Recommended Approaches for General Officer Promotions in the U.S. Space Force
About This Report

Because of its small size, the U.S. Space Force (USSF) will likely have more difficulty with filling its general officer ranks than the other services, which have a larger pool of qualified members from which to draw. Its small size will not only limit selectivity but also make it more difficult to match officer competencies with position requirements when there are open positions. The USSF Deputy Chief of Space Operations for Human Capital (USSF/S1) asked RAND Project AIR FORCE to envision an approach for the future and to present recommendations to improve the effectiveness of general officer promotions given the relatively small size of the USSF general officer corps. We drew insights from the executive selection process at several government agencies and private-sector organizations, comparable models in the other military services, interviews with subject-matter experts, and a simulation analysis to define the key challenges that the USSF faces in sustaining its general officer corps and to develop options to overcome these challenges.

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Summary

Issue

As the United States’ newest and smallest service, the U.S. Space Force (USSF) is working to establish its identity and self-sufficiency. Of the many challenges encountered since its reestablishment, some relate to the development and management of general officers (GOs). Specifically, the small size of the USSF’s GO corps has caused the USSF to examine the current statutory requirements and consider how it might or might not be able to operate within these requirements to effectively manage its talent and cultivate the leaders it needs at the most senior level. We developed potential approaches and presented recommendations to improve the effectiveness of GO promotions, given the relatively small size of the USSF GO corps.

Approach

We worked with senior leaders in the USSF to enumerate a set of desired characteristics for an ideal promotion system and conducted semistructured interviews with personnel in organizations who were likely to have insights on aspects of the USSF’s problems, such as its small scale for selecting GOs and the processes for evaluating and selecting executives in technical organizations. Finally, we built on prior RAND work and developed a simulation model of the USSF GO promotion system, whose results enabled us to characterize the system based on its ability to fill vacancies, expected selectivity, and resulting promotion rates.

Findings

- The USSF faces three main challenges in managing its GO corps:
  - having enough viable candidates to allow for a measure of selectivity
  - aligning the competencies of selected officers with those who are vacating their positions
  - meeting statutory constraints for board membership and selection rates.

- The USSF could often encounter circumstances in which the number of O-8 (major general) vacancies equals or exceeds the number of eligible O-7 (brigadier general) candidates. Multi-grade promotions at major general (including O-6s, or colonels, as candidates for promotion to O-8) could increase selectivity for O-8 positions that require competencies that few O-7 positions require. The Judge Advocate General’s Corps and Chaplain Corps both offer a precedent.
• The USSF will need to exercise rigorous workforce planning to anticipate future retirements and promotions and then use the planning results to provide guidance to promotion boards regarding specific competency requirements.

• Incorporating USSF Senior Executive Service (SES) personnel on selection boards could allow promotion boards to be held more frequently if sufficient officers are unavailable and could increase the diversity of perspectives and demographics on promotion boards.

• Additional options that further depart from the structures established by the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act—most notably, options that make rank contingent on the position occupied—could help match qualified officers with position requirements. However, these options are not recommended because they fail to meet characteristics of an ideal promotion process: They are less fair, less executable, and less explainable.

• Some changes, such as expanding promotion board eligibility, removing selection rate caps, or authorizing multigrade promotions, require changes in statute.

• Conventional assignment flexibilities—e.g., grade substitution, frocking (or awarding officers the next grade and title before formal promotion can take place), cross-functional utilization, shifting position to SES, and recalling retired officers to active duty—can be used to mitigate the promotion system’s limitations.

Recommendations

• The USSF should provide comprehensive minimum and maximum competency guidance to O-7 and O-8 promotion boards, based not only on expected vacancies but also on the overall succession planning.

• The USSF should propose legislative changes for three additional flexibilities:
  – a request for the 95-percent cap on the selection rate to apply to the total number of eligible officers rather than those on their first promotion look
  – the ability to use members of the SES as selection board members
  – the authority to consider O-6s for promotion to O-8.

