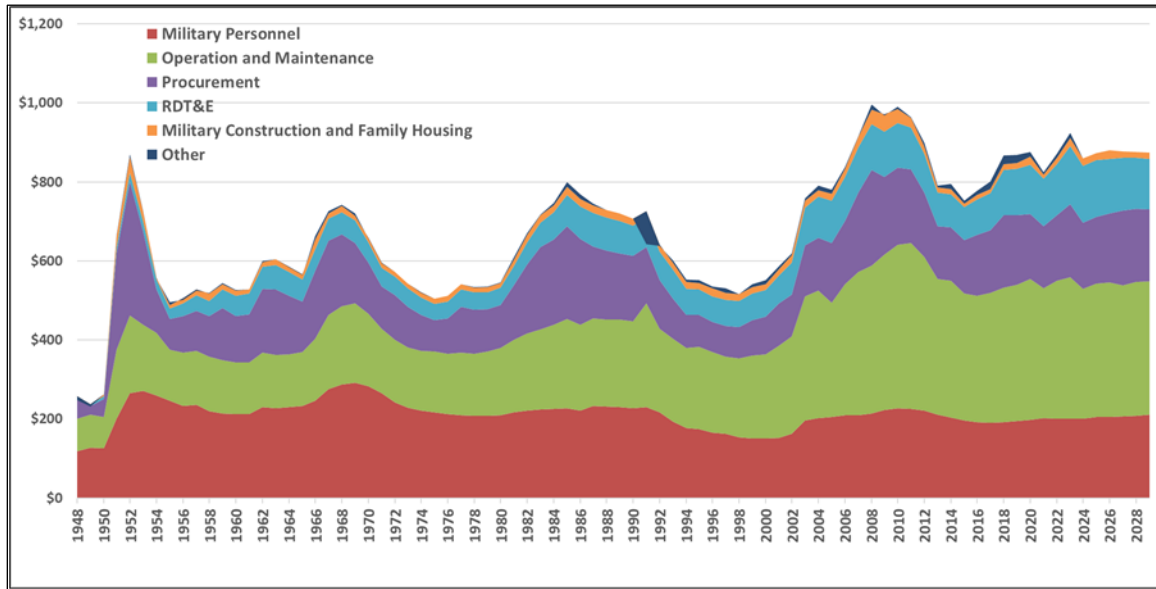
example, there was a Chief of Staff of the Air Force at the peak of the Vietnam War, when the Air Force had about 900,000 airmen, and there is still one in 2026, with the Air Force strength at approximately 319,000 airmen as of December 31, 2025.²⁵ Given the organizational structure and “posture” of the Armed Forces—some of which is required by law—the amount of management “overhead” does not necessarily change in direct proportion to the size of the force.

- **Technological changes.** A third justification for increased GFO ratios is that technological advances have changed the way the United States fights its wars. Modern weapons systems, much more powerful and accurate than their predecessors, require fewer personnel to deliver greater firepower. Thus, while the number of personnel a GFO commands may decline as more sophisticated equipment is substituted for manpower, the lethality of those forces may increase. From this perspective, the lethality of the weapons systems, rather than the number of people, provides the justification for an organization to be led by a very senior military officer. Additionally, the advent and development of new domains of warfare—such as space and cyber—has led to the creation of new organizations (e.g., U.S. Space Force, U.S. Cyber Command) to exploit advantages and defend against vulnerabilities in those environments, with additional senior positions.
- **Resource Management Changes.** DOD budget authority and complexity have generally increased over time, as have expectations of their management. (DOD budget authority is depicted in **Figure 3**.) As with the increased sophistication of operations and weaponry, responsibility for budgets that amount to over one-half of federal discretionary spending may require more senior-level management.

²⁵ Department of Defense Active Duty Military Personnel by Rank/Grade and Service, December 31, 2025.

Figure 3. Department of Defense Budget Authority, by Public Law Title FY1948-FY2028

In billions of constant FY2025 dollars



Sources: FY2025 Budget Request: Department of Defense-Military (Subfunction 051), by Cameron M. Keys. CRS analysis of Department of Defense, National Defense Budget Estimates for FY2025, April 2024, Table 6-8.

Note: Figures for FY2026-FY2029 are projections.

