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Succession Management for Senior Military Positions

The Rumsfeld Model for
Secretary of Defense Involvement

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Summary

Background and Introduction

The selection and assignment of the most senior military officers, those who wear three and four stars, include processes that, although well developed and long-standing, are generally unknown to most people, even those inside the armed forces. For many years, selection and assignment decisions were largely made within the services. Although the final decision fell to the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary typically did not challenge the recommendations of the services.

When Rumsfeld became Secretary of Defense in January 2001, he decided that he would become personally involved in the selection of officers for all three- and four-star assignments. Proponents of his involvement agreed with the need for his assertion of civilian control over the selection of officers who could help him transform DoD. Others viewed this change as an intrusion into processes that were best left to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the military chiefs, who were more familiar with their own officers.

This monograph describes these processes and the context and perspectives that contributed to their development.

A Conceptual View

It is generally accepted that *succession planning* is practiced more robustly in the private sector than in the public sector. Not surprisingly, Rumsfeld and some of his key advisers (who, like Rumsfeld, had

private-sector experience) found that the succession planning process they inherited for senior military leadership lacked some vital ingredients. Their experiences would likely have conditioned them to look for the following six elements:

- focusing on key positions
- identifying position-specific competency requirements and qualifications
- identifying and assessing high-potential candidates
- matching pools of candidates and positions, considering both near- and long-term successions
- using career paths to deepen and widen candidate pools
- engaging senior executives in the process.

As a seasoned executive, Rumsfeld had developed his own perspectives on succession management. In interviews with the authors, he identified the following as critical to succession planning:

- To maximize the chance of realizing an organizational vision, an executive needs people in key positions who share common goals.
- The recognition that people and positions change over time is important to putting the right people in the right positions.
- Executives must delegate many responsibilities, but succession management for senior subordinate positions is not one of them.
- A robust process is necessary to overcome the tendency to pick those you know for key positions, overlooking better, lesser-known candidates.
- The chief executive must pay attention to senior leader selection such that key subordinates will also pay more attention to it.

Some critics of Rumsfeld's active role in succession management viewed it as an unwarranted intrusion into the affairs of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (for joint positions) or the military chiefs (for service positions). However, we found that Rumsfeld's involvement was consistent with the principles of civilian control of the military as modified and clarified by the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 and with statutory provisions (10 U.S.C. 601) pertaining to appointments to fill three- and four-star positions.

The Historical Context

When Rumsfeld began his second tenure as Secretary of Defense, he perceived several fundamental problems with the processes used to choose senior military leaders to be recommended for higher rank or additional assignments. First, he perceived a lack of explicit criteria for each position that should guide the selection of the most appropriate candidate. Second, he found that, although each service was required by law to submit at least one nominee for joint four-star vacancies, the services were not consistently offering viable candidates. Instead, the services appeared to be submitting strong candidates only when they perceived that it was their “turn” to fill a position in an understood pattern of job rotations or when the position had traditionally been filled by the service. Rumsfeld found the lack of both explicit criteria and a truly competitive process for filling the most senior military positions to be in conflict with his management philosophy. He also felt it important to challenge the services to provide the very best candidates for all three- and four-star assignments.

There are several key aspects of the process that Rumsfeld introduced. First, the decisions involved four key decisionmaking members: the Secretary of Defense, the Deputy Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Although the final decision belonged to the Secretary of Defense, all accounts suggest that the discussions held by this group, which became known informally as the personnel committee, did inform—and sometimes change—the final decision. It is important to note that the military chiefs were not included in this small group of decisionmakers.

These decisionmakers, including Rumsfeld, personally interviewed candidates as part of the evaluation and decision process. In addition to interviewing candidates for specific assignments, Rumsfeld also sought to interview high-potential officers whenever he was traveling to their locations or otherwise had the opportunity to do so.

Rumsfeld noted early in his second tenure as Secretary of Defense the lack of explicit, position-specific criteria for selection. The personnel committee and its supporting staff developed these criteria and

adopted associated evaluation tools in the form of matrixes used to rate the competencies and qualifications of various candidates. Another important tool was “the Board,” a felt-covered piece of plywood with the names of various positions and candidates attached by a Velcro-like material. This tool permitted the personnel committee to consider current and future vacancies in their entirety.