• The USSF should employ all available conventional assignment flexibilities to address challenges in aligning personnel with promotions. Such flexibilities include conferring GO authorities to capable SESs, frocking, and recalling retired GOs to active duty.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

As the United States’ newest and smallest service, the U.S. Space Force (USSF) is working through many challenges to establish its identity and self-sufficiency. Several of these challenges relate to the development and management of its general officers (GOs). The USSF’s GO corps is made up of brigadier generals (those in the pay grade of O-7), major generals (O-8), lieutenant generals (O-9), and generals (O-10). Specifically, the small size of its GO corps has caused the USSF to examine the current statutory requirements and imagine how the USSF might or might not be able to operate within them to effectively manage its talent and cultivate its leaders at the most senior level.

USSF’s Concerns

The USSF was established by law on December 20, 2019, and became the sixth armed service of the United States (Pub. L. 116-92, 2019). The USSF’s military positions, including its GO positions, were transferred from the organizations in the other services that were performing space missions, primarily the U.S. Air Force. Title 10 of the U.S. Code (U.S.C.) currently authorizes 21 USSF GOs and sets the floor for the USSF’s contribution to joint positions at six (10 U.S.C. § 526)—a significantly smaller number of senior officers than in the other armed services.¹

The USSF was created with the same statutory personnel management policies that regulate the other military services, but even the smallest of the five other U.S. services have significantly more senior officers than the USSF, as shown in Figure 1.1. The Coast Guard manages a pool of flag officers that is twice as large as the USSF, and the Marine Corps GO ranks are over three times as numerous. In addition, certain niche functional areas with customized GO management specified in Title 10, such as the Judge Advocate General’s Corps and Chaplain Corps, are much smaller than the USSF. Although these niche functions do not have to contend with managing multiple specialties, the USSF has five officer career fields: Space Operations (13S), Intelligence (14N), Cyber (17D), Developmental Engineering (62E), and Acquisition Manager (63A). Given that no military organization manages GOs at quite the same scale as the USSF, the USSF might require alternative policies and legislation.

¹ The most senior officers in the U.S. Army, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Space Force are known as general officers. The most senior officers in the U.S. Navy and U.S. Coast Guard are known as flag officers. This document focuses solely on boards for full-time positions in the USSF. The USSF could possibly end up with a reserve component (i.e., the proposed Space National Guard) and another component that would consist of both full-time and part-time members but that would not label them as “regular” and “reserve.” These provisions require additional legislation, some of which was included in the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for fiscal year (FY) 2024. Meanwhile, some space assets remain in the Air Force Reserve and the Air National Guard.
The USSF Deputy Chief of Space Operations for Human Capital asked RAND Project AIR FORCE to envision an approach for the future and to present recommendations to improve the effectiveness of GO promotions given the relatively small size of the USSF GO corps. These recommendations will help ensure that decisionmakers have the information they need to develop sustainable, equitable, and executable policies related to GO promotion within the USSF.

The USSF has two primary concerns, which were the starting point for our analysis. First, the USSF is concerned about executing basic management practices with so few GOs. Accurate forecasting to have available, promotion-ready officers to fill emergent GO requirements—which are driven by joint opportunities, retirement requests, disqualifications, and removals for cause—will likely be more error-prone with such a small pool from which to draw. Misestimation can be mitigated in larger populations, but in a smaller population, such as the USSF, any underestimation can result in long-term vacancies for critical positions, while any overestimation can result in excessively long wait times for officers to officially be promoted to, or “pin-on,” the next rank.

A second perceived concern is whether the USSF can consistently comply with U.S.C. requirements, specifically Section 612 of Title 10, which mandates the composition of selection boards to recommend officers for promotion to grades below O-9. These boards must be made up of officers who are higher in grade than the grade for which the eligible officers are being considered. Furthermore, the statute prohibits individuals from serving on consecutive boards for the same grade to counter concerns related to bias, subjectivity, and excessive influence. The statute also encourages the procurement of board members who represent the diverse population of the armed forces, including by race, ethnicity, and gender. Given the small number of USSF GOs, it might not be possible to consistently assemble a panel of members at the appropriate grade—with the diversity needed for equitable representation—who have not served on the previous board.
Our Research Approach Combined Interviews with Promotion System Simulations

We employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches to uncover the main challenges and most promising solutions for USSF GO promotions. Before we began collecting data, we worked with senior leaders in the USSF to enumerate a set of desired characteristics for an ideal promotion system. These characteristics provided a structure for discussing trade-offs and ensured that we judged any potential changes systematically. This exercise resulted in the consensus that an ideal promotion system would (1) fulfill requirements, (2) be fair and trustworthy, (3) be executable, (4) be explainable, and (5) be responsive to change. We explain each characteristic in subsequent sections of the report before turning to our analysis of potential policy changes.

