

Air Force Senior Leader Representation in the Joint Community

Gen David Goldfein, chief of staff of the U.S. Air Force, has made the development of airmen for senior joint billets one of his top leadership priorities, announcing a series of broad efforts designed to increase Air Force representation in the most-senior joint positions. As a complement to its internal initiatives, the Air Force asked RAND Project AIR FORCE to identify ways to improve joint forces commander development and Air Force competitiveness for these positions.

The research took a top-down approach to help the Air Force think through the broader strategic issues as it pursues its own bottom-up initiatives to reform joint leader development and joint task force (JTF) organization. Its purpose was to help the Air Force consider which specific joint positions it should value the most and why; how well it is represented in those positions; and to what extent it can improve airmen's representation in those positions, given the wide array of variables that factor into the joint senior leader selection process. While the Air Force can take steps to better groom airmen for senior joint positions, whether such changes are worth the time and effort requires a serious consideration of exactly what the Air Force ultimately hopes to achieve by increasing its senior joint representation and contributions to JTFs.

Key findings:

- Airmen are underrepresented in senior joint positions critical to shaping U.S. national security strategy and warfighting capability.
- The Air Force needs to undertake an assessment of which senior joint positions would most benefit from an airman's perspective.
- Efforts to increase competitiveness for senior joint positions entail risks, which must be considered.
- Senior leaders should play a central role in championing reforms, should they be undertaken, to ensure that these priorities are embraced within the Air Force culture.

Does the Air Force believe that the nation suffers when airmen are not at least equally represented in senior joint billets? If so, which billets most critically need the Air Force's input? What would the Air Force be willing to give up to assume greater representation in these positions? The Air Force would likely benefit from considering each of these questions as part of a broader conversation about the rationale for making joint leader development a top priority *before* it exerts considerable time and resources toward reform of its joint senior leader development efforts.

U.S. Air Force Representation in Senior Joint Positions

Interviews with current and former senior military leaders from both inside and outside the Air Force suggested that the most critical positions are ones that directly influence both U.S. national security strategy and the nation's warfighting capability.¹ These positions include such Joint Staff positions as the CJCS, the VCJCS, the ACJCS, the DJS, and the directors of the following directorates: Operations (DJ3), Strategic Plans and Policy (DJ5), and Force Structure, Resources, and Assessment (DJ8), as well as leadership of the combatant commands and JTFs.

The authors' analysis of data revealed that the Air Force is, in fact, consistently underrepresented in the joint positions that interviewees saw as most critical to the nation's warfighting apparatus. Since the 1986 enactment of the Goldwater-Nichols Act, the Air Force has held the CJCS job only once, or 13 percent of the time, compared with 51 percent for the Army, 25 percent for the Navy, and 11 percent for the Marine Corps. During the same era, the Air Force held 24 percent of combatant commander positions overall, but that representation is skewed toward functional commands (41 percent) and away from geographic commands (10 percent), the latter

¹ The authors interviewed more than a dozen individuals—one senior civilian and the rest military personnel at the four-star level. Among them, they held or had held numerous senior positions, including Secretary of Defense, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (VCJCS), assistant chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (ACJCS), director of the Joint Staff (DJS), various directors within the Joint Staff, and a wide cross-section of combatant commander positions.

of which interviewees viewed as more influential (Figure 1). When examining the three combatant commands identified as most influential by senior leaders, Air Force representation is even lower. Airmen have never commanded U.S. Central Command or U.S. Pacific Command and have held the top spot at U.S. European Command only 18 percent of the time.

The Air Force is also underrepresented in influential Joint Staff positions identified as grooming positions for senior joint command. Overall, since 2005, the Air Force has held critical positions on the Joint Staff 22 percent of the time (Figure 2). But closer scrutiny reveals that representation is heavily skewed to certain jobs. Airmen were well represented as the ACJCS (45 percent) and the DJ8 (46 percent), but they seldom sat in the VCJCS, DJS, DJ3, or DJ5 seats. In addition, the service has led only a handful of JTFs between 2005 and 2016.