Translating defense authorization laws governing policy and appropriations laws for defense and military construction into a *Future Years Defense Program* that illustrates policy and plans five years into the future and “record[s] and display[s] resource decisions,” may require the seniority of a GFO.²⁶

Justification for the Statutory Status Quo

As noted above, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024 (FY2024 NDAA; P.L. 118-31) realized a congressionally directed reduction of GFO billets, achieved through intensive study and oversight.²⁷ The law does not prohibit the executive branch from further reductions, and the executive branch has initiated such a reduction. Secretary of Defense Peter B. Hegseth, who is using “Secretary of War” as a “secondary title” under Executive Order 14347 dated September 5, 2025, released a memorandum on May 5, 2025, directing the following general and flag officer reductions.

- A minimum 20% reduction of 4-star positions across the Active Component;
- A minimum 20% reduction of general officers in the National Guard; and

²⁶ For more information on the Future Years Defense Program, see CRS In Focus IF10831, *Defense Primer: Future Years Defense Program (FYDP)*, by Brendan W. McGarry and Alexandra G. Neenan.

²⁷ See footnote 13 and see footnote 14. See also H.Rept. 114-840, p. 1013. A copy of the Track Four Efficiency Initiatives Decisions memo by Secretary Gates is available at https://www.acq.osd.mil/asda/dpc/ce/pc/docs/archive/3-14-2011_Track_Four_Efficiency_Initiatives_Decisions.pdf.

- An additional minimum 10% reduction in general and flag officers with the realignment of the Unified Command Plan.²⁸

The final list of “redundant” positions is yet to be released. Therefore, Congress may choose whether or not to await further legislative action and review any future executive branch decisions.

GFO Assignments

Assignment to any role in the uniformed military services is subject to controls provided in statutes, DOD regulations, and military department regulations. Congress has the constitutional power to make the laws that govern the Armed Forces.²⁹ In carrying out these laws, the President, as Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces (U.S. Constitution, Article 2, Section II), exercises command authority, which extends to the most junior leader of any unit. In statute, the Defense Secretary has “authority, direction, and control” over the Defense Department.³⁰ The duty assignment of any servicemember, including leadership and command positions at all levels, depends on such delegated command authority.

GFOs are subject to the same command authority and to certain statutes and regulations that apply to their nomination for promotion and service in certain assignments. For joint duty assignments (JDAs), including as Combatant Commanders, other than those in statute, “Most GFO JDAs are identified and managed as 2-year assignments. The tour length for Combatant Commanders and Defense Agency directors is 3 years. Acquisition billets are governed by additional legislation that may require tour lengths of 3 or 4 years.”³¹ Services have their own specific regulations that apply only to GFOs in service-controlled billets.

Terminology in describing assignment actions, including GFOs, can be imprecise. The terms *fire*, *sack*, *axe*, *cashier*, *relieve*, *reassign*, and *dismiss* are used as synonyms in various press articles and oral reporting to describe the dynamic process of a uniformed officer’s change of position. The latter three terms figure in statute and in DOD issuances. Dismissal is the most severe because it expels the officer from the service altogether as punishment for misconduct. Such authority has limits in statute, especially regarding dismissal, which can occur only by sentence of court martial, unless the President orders it during war, in which case the officer is entitled to demand court martial (e.g., 10 U.S.C. §§804 and 1161). Relief and reassignment are duty changes that may be negative, positive, or neutral in character, depending on the individual situation.

Appendix B includes selected provisions of the *U.S. Code* that inform decisions related to GFO assignments.

²⁸ Secretary of Defense Peter B. Hegseth, *Memorandum For Senior Pentagon Leadership, Subject: General/Flag Officer Reductions*, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2025/May/05/2003704210/-1/-1/1/MEMORANDUM-DIRECTING-GENERAL-AND-FLAG-OFFICER-REDUCTIONS.PDF>.

²⁹ U.S. CONST. art. I, §8, cls. 14 (to make Rules for the Government and Regulation of the land and naval Forces), 16 (to govern such part of the militia in federal service).

³⁰ 10 U.S.C. §113.

³¹ Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, The Joint Staff, *Manpower And Personnel Actions Involving General And Flag Officers*, CJCSI 1331.01E, Washington, DC, March 31, 2022, p. C-1. Based on 10 U.S.C. §664. See also Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, *DOD Joint Officer Management Program*, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, DOD INSTRUCTION 1300.19, Washington, DC, May 18, 2023, p. 27, <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/130019p.pdf?ver=2018-04-03-114842-923>.