No organization or military service is quite like the USSF in its mission, workforce, or scale. Our qualitative research strategy was to conduct semistructured interviews with personnel in organizations that were likely to have insights on aspects of USSF’s challenges, such as its small scale for selecting GOs and the processes for evaluating and selecting executives in technical organizations, especially organizations with a space-related mission. We interviewed the GO management office in the USSF and the GO or flag officer management offices in the other armed services and the U.S. Coast Guard to better understand the practical issues particular to GO promotions and to learn about these offices’ views on the challenges that the USSF faces. We also interviewed personnel involved in the executive selection process at several government agencies and private-sector organizations to uncover insightful practices that the USSF should investigate further. We supplemented our private-sector interviews with a comprehensive and systematic review of the research literature on executive selection. Finally, we interviewed current USSF GOs to understand their perspectives on the current promotion system and potential alternative approaches.

Our qualitative research identified some potential problems that the USSF is likely to encounter, but it did not identify how often the problems would arise or the cost of process constraints vis-à-vis filling all GO positions. For this information, we built on prior unpublished RAND work and developed a simulation model of the USSF GO promotion system. The simulation model takes the desired pyramid of required positions and then simulates the process of replacing GOs when they retire or get promoted. The model accounts for (1) the fact that the law requires a selection board to recommend O-7s and O-8s for promotion to the next higher grade, (2) the associated requirements for selection board members, and (3) any other constraints that determine eligibility for promotion and continued service. The results enabled us to characterize the system based on its ability to fill vacancies, expected selectivity, and resulting promotion rates. Importantly, the simulation results revealed how the shape of the pyramid and the process rules affect these outcomes. See Appendix A for further description of the model.

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2 Military personnel systems largely promote from within, so the number of positions declines with seniority. Thus, stacking the number of positions typically forms a pyramid. When we use the term pyramid, we refer to the set of positions at each pay grade.
Bottom Line Up Front

Because of its unique size and requirements, the USSF faces three main challenges with the GO promotion system. First, some current functional requirements (e.g., acquisition and intelligence positions) produce rectangular pyramids, or situations in which there are similar numbers of requirements at adjacent grades, limiting selectivity. Second, with few GOs and limited variation of position openings, it will be difficult to synchronize the competencies of the promoting officers with those required for positions or to line up a series of positions to fulfill succession planning needs. Third, statutory constraints on selection board membership and the maximum selection rate, which have no impact on the larger military services, could reduce the frequency with which the USSF can hold boards and will hinder the flow of officers into positions at the USSF’s current scale, particularly for O-8 selection boards.

Moving forward, the USSF can make some necessary adjustments without legislative changes that would better synchronize the competencies of selected officers with those required for their positions. We recommend that the USSF submit legislative proposals for narrow changes targeted at helping with O-8 selection board membership and selection rate issues. We also recommend a third legislative proposal to allow O-8 boards to consider senior O-6s, which is the only way to increase selectivity for rare competencies. This approach significantly deviates from traditional promotion frameworks, and thus, gaining support for it could pose additional challenges. Nonetheless, there is legal precedent for such promotions in the cases of the Deputy Judge Advocate General and the Chief of Chaplains, which are both O-8 positions.

The remainder of this report delves deeper into these findings and recommendations. In Chapter 2, we present the USSF GO management problem. In Chapter 3, we describe the characteristics of an ideal promotion process, and, in Chapter 4, we provide insights from the private sector and other military services that could inform how an ideal system might work in the USSF. In Chapter 5, we discuss some options that the USSF could consider for improving GO management, and, in Chapter 6, we conclude with our recommendations.