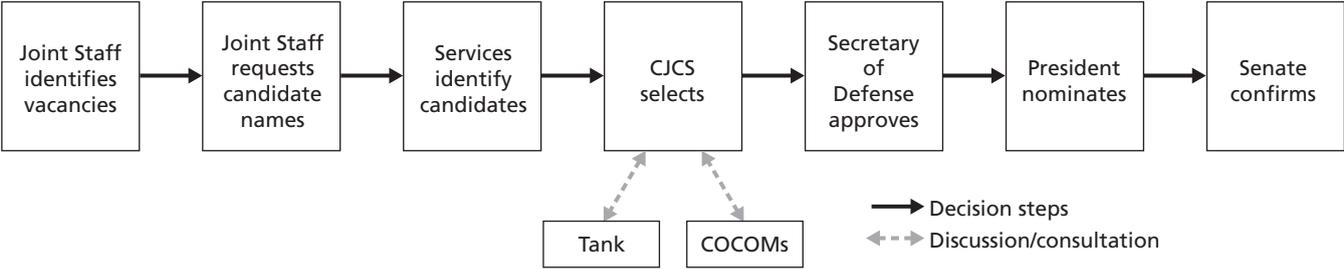
The process that emerged under Rumsfeld included both *slating* and *laydowns*. Slating addressed near-term vacancies. It differed from the prior, conventional practice in that multiple vacancies were considered simultaneously rather than sequentially. The Board facilitated this process by allowing the decisionmakers to explore alternatives by moving positions and candidates to various places on the felt surface. Laydowns—a relatively new concept for most of the military services—entailed the purposeful identification and development of high-potential officers for future assignments, and they were discussed once or twice a year during private sessions between a service chief and Rumsfeld. These laydown discussions would sometimes cover, for example, the career paths recommended for high-potential one- and two-star officers to prepare them for specific three- and four-star assignments.

Another important aspect of the Rumsfeld process was the prioritization of assignments. Contrary to traditional military culture, which had prioritized the service chief as the preeminent assignment, Rumsfeld made the combatant commander positions the most important. He also placed a new emphasis on joint deputy commander positions, considering them to be developmental opportunities rather than career pinnacles.

The Process

Prior to the changes introduced by Rumsfeld and his advisers, the central role in the selection of officers for senior joint positions was played by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. As shown in Figure S.1, the process was linear and sequential: Typically, each vacancy was con-

Figure S.1
The Prior Process for Senior Joint Position Nominations



NOTES: CJCS = Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. COCOM = combatant commander.

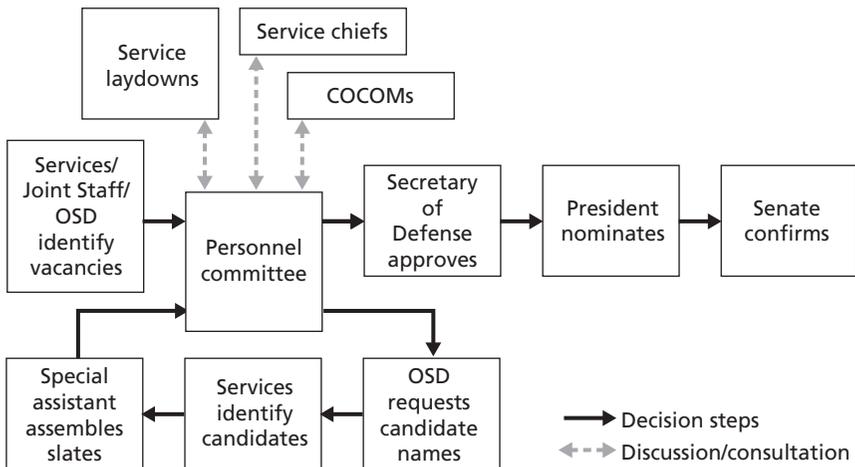
RAND MG1081-S.1

sidered and filled with little or no regard for other vacancies that might arise at other times.

Rumsfeld’s process, when fully implemented, had the elements depicted in Figure S.2. The central role was played by the personnel committee, with supporting participation provided by one or more special assistants. Key elements included service laydowns, consideration of multiple candidates for multiple positions, consideration of candidates for key service and joint positions, and the potential for Rumsfeld and his staff to identify candidates beyond those recommended by the military chiefs.