GFO Management Considerations for Congress

Congress has established in law certain GFO positions with specified grades, designated duties, or both. Those GFOs named in 10 U.S.C. §151, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the commanders of unified and specified combatant commands comprise most of these positions. The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2026 (P.L. 119-60 §911) amended 10 U.S.C. §§151 and 164(a) to require that the President notify Congress when a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff or a commander of a unified or specified combatant command is being removed or transferred, and provide a statement of the reason for the removal or transfer, no later than five days after the removal or transfer. Congress may consider whether or not to adjust other statutory requirements controlling GFO assignments. This could include

- presidential reports to Congress in the case of §601 GFO assignments that fall outside of the assignment framework represented in **Appendix B**;
- a specified tour duration for Combatant Commanders;
- specified Service rotation in Combatant Command assignments, or a sense of Congress regarding a preferred Service to lead such commands; and
- more detailed education, training, or assignment history requirements (e.g., for Combatant Commanders, an assignment in the nominated theater at the O-6 level or above).

Appendix B highlights positions and selected provisions with statutory requirements that affect responsibilities, duties, or functions of certain GFO positions and GFO positions generally.

Congress Faces Recurring Questions in Managing GFO Authorizations

Should Congress elect to address GFO authorizations, duties, compensation, or other related topics in more detail, it may consider the following:

- What is the most appropriate way to determine how many GFOs DOD should have? How closely should this be linked to total force size? To what extent do statutory requirements drive GFO requirements? What other factors would be useful in determining the optimal number of GFOs?
- Are there GFO roles that could be filled by civilian employees? Which tasks or roles require a senior military officer, especially in terms of advanced managerial skills, and which tasks or roles currently held by senior military officers could be done by senior civilian personnel?
- How do advances in information technology and decisionmaking tools affect the need for GFOs? Could the use of these technologies result in flattened management structures and decrease the need for GFOs? Or do they require additional GFOs with specialized expertise?
- Could organizational restructuring of the Joint Staff, Service Staffs, and combatant command staffs decrease the need for GFOs or allow positions to be held by officers of a lower pay grade? Could selected organizations be merged to reduce the requirements for GFOs?
- How important is rank equivalence when senior U.S. military personnel work with their allied peers? Could military relations with international partners be restructured to reduce the need for GFO representation?

- Could National Guard and Reserve GFOs be used to reduce the need for active-duty GFOs?
- Are there GFO positions that could be eliminated or “downgraded” to a lower rank? What are the costs and benefits associated with these actions? How might this affect military effectiveness?
- Can the direct and indirect costs associated with GFOs be reduced? For example, could staff overhead costs be reduced without significantly affecting the ability of GFOs to carry out their duties?

Appendix A. Historical GFO Levels

Table A-1. Historical GFO Levels

Year	Officers					As Percentage of Total Force							
	4-Star	3-Star	2-Star	1-Star	1- & 2-Star	All GFOs	All Officer	Active Force	4-Star Officers	3-Star Officers	1- & 2-Star Officers	All GFOs	All Officers
1965	36	119	n/a	n/a	1,129	1,284	338,822	2,655,389	0.0014%	0.0045%	0.0425%	0.048%	12.76%
1970	40	141	n/a	n/a	1,157	1,338	402,226	3,066,294	0.0013%	0.0046%	0.0377%	0.044%	13.12%
1975	36	118	443	584	1,027	1,181	292,424	2,128,120	0.0017%	0.0055%	0.0483%	0.055%	13.74%
1980	32	113	406	559	965	1,110	277,622	2,050,627	0.0016%	0.0055%	0.0471%	0.054%	13.54%
1985	36	125	370	519	889	1,050	308,919	2,151,032	0.0017%	0.0058%	0.0413%	0.049%	14.36%
1990	36	121	367	530	897	1,054	296,591	2,043,705	0.0018%	0.0059%	0.0439%	0.052%	14.51%
1995	35	110	274	432	706	851	237,602	1,518,224	0.0023%	0.0072%	0.0465%	0.056%	15.65%
2000	34	119	282	436	718	871	217,178	1,384,338	0.0025%	0.0086%	0.0519%	0.063%	15.69%
2005	35	128	272	439	711	874	226,619	1,389,394	0.0025%	0.0092%	0.0512%	0.063%	16.31%
2010	39	150	310	482	792	981	234,000	1,430,985	0.0027%	0.0105%	0.0553%	0.069%	16.35%
2015	38	141	310	420	730	909	230,468	1,313,940	0.0029%	0.0107%	0.0556%	0.069%	17.54%
2018	40	147	296	438	734	921	230,708	1,317,325	0.0030%	0.0112%	0.0557%	0.070%	17.51%
2019	37	142	295	409	704	883	214,661	1,325,826	0.0028%	0.0107%	0.0531%	0.0666%	16.19%
2020	45	153	281	417	698	896	215,935	1,333,461	0.0034%	0.0115%	0.0523%	0.0672%	16.19%
2021	41	156	293	405	698	895	216,369	1,333,771	0.0031%	0.0117%	0.0523%	0.0671%	16.22%
2022	39	146	283	373	656	841	213,175	1,296,309	0.0030%	0.0113%	0.0506%	0.0649%	16.44%
2023	37	132	252	388	640	809	234,252	1,286,027	0.0029%	0.0103%	0.0500%	0.0630%	18.22%
2024	41	166	282	374	656	863	233,581	1,280,652	0.0032%	0.013%	0.0512%	0.0674%	18.24%
2025	36	144	259	409	668	848	235,575	1,298,099	0.0028%	0.0111%	0.0515%	0.0653%	18.15%