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3 Air Force Handbook 36-2647 (2022, p. 31) defines competencies as an “observable, measurable pattern of knowledge, skills, abilities, behaviors, and other characteristics needed to perform institutional or occupational functions successfully.”
Title 10, Chapter 36 of the U.S.C. outlines the promotion procedures for the active components. The sections in Chapter 36 place the responsibility of selecting officers for promotion in grades O-2 through O-7 in the hands of selection boards (10 U.S.C. § 611), which are composed of at least five members from the same military service who are currently serving in a higher grade than those under consideration (10 U.S.C. § 612). Title 10 directs these boards to recommend the best qualified officers for promotion while “giving due consideration to the needs of the armed force concerned for officers with particular skills” (10 U.S.C. § 616).

Figure 2.1 shows the authorized strength of the USSF GO corps, which includes headspace for 21 GOs in the USSF and a prescribed minimum of six GOs in positions that count toward joint headspace. Our first research goal was to pinpoint and assess the challenges created when the USSF applies the current statutory structures to the pyramid in Figure 2.1.

Note: The USSF currently has only four officers in positions that count toward joint headspace. For our analysis, we have provisionally allocated the two additional positions that the USSF is authorized to an O-7 and an O-8 position, shown with a dotted outline. GO positions do not have formal specialty requirements, but we inferred acquisition and intelligence specialty requirements from the occupants of current positions.

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4 Headspace is set by law. A service’s headspace is the specific number of GOs that a service is permitted to have. The law separately specifies the number of GOs in joint positions, which is referred to as joint headspace.
The first challenge is that the pyramid in Figure 2.1 is rectangular, meaning that there are similar numbers of O-7s, O-8s, and O-9s. This rectangular shape is especially apparent when accounting for functional experience because the positions highlighted as acquisition and intelligence specialties (indicated by the orange and green borders in Figure 2.1) show equal numbers of these GOs required at successive grades. A rectangular pyramid limits the number of candidates for selection boards or from which appointing authorities can choose to fill individual positions or fill a series of positions in pursuit of a long-term succession plan.

For example, the two O-9 positions filled by GOs that have an acquisition specialty in Figure 2.1 are (1) the Commander of Space Systems Command and (2) the Deputy Chief of Space Operations for Strategy, Plans, Programs, Requirements, and Analysis. The incumbents were appointed to these positions within a year of each other, so it is possible that the positions will vacate at nearly the same time. Even if all O-7s and O-8s that have acquisition experience are viable candidates for these two O-9 positions, there are a maximum of four GOs at lower grades to consider. If the two O-8s were appointed to fill the O-9 positions, the most likely candidates to backfill their O-8 positions would be the two O-7s, which offers little selectivity. Furthermore, if any of these officers were to be selected for a joint position, this selection would further magnify the challenge of arranging backfills for key USSF positions.

The second GO management challenge is the difficulty of aligning the competencies of selected officers with the competencies required for such a small number of positions. This challenge primarily applies at the O-7 and O-8 levels because appointments to O-9 and O-10 are tied to placement in specific positions. The Department of the Air Force (DAF) selection board processes currently used by the USSF primarily evaluate candidates on their merit in the abstract, with some provisions for requesting officers who have particular functional experiences, and then promote those selected in order of seniority. With a pool of nearly 200 GOs in the regular O-7 and O-8 ranks, the DAF can afford to focus on merit because it will always have many options for aligning officer competencies with open positions, including a large body of positions that have flexible or no specific functional requirements. By contrast, a pyramid with 11 O-7s and eight O-8s creates the possibility that a queue of officers on the promotion list ordered by seniority would be poorly aligned with the available O-8 positions for a prolonged period.

The third issue that arises when executing the promotion process for so few officers involves the requirements that Section 612 in Title 10 of the U.S.C. places on selection boards, which include the following:

- The boards must include a minimum of five officers who are in grades higher than those under consideration, and it is customary to include a non-voting president who is at least two grades above the candidates.
- Board members cannot serve on two consecutive boards, ensuring that each candidate receives two entirely independent evaluations for promotion.