Factors That Influence Joint Senior Leader Development and Selection

If airmen are underrepresented in influential senior joint positions, why is this the case? One possibility is that the Air Force is not offering the most-qualified candidates for senior joint positions. Another possibility is that the decisionmaking process for senior joint leadership selection is shaped by

a variety of factors that make it less likely for airmen to be selected for senior joint assignments. Based on the interviews conducted, the authors found aspects of both possibilities. The Air Force’s approach to senior leader development and the senior leader selection process itself have significantly affected Air Force representation in the upper echelons of joint command.

Joint Leader Development

The Air Force may be less competitive for senior joint positions for both subjective and objective reasons. Most notably, from a subjective perspective, interviewees perceived that the Air Force may have a cultural tendency to focus on grooming its rated force for top positions inside the service rather than systematically cultivating qualified officers for joint assignments. They also indicated a tendency at the three- and four-star level for senior leaders to identify officers based on their shared experience in the same military occupation—that is, picking officers who look like them based on their knowledge of the skills they had to develop to reach and successfully perform in top positions. The interviewees indicated that objective considerations that may be reducing competitiveness include a potential shortfall in the quality of joint experience in terms of Washington staff work and cross-domain exposure, a lack of joint experience early in airmen’s careers,

Figure 1. Airmen Are Consistently Underrepresented in Geographic Commands

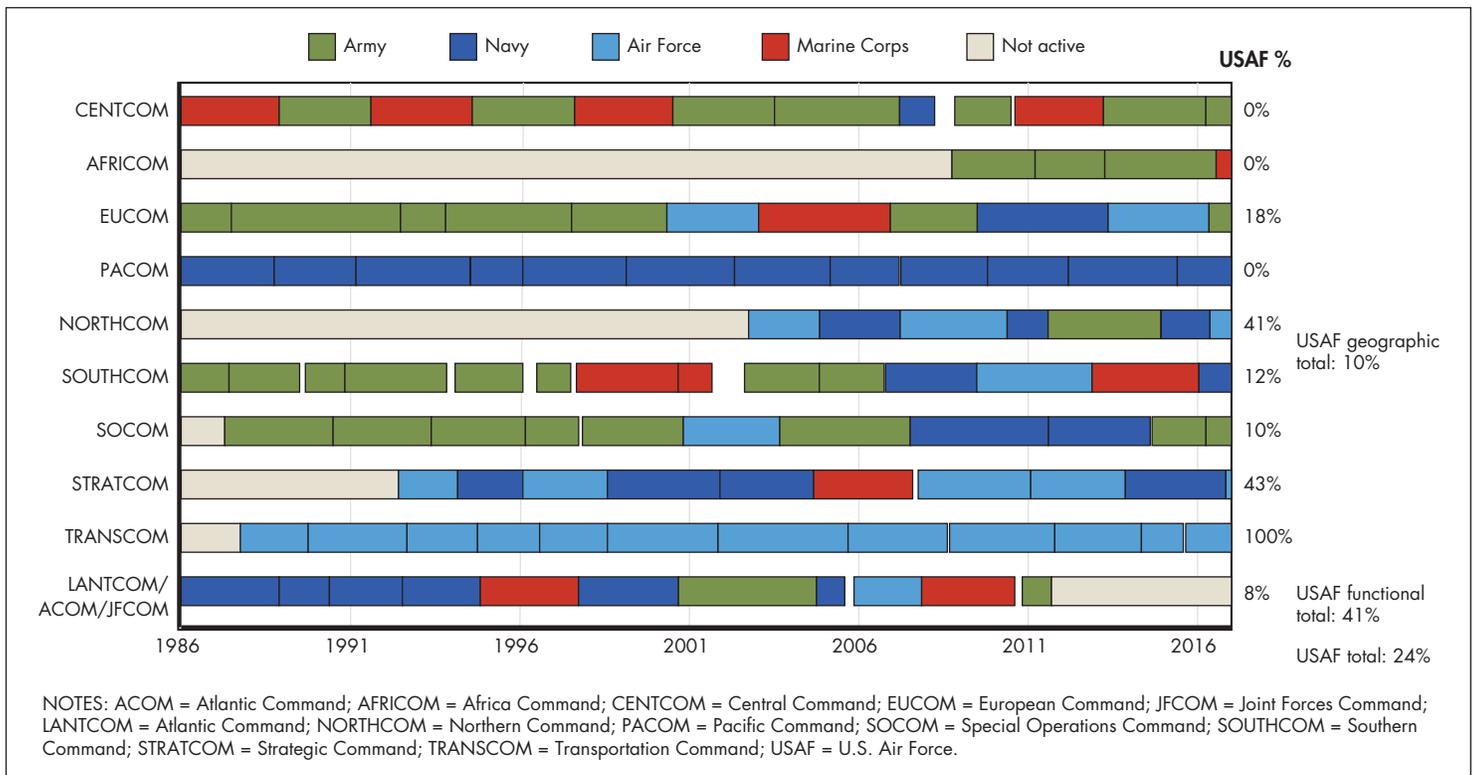
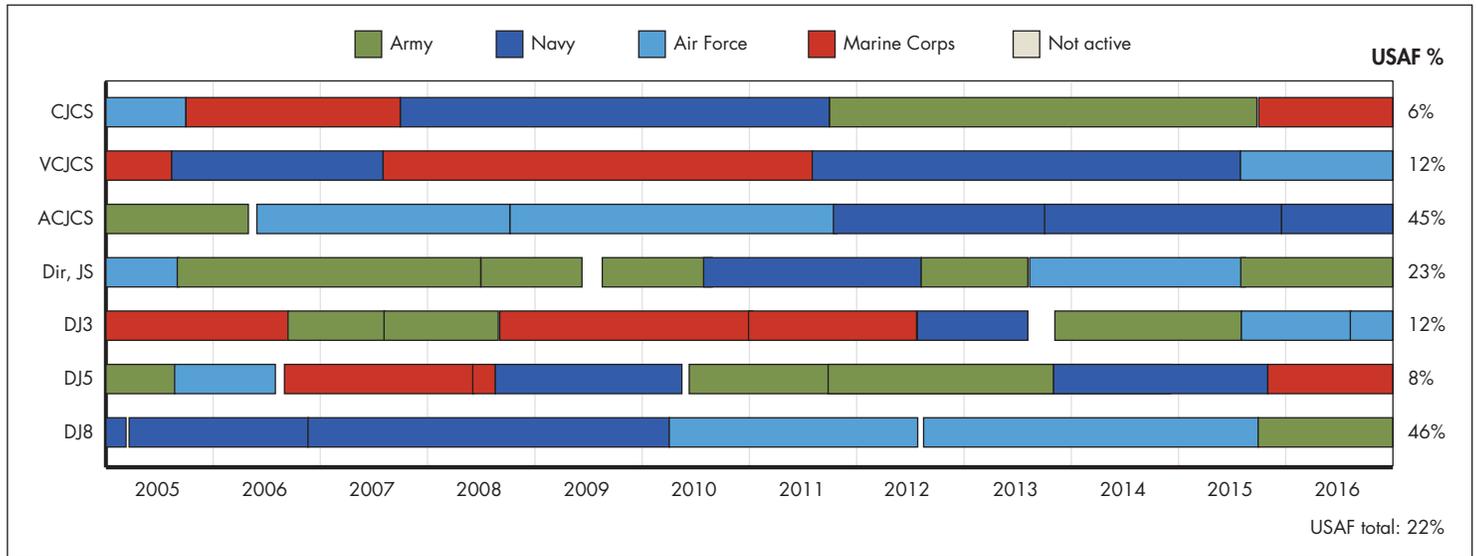


Figure 2. Joint Staff Representation by Airmen Is Skewed Toward ACJCS and DJ8



a lack of emphasis on strategic-level education focused on interagency cooperation and geographic expertise, and an inadequate organizational structure to support the establishment of JTFs.

Joint Leader Selection Process

The authors also considered subjective and objective factors that may influence the joint senior leader selection process. Interviewees indicated that much of the process lies outside Air Force control, resting instead in the hands of the Secretary of Defense, the CJCS, and, ultimately, the President and Senate. Interviewees suggested ways that the Air Force could make itself more competitive for senior joint positions but cautioned that the process overall is highly subjective.