Source: CRS compilation of data produced by the Defense Manpower Data Center.

Notes: Figures are as of September 30 of each year. n/a = not applicable.

Appendix B. Selected Positions and Statutes

Table B-1. Selected Positions and Statutes

Position/Service	Statute	Grade and Requirements	Selected Duties, Responsibilities, or Functions	Appointment Duration
Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff/Joint	10 U.S.C. §§152-153	<p>General or Admiral</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must have served as the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Service Chief, or commander of a unified or specified combatant command. • The President may waive the above if the President determines such action is necessary in the national interest. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assisting the President and the Secretary of Defense in providing for the strategic direction of the Armed Forces. • In matters related to strategic and contingency planning, developing strategic frameworks and preparing strategic plans, as required, to guide the use and employment of military force and related activities across all geographic regions and military functions and domains, and to sustain military efforts over different durations of time, as necessary. • In matters relating to global military strategic and operational integration, providing advice to the President and the Secretary on ongoing military operations, and advising the Secretary on the allocation and transfer of forces among geographic and functional combatant commands, as necessary, to address transregional, multidomain, and multifunctional threats. 	<p>Four years (except in time of war) Term begins on October 1 of an odd-numbered year.</p>

Position/Service	Statute	Grade and Requirements	Selected Duties, Responsibilities, or Functions	Appointment Duration
Service Chiefs/Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, and Space Force	10 U.S.C. §7033 (for other Service Chiefs, see 10 U.S.C. §§8043, 8033, 9033, and 9082)	<p>General or Admiral</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Significant experience in joint duty assignments; and ... one full tour of duty in a joint duty assignment ... as a general officer.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In matters related to comprehensive joint readiness, evaluating the overall preparedness of the joint force to perform the responsibilities of that force under national defense strategies and to respond to significant contingencies worldwide. In matters relating to joint capability development, identifying new joint military capabilities based on advances in technology and concepts of operation needed to maintain the technological and operational superiority of the Armed Forces, and recommending investments and experiments in such capabilities to the Secretary. In matters relating to joint force development activities, developing doctrine for the joint employment of the Armed Forces, and formulating policies and technical standards, and executing actions, for the joint training of the Armed Forces. 	<p>Varies by Service.</p> <p>For the Chief of Staff of the Army:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Presiding over the Army Staff. <p>Four years, term extendable up to four years during time of war or during a national emergency declared by Congress. Serves at the pleasure of the President.</p>

Position/Service	Statute	Grade and Requirements	Selected Duties, Responsibilities, or Functions	Appointment Duration
		<p>The President may waive the above if the President determines such action is necessary in the national interest.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transmitting the plans and recommendations of the Army Staff to the Secretary and advising the Secretary about such plans and recommendations. • After approval of the plans or recommendations of the Army Staff by the Secretary, acting as the agent of the Secretary in carrying them into effect. • Exercising supervision, consistent with the authority assigned to commanders of unified or specified combatant commands under Chapter 6 of this title, over such members and organizations of the Army as the Secretary determines. • Performing duties as prescribed for members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. 	
<p>Commander of a combatant command, Commander, United States Forces, Korea/Joint</p>	<p>10 U.S.C. §164 and §604</p>	<p>General or Admiral</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 U.S.C. §604 refers to “commander of a combatant command” positions as “Joint 4-star officer positions.” • Joint specialty under Section 661 of Title 10; has completed a tour of duty in a joint duty assignment as a general or flag officer. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Giving authoritative direction to subordinate commands and forces necessary to carry out missions assigned to the command, including authoritative direction over all aspects of military operations, joint training, and logistics. • Prescribing the chain of command to the commands and forces within the command. 	<p>Not specified</p> <p>Normally three years; DOD policy requires two years (see footnote 14).</p>