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5 With equal numbers of positions in a higher and lower grade, selectivity can be reduced to less than 100 percent by arranging for tenure in the higher grade to be longer than tenure in the lower grade. For example, if officers in the two O-9 acquisition positions serve for four years, and officers in the two O-8 positions either are promoted or retire after two years, the expected selection rate would be 50 percent.

6 Appendix B contains an overview of the general officer promotion process.
• To the extent practicable, the board should represent the diversity of the armed forces.
• The promotion rate of the board cannot exceed 95 percent of the promotion zone population.

Meeting these constraints for the size and composition of the board is a challenge for the USSF; the pyramid in Figure 2.1 shows only 14 total O-8s and O-9s who could serve as O-8 promotion board members. Our simulation model results show that the USSF needs to draw from both the O-8 and O-9 ranks to staff annual selection boards with five core members. Furthermore, the feasibility of staffing these boards depends on whether most eligible board members are available (see Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2. O-8 Board Cancellations Under Varying Availability Assumptions

NOTE: For each pyramid and number of unavailable board members, we ran 50 replications of 50 years of selection boards each. For each replication, we calculated the percentage of 50 annual selection boards that could not be fully staffed. The dots represent the median value across the 50 replications, and the vertical lines represent the range from the 5th percentile replication to the 95th percentile of these percentage values across the 50 replications. All simulations for all pyramids included no cancellations when zero or one board member was unavailable each year.

All three of the pyramid sizes that we examined allow for one officer to always be unavailable, which the figure reflects by showing all dots on the horizontal axis for the values of 0 and 1. The current pyramid of 27 GOs (shown in the lightest blue) can afford up to four unavailable officers each year without having to cancel an O-8 board; when the fifth officer becomes unavailable, the model is

7 The statute defines the promotion zone as a category consisting of officers meeting the board for their first look (10 U.S.C. § 645).
8 In addition to the number of available board members, whether the limitations would frequently prevent the USSF from holding an O-8 promotion board also depends on how quickly GOs promote out of the O-8 grade and are replaced by new officers who would not have served on the previous board.
9 Officers can be unavailable to serve on a board for several reasons. An officer deployed to a combat zone, for example, might be considered unavailable. Illness or injury could also restrict availability.
unable to staff annual boards about 30 percent of the time. Even if the GO pyramid were smaller (for instance, if it only included headspace for 21 GOs, shown in darkest blue), the O-8 boards would be technically feasible, as long as nearly all eligible GOs could serve on boards.10 Although O-8 selection boards are feasible, there could still be other downsides, such as having little flexibility for appointing members who represent the diversity of the entire USSF.

Although it should be possible for the USSF to staff selection boards under current rules, the 95-percent cap on the promotion rate is extremely limiting for O-8 promotions.11 To assess the impact of this requirement, we ran simulations comparing the promotion system under current rules—in which the number of officers that a board can select is capped at 95 percent of the number of promotion zone officers who are eligible—with an alternative in which the 95-percent cap is applied to all eligible officers meeting the board. The results show that current rules render the O-8 selection boards unable to select enough officers to fill projected O-8 vacancies.12

The typical O-8 selection board under current rules selected about six fewer officers compared with the case in which boards could select up to 95 percent of all eligible officers.13 Because the 95-percent cap consistently prevents the O-8 board from selecting enough officers to replace O-8s who are promoted or retiring, the inevitable result would either be periods in which positions are empty or extensions in which officers in grades O-8, O-9, or O-10 must delay retirement until another board can select more O-8s to complete the string of replacements.14 Figure 2.3 quantifies this result by showing, for each alternative, the percentage of officers in each grade whose retirements had to be extended and the average number of years that officers had to extend, including those officers who did not require extensions.

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10 Provisions in the law allow the services to use retired GOs as selection board members. Over time, as more GOs retire from USSF, there will be a larger pool to draw from if too few eligible GOs on active duty are available to serve as board members.

11 The 95-percent cap was enacted in Section 503 of the FY 2020 NDAA in reaction to the U.S. Air Force’s use of a 100-percent selection rate for promotion to O-4. The 95-percent cap was softened by a temporary provision in Section 503 of the FY 2022 NDAA, which made it applicable to all officers considered for promotion to O-8 rather than those in the primary promotion zone. This provision expired at the end of calendar year 2022. As of this writing, Section 509 of the Senate version of the FY 2024 NDAA extends this provision to the end of calendar year 2024, but there is no mention of an extension in the House version.

