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## Managing General and Flag Officers

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**O**ver the past few years, the Secretary of Defense has voiced concern about the career management of general and flag officers of the military services.<sup>1</sup>

He has noted that senior officers, when compared with their private-sector counterparts, do not spend as much time in duty assignments and frequently leave the military relatively soon, often with less than three years in grade. The concern has been that the rapid turnover in the senior ranks could harm organizational effectiveness, dilute individual accountability, and erode the confidence of junior and mid-level officers in the senior officers. For their part, the military services worry that lengthening the careers of senior officers would clog the system, slowing promotions throughout the officer corps.

Researchers of the RAND National Defense Research Institute examined the issue. They first charted the career patterns of general and flag officers and compared them with those of their counterparts in the private sector. The goals were to determine whether the career patterns of the two groups indeed differed significantly; how the private-sector model affected development and promotion opportunities; and whether the private-sector model, if applied to senior military officers, would resolve the concerns of senior policymakers and, if so, how.

### Do Career Patterns Differ?

Private-sector careers resemble those of the military in that both organizations identify employees with high potential and carefully monitor and manage their careers, especially in the later stages of development. But the management of these employees differs. In the private sector, early jobs are develop-

### Key findings:

- Senior officers spend much less time in assignments and retire much earlier than do their private-sector peers.
- Unlike the private sector, the military does not vary job tenure based on whether the job develops skills or uses skills learned in prior jobs.
- Some, not all, assignments should be longer.
- The Department of Defense and the military services should rationalize career paths and set goals for time in jobs and for the number and timing of jobs; however, the system should retain flexibility in applying rules.

mental and help to build functional skills, organizational knowledge, and personal insights. Later jobs tend to have more complex and ambiguous responsibilities that draw on the knowledge and skills developed in earlier ones. Thus, the assignments have different purposes: Some develop skills, while others use skills previously developed. The “developing” assignments do not need to be as long as the “using” ones, and private-sector management reflects this practice.

The military also has developing and using jobs. Certain jobs appear repeatedly on the resumes of four-star officers—that is, those of the highest military rank. But unlike the private sector, assignment lengths do not vary between the two types of jobs. For example, the average assignment length for two- and three-star officers is about two years—too brief for either effectiveness or accountability. The upshot

<sup>1</sup> The most-senior officers of the Army, Air Force, and Marine Corps hold the ranks of brigadier general to general. The most-senior officers of the Navy hold the ranks of rear admiral (lower half) to admiral. They are often referred to by their pay grade (O-7, O-8, O-9, or O-10) or by the number of stars in their rank insignia.

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of these shorter job tenures is that the most-senior military officers hold their jobs for far less time than their private-sector peers (two to three years compared with eight) and retire much sooner. Almost 90 percent of four-star officers retire before reaching age 60, compared with only about a third of their private-sector counterparts.

### **Could the Private-Sector Model Apply to the Military?**

To determine whether the private-sector model could work in the military, the researchers used a series of personnel models that included probability of promotion, time in service, time in grade, time in job, and career tenure to track the flow of senior officers through the system. Of the several career patterns considered, the one in which developing assignments lasted two years and using assignments four emerged as best because it met the criteria of maximizing stability and accountability without sacrificing promotion opportunity.

### **Does This Approach Resolve the Concerns?**

A career pattern for general and flag officers that has them serve two years in developing assignments and four in using assignments addresses the concerns of both the Secretary of Defense and the military services. Senior officers would serve in assignments longer, those in using jobs would have more time in grade at retirement, and the most-senior officers would have longer careers. Promotions would generally equal or better the current system, except for promotion to the highest rank, which is cut by about half. But those rising to the highest level would hold their jobs longer and stay longer. Managing time in job and number of developmental assignments would increase stability and accountability, give the best officers developing experience while keeping promotion opportunity, and, in turn, boost the confidence of all in the system. Assignments could be made longer under current law, but new law would give more flexibility to the system and provide the needed change in compensation to support longer careers better. ■

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This research brief describes work done for the National Defense Research Institute documented in *Aligning the Stars: Improvements to General and Flag Officer Management*, by Margaret C. Harrell, Harry J. Thie, Peter Schirmer, and Kevin Brancato, MR-1712-OSD, 2004, 129 pages, \$20, ISBN: 0-8330-3501-0, available from RAND Distribution Services (phone: 310-451-7002; toll free: 877-584-8642; or email: [order@rand.org](mailto:order@rand.org)). The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND**® is a registered trademark.

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