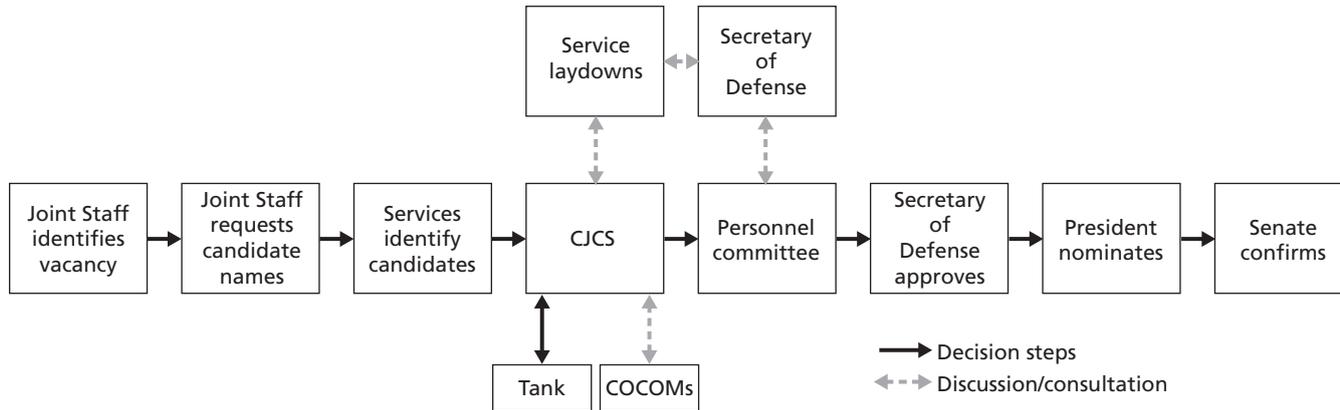
Immediately following Rumsfeld’s departure in 2006, the process largely reverted to a linear form similar to that which prevailed prior to his arrival in 2001. Some elements, such as service laydowns and the review of candidates by the similarly constituted personnel committee, were retained, at least initially. However, as shown in Figure S.3, primary responsibility for the process shifted to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Figure S.2
The Rumsfeld Process



NOTE: OSD = Office of the Secretary of Defense.

Figure S.3
The Post-Rumsfeld Process for Senior Joint Position Nominations



RAND MG1081-S.3

Returning to the six important elements of a succession planning process, identified earlier, we evaluated the Rumsfeld process and the prior and subsequent processes. Our assessments are shown in Table S.1, where a black checkmark indicates a robust implementation and a gray checkmark indicates a more limited implementation. The absence of a checkmark indicates that the element was or is not a consistent feature of the process.

Overall, we found that the Rumsfeld process, as it finally evolved, contained most of the expected elements of a fully formed succession management system. However, in the view of some key stakeholders (mainly, some military chiefs), there were unresolved issues: lack of transparency in personnel committee deliberations, poor understanding of the role of the special assistant who managed the process for the Secretary, and discomfort with the laydown process.

Table S.1
Assessing the Processes

	Prior Process	Rumsfeld Process	Subsequent Process
Focus on key positions	✓	✓	✓
Identify position-specific competency requirements and qualifications		✓	
Identify and assess high-potential candidates	✓	✓	✓
Match pools of candidates and positions, considering both near- and long-term successions		✓	✓
Use career paths to deepen and widen candidate pools		✓	✓
Engage senior executives in the process	✓	✓	✓

Conclusions and Recommendations

The two most important elements introduced by Rumsfeld and his personnel committee were (1) the active, engaged participation of the Secretary of Defense in the selection of officers for senior positions and (2) the identification and development of high-potential, more junior officers. Another key contribution was the simultaneous consideration of multiple candidates and multiple vacancies, which was intended to optimize the selection process. These elements appear to have been significantly deemphasized after Rumsfeld's departure. Much of the deliberation undertaken in selecting candidates for joint positions moved from the personnel committee to the Joint Chiefs of Staff tank, and the selection of officers to fill positions within the services was left largely to the military chiefs and secretaries.

We propose the following recommendations for future processes:

- Consider establishing a senior general/flag officer management office (GOMO) within the Office of the Secretary of Defense, with its chief reporting directly to the Secretary of Defense, to provide staff support for joint succession planning. (See p. 52 for special requirements related to the position.)
- Require the senior GOMO to develop tools and information systems to support simultaneous consideration of multiple candidates for multiple positions.
- Require the senior GOMO to maintain descriptions of the qualifications and expertise required for senior positions.
- Clarify the purpose and desired content of service laydowns, focusing them specifically on longer-term personnel plans.
- The Secretary and Deputy Secretary of Defense should be closely involved in the selection of senior leaders and should understand the strengths and weaknesses of each selected officer as well as the characteristics of the officers not selected for each position.
- The Secretary of Defense, with the participation of the personnel committee, should explicitly prioritize senior leader positions and ensure that the best candidates are selected for the highest-priority positions.