12 This problem is particularly acute for the O-8 selection board. The typical O-6 year group in the USSF has between 20 and 50 officers, which would allow the O-7 board to recommend between 19 and 47 officers for promotion. These numbers are well above what would be needed to fill the projected vacancies for the 11 O-7 positions.

13 Specifically, we calculated the difference between the number of officers that the board needed to select and the number that rules permitted the board to select for each year over 50 years. We calculated the average annual shortfall over the 50 years in each of 50 simulation replications. The median shortfall (over the 50 replications) was 6.4 under current rules, which fell to 0.8 in the set of replications that allowed the board to select up to 95 percent of the total number of eligible officers.

14 The model simulates retirements according to historical statistical patterns for DAF GOs but is then prohibited from executing a retirement until a full set of replacements is available. For example, at the simulated time of retirement for an O-10, the model checks to see if there is an O-9 available to replace the O-10, an O-8 available to replace that O-9, an O-8 (select) available to replace that O-8, and an O-7 (select) available to replace that O-7. If there is any gap in this string, the model extends the retirement until it can be completed. Thus, the extensions either represent delayed retirements or gaps in which a position in the string would remain unfilled.
Figure 2.3. Retirement Extensions Under Varying Selection Rate Cap Rules

NOTE: For each selection rate cap rule, we ran 50 replications of 50 years of promotion boards each. For each replication, we calculated the percentage of officers who experienced a retirement extension and the average value of the extension times (including zeroes for those who were not extended) in years. The dots represent the median value across the 50 replications, and the vertical lines represent the range from the 5th percentile replication to the 95th percentile of these percentage values across the 50 replications. The term first-look refers to the first time an officer is eligible for promotion.

This analysis of current policies suggests that USSF should consider solutions that (1) expand the eligible pool of officers to increase selectivity, (2) ensure that specialized competency needs play an appropriate role in selection board and promotion processes, and (3) address the current statutory constraints on its O-8 board composition and selection rate.
Chapter 3

Characteristics of an Ideal Promotion Process

The ultimate objective of a promotion process is to produce a cohort of senior leaders who have the character and competence to effectively lead their organization. With that in mind, we identified characteristics by which to judge potential USSF promotion policies and processes. These characteristics were initially proposed by our research team, some of whom have experience as GOs themselves or in GO management, selection boards, and senior military organizational leadership positions. We then refined these characteristics and vetted the results in interviews about senior leader selection processes with USSF representatives and others. As listed and defined in Table 3.1, the five ideal characteristics of promotion policies and processes are that they fulfill requirements, are seen as fair and trustworthy, are executable, are clear and explainable, and are responsive to change. We further expand on these characteristics in the sections that follow.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Fulfills requirements</td>
<td>The policies and processes produce a cohort of qualified and capable GOs who meet current and future leadership and technical requirements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair and trustworthy</td>
<td>The policies and processes permit a level playing field for all who are eligible to compete.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Executable</td>
<td>The USSF can operate without major administrative burdens or costs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Explainable</td>
<td>The USSF can easily explain the policies and processes to guardians and external audiences (e.g., Congress, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, sister services, the media).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsive to change</td>
<td>The policies and processes can be adapted or adjusted to strategic or legislative requirements with minimal disruption.</td>
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Fulfills Requirements

Promotion policies and processes should produce a cohort of qualified and capable GOs who meet current and future leadership and technical requirements. The guardians who are promoted through the promotion process should possess the competencies required to perform the duties of the positions to which they will eventually be assigned. These competency requirements should reflect the needs of current and anticipated USSF, DAF, and joint positions that might be filled by USSF
officers. The promotion planning process should include a vision of how guardians will be utilized and developed through promotions and assignments to successive positions and consider the capacity of candidates to fit the expected breadth of demands in typical senior officer career paths. Selectee competencies should also align with the qualities outlined in the Guardian Commitment—the USSF’s core values of character, connection, commitment, and courage. Those selected for promotion should embody the character traits that are important for guardian success, including honesty and integrity.