Selection outcomes depend heavily on selection authorities’ personal views of what constitutes a competent leader, personal biases for or against particular military services, perceptions of a service’s knowledge and experience in a given geographic or warfighting domain, and personal experience interacting with a given candidate. Several interviewees singled out cross-domain knowledge as an important trait of candidates for senior joint positions—and one in which Air Force officers tend to fall short because there is a perception that the Air Force lacks “warfighters,” defined in terms of association and connection with ground forces.

While subjectivity inevitably dominates the selection process, a number of practices have inserted objectivity into the selection process as well. “Fair share” representation among the services, as well as racial and gender diversity, may play a role, albeit a secondary one. The Secretary of Defense and other senior officials can also influence the process and

potentially mitigate other biases. Should this occur, understanding how senior defense civilians think about joint senior leader selection and Air Force competitiveness for these positions becomes particularly important.

Recommendations

To adopt meaningful reforms that address these shortfalls, the Air Force should consider whether it is willing to undertake a fundamental cultural transformation to elevate the importance of senior joint command over senior Air Force command. Such reforms will require the Air Force to (1) openly examine and acknowledge its values and priorities in regard to senior leader development and (2) use those values and priorities as a basis for making conscious decisions about where to invest time and resources in joint senior leader development while acknowledging where corresponding trade-offs must be made.

Moreover, there are risks associated with pursuing reforms related to joint senior leader development. First, to some extent, senior joint jobs that are most important for the nation change over time as the strategic environment evolves. Second, a wide variety of external factors beyond Air Force control impinge on the decisionmaking process that surrounds senior joint leadership selection, as previously discussed. Third, the Air Force will have to accept some risk in the development of officers for senior Air Force positions in order to support enhanced joint senior leader development.

If the Air Force decides to embrace reforms, after considering the risks, the following recommendations aim to help the Air Force take a more-purposeful approach to senior joint leader development.

1. Conduct an internal assessment among senior leadership to identify which senior joint positions would most benefit from an airman's perspective. A top-down approach would allow the Air Force to systematically assess whether the service is underrepresented in a particular set of positions and then, if necessary, purposefully target reforms to increase competitiveness.
2. Select a pool of officers who are best suited to be groomed for positions identified as most critical. In doing so, the Air Force can consider which types of officers might be most competitive for senior joint positions and enhance joint education and training for this group.
3. Develop a succession plan for senior joint development and institutionalize general officer development practices. A succession plan would ensure that candidates for senior joint positions pursue well-understood career pathways that aim to balance Air Force and joint experience.

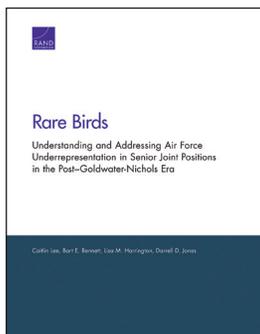
To improve Air Force competitiveness for senior joint positions, the authors suggest the following specific reforms.

1. Increase the quality of joint experience to include high-visibility positions that enhance networking, exposure to

Washington staff work, joint warfighting tours to increase cross-domain understanding, and positions to enhance geographic expertise.

2. Increase the extent of joint experience by starting joint assignments earlier for officers targeted for senior joint positions.
3. Consider educational reforms to enhance airmen's ability to think strategically, with focus on interagency cooperation and geographic expertise.
4. Consider organizational reforms that would enhance the Air Force's ability to stand up a full JTF capability, along the lines of the U.S. Army's organic capabilities at the division and corps units, should the Air Force desire to expand its capacity to manage cross-domain JTFs.

Undertaking reform to foster senior joint leader development will require a cultural shift, at least to some degree, away from an Air Force-centric approach to a more joint outlook. Thus, careful stewardship of the joint senior leader development effort is needed at the very top of the Air Force to ensure that the effort is taken seriously and leads to a meaningful cultural shift in support of the joint community.



This brief describes work done in RAND Project AIR FORCE and documented in *Rare Birds: Understanding and Addressing Air Force Underrepresentation in Senior Joint Positions in the Post-Goldwater-Nichols Era*, by Caitlin Lee, Bart E. Bennett, Lisa M. Harrington, and Darrell D. Jones, RR-2089-AF, 2017 (available at www.rand.org/t/RR2089). To view this brief online, visit www.rand.org/t/RB9970. The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark. © RAND 2017

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