Position/Service	Statute	Grade and Requirements	Selected Duties, Responsibilities, or Functions	Appointment Duration
Commander, Special Operations Command/Joint	10 U.S.C. §167 in addition to §164	General or Admiral <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No requirements beyond those specified in §164. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizing commands and forces within that command as necessary to carry out missions assigned to the command. • Employing forces within that command as necessary to carry out missions assigned to the command. • Assigning command functions to subordinate commanders. • Coordinating and approving those aspects of administration and support (including control of resources and equipment, internal organization, and training) and discipline necessary to carry out missions assigned to the command. • Exercising the authority with respect to selecting subordinate commanders, selecting combatant command staff, suspending subordinates, and convening courts-martial. 	Not specified

Position/Service	Statute	Grade and Requirements	Selected Duties, Responsibilities, or Functions	Appointment Duration
Commander, Cyber Command/Joint	10 U.S.C. §167b in addition to §164	General or Admiral <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No requirements specified beyond those specified in §164. 	<p>the special operations command.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training assigned forces. • Conducting specialized courses of instruction for commissioned and noncommissioned officers. • Validating requirements. • Establishing priorities for requirements. • Ensuring the interoperability of equipment and forces. • Ensuring the combat readiness of forces assigned to the special operations command. • Monitoring the preparedness to carry out assigned missions of special operations forces assigned to unified combatant commands other than the special operations command. • Managing the development and acquisition of special-operations equipment. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing strategy, doctrine, and tactics [related to cyber operations activities]. • Preparing and submitting to the Secretary of Defense program recommendations and budget proposals for cyber operations forces and for other forces assigned to the cyber command. 	Not specified

Position/Service	Statute	Grade and Requirements	Selected Duties, Responsibilities, or Functions	Appointment Duration
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exercising authority, direction, and control over the expenditure of funds for forces assigned directly to the cyber command, and for cyber operations forces assigned to unified combatant commands other than the cyber command. • Training and certifying assigned joint forces. • Conducting specialized courses of instruction for commissioned and noncommissioned officers. • Validating requirements, establishing priorities for requirements, and ensuring the interoperability of equipment and forces. • Monitoring the promotion of cyber operation forces and coordinating with the military departments regarding the assignment, retention, training, professional military education, and special and incentive pays of cyber-operation forces. • Ensuring the combat readiness of forces assigned to the cyber command. • Monitoring the preparedness to carry out assigned missions of cyber forces assigned to unified combatant commands. 	

Position/Service	Statute	Grade and Requirements	Selected Duties, Responsibilities, or Functions	Appointment Duration
Chief of the National Guard Bureau/Joint “Positions of importance and responsibility” Grade of general or admiral or lieutenant general or vice admiral	10 U.S.C. §10502 10 U.S.C. §601	General <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must have had at least 10 years of federally recognized commissioned service in an active status in the National Guard in a grade above the grade of brigadier general. • Significant joint duty experience. • The President designates such positions serving on active duty in any grade above colonel or Navy captain. • Other joint duty assignments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serving as a principal advisor to the Secretary of Defense, through the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, on matters involving nonfederalized National Guard forces and on other matters as determined by the Secretary of Defense. • Serving as the principal advisor to the Secretary of the Army and the Chief of Staff of the Army, and to the Secretary of the Air Force and the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, on matters relating to the National Guard, the Army National Guard of the United States, and the Air National Guard of the United States. • Addressing matters involving nonfederalized National Guard forces in support of homeland defense and civil support missions as a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. 	Four years, may be reappointed. Serves at the pleasure of the President.
Vice Chief of the National Guard Bureau/Joint “Positions of importance and responsibility”	10 U.S.C. §10505 10 U.S.C. §601	General <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must have had at least 10 years of federally recognized commissioned service in an active status in the National Guard. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performing such duties as may be prescribed by the Chief of the National Guard Bureau. 	Four years. May be removed from office at any time for cause.

Source: Title 10, *U.S. Code*.

Notes: This table does not include a full listing of statutory positions. Likewise, for the positions it does list, the table does not include a full description of statutorily defined functions, duties, or responsibilities.

Author Information

Michael J. Vassalotti, Coordinator
Section Research Manager

Sofia Plagakis
Senior Research Librarian

Acknowledgments

Lawrence Kapp, former Specialist in Defense Personnel Policy, originally authored this report.

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.