**Fair and Trustworthy**

The policies and processes should ensure that all who are eligible have an equal opportunity to compete for promotion. The process should contain checks and balances that impart trust to candidates, board members, the rest of the force, and external stakeholders. Ideally, the process should give weight to the impression of candidates held by peers and subordinates. To avoid favoritism, the process should limit the amount of individual influence on promotion outcomes. This concern is accentuated in the USSF because the smaller population of officers will allow personal knowledge of most or all candidates by the GO selection board members. In the interest of transparency, clear standards for character and competence should be established, widely disseminated, and adhered to during selections, to the extent possible.

**Executable**

The USSF should implement GO promotion policies and processes that do not require major administrative burdens or costs. Major administrative burdens are defined as those requiring significant changes to information technology systems, time, or funding. For example, an evaluation process that incorporates peer and subordinate feedback might add significant administrative burdens and be less executable than one that uses preexisting performance records. Another example would be convening promotion boards more frequently than the typical annual pattern or creating multiple competitive categories at the GO level. Although these approaches might facilitate matching selections to specific position requirements, the administrative burdens would be relatively high. Evaluation processes are part of the overall promotion process and should be able to reliably assess and deliver information on the levels of competencies and character attributes that the candidates possess.

Another important component of executability is whether statutory changes are needed to implement a new process. Changes in policy that can be implemented within the existing authority of service secretaries are more executable than ones that require statutory changes. Statutory changes that would be applicable and beneficial to all the military services are more executable than those that carve out service-specific exceptions. In addition, when service-specific exceptions are needed, those that introduce minor departures from the standardization principles in the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA) can be more easily executed than those that introduce major departures.
**Explainable**

The USSF should be able to explain promotion policies and processes clearly and easily to guardians and external audiences, such as Congress, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, sister services, and the media. All guardians should have a clear understanding of promotion policies and processes, including how they are being evaluated, the criteria for these evaluations, and how candidates are selected. Guardians should be able to explain how the process works and what their own specific roles and responsibilities are in the process. For example, a promotion process that includes additional steps, such as qualification boards, might be harder to explain to certain audiences than a traditional promotion process. USSF leadership should be able to broadly articulate a vision and goals for USSF GOs, including all the desired attributes, and explain to the force and outside stakeholders how the promotion processes achieve these goals.

**Responsive to Change**

The policies and processes should be able to accommodate variation in mission needs and available talent to better meet requirements. The promotion process should adjust with minimal disruption, which could take the form of information technology requirements, process changes, or strategic changes in requirements, including new competencies needed to do the job successfully. Changes should be able to be incorporated into the existing process with relative ease. For example, a process that can better accommodate a highly talented technical individual with a nontraditional background (e.g., a CEO who is a reservist) might be considered more responsive to change.

A small candidate pool can make it more difficult to rapidly respond to change. For example, a change in mission needs might result in the need for different competencies than are present among current GOs. The process should be able to consider a broader variety of candidates to be responsive to change.
Chapter 4

Insights from Other Organizations

In seeking ways to adapt the current GO promotion process to bring the USSF closer to the ideals described in the previous chapter, we conducted a systematic review of available research and held interviews with human resources experts in other military services, government agencies, academia, and the private sector. In this chapter, we summarize the resulting insights and use them to inform how potential modifications to the GO promotion process relate to the ideal characteristics of the promotion process described previously.

Private-Sector Insights and Themes

Executive selection can influence an organization’s success, shaping strategic decisions, company culture, and performance. Despite the importance of executive selection, Highhouse and Brooks (2017) observed that organizations often select executives using informal, unscientific methods. Typically, executive recruiters and senior executives direct the selection process without involving behavioral or management scientists (Hollenbeck, 2009). Even when systematic assessment tools are employed, their usage is restricted to candidate screening, leaving the final stages of selection as informal and unsystematic. Recruiters often advocate for specific tools or strategies, resulting in a scarcity of empirical studies on executive selection (Thornton, Hollenbeck, and Johnson, 2010). Therefore, comprehensive scientific reviews of the selection process, such as those performed by Sessa and Taylor (2000) and Sessa et al. (1998), are rare and outdated. Nevertheless, the existing literature offers some key insights.

We interviewed the following individuals: three RAND researchers who have extensive experience related to military promotions; three Coast Guard representatives who are familiar with officer promotions generally and flag officer promotions specifically; one representative from the Navy Flag Matters office; one representative from the Marine Corps’ General Officer Management Office; one representative from the National Reconnaissance Office; two representatives from large defense contracting companies; and three representatives from government agencies, including the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency.

As a supplement to this discussion, Appendix C contains an overview of the GO promotion process at four allied and partner military services—the United Kingdom (UK), Canada, Australia, and New Zealand—highlighting insights that could be applicable to the USSF.

The importance of the executive selection is underscored by Huson, Malatesta, and Parrino (2004), which suggests a strong correlation between executive selection and a company’s financial performance (see also Hambrick and Quigley, 2014). Furthermore, an article by Rowe et al. (2005) illustrates the potential ripple effects that a poor executive selection can have on an organization, which affect not only financial outcomes but also employee morale and the broader organizational culture (see also Giambastista, Rowe, and Riaz, 2005).

We conducted a literature search using RAND’s library services. Specifically, we sought to gather information on how private-sector and government agencies select executives and how the military selects its executives, generals, and leaders. We identified a total of 5,968 papers in the private-organization search. Of these, 492 papers were excluded that had missing abstracts or sources.
Identification of the Requirements Is Essential for Successful Executive Selection

A successful executive selection process depends on identifying explicit, specific requirements rather than generic, vague ones. Unclear requirements can lead to selection failure. As found by Sessa et al. (1998), successful executive selections are associated with explicit job and candidate requirements, such as dedication, ethics, cultural fit, creativity, and interpersonal skills, rather than generic skills, such as strategic global perspective, thinking outside the box, performance orientation, improving business, or productivity. However, organizations often tend to define the requirements too broadly or vaguely to guide the assessment and selection process (Thornton, Hollenbeck, and Johnson, 2010).

Sessa and Taylor (2000) proposed three types of requirements: organizational needs, position requirements, and candidate requirements. In other words, the selection should match the specific needs of the vacant position. For example, a company that requires an executive for a turnaround situation should avoid selecting a candidate who is more suitable for sustaining the organization. Likewise, the selection decision for a visionary role will differ from a role that is focused on improving efficiency or productivity.

Sessa and Taylor further categorized candidate requirements into hard-side, soft-side, and fit (Sessa and Taylor, 2000). Hard-side requirements encompass a specific functional background, technical knowledge, and industry or job knowledge. Soft-side requirements involve soft skills (e.g., management, interpersonal relationship-building, communication, leadership, strategic planning) and characteristics (e.g., being a team player, ethical, energetic, driven, intelligent, flexible, or creative). Lastly, fit refers to company knowledge and cultural alignment.

A Quality Talent Pool Is Imperative for a Successful Executive Selection

The study by Sessa and Taylor (2000, p. 65) firmly states that “[w]ithout a pool of qualified executives, the best selection practices in the world will not work.” They found that many organizations fail to recruit qualified candidates, with “nearly a quarter of the time the executive selected for the position was the only candidate considered” (Sessa and Taylor, 2000, p. 65). Organizations often seek to broaden their talent pool by recruiting externally, but the study by Sessa and Taylor (2000, p. 107) cautions that “external executives are less likely to succeed when hired.”

Succession management is another way to enhance the internal talent pool (Day, 2009). Day (2009) recommends that organizations carry out succession planning and management at least annually, aiming to identify and deliberately cultivate employees for executive roles. An article by Schleu and Hüffmeier (2021, p. 14) concurs, suggesting that “succession planning might be a helpful extension to meritocratic promotion,” which refers to the practice of promoting top-performing
employees to leadership roles. These authors found mixed results on the predictive quality of the meritocratic promotion on leaders’ performance.

A Science Versus Practice Gap Exists in Assessment Tools and Methods

Scientific research consistently highlights cognitive abilities and, to a smaller extent, personality traits as significant predictors of job performance across all management strata, including executive positions (Highhouse and Brooks, 2017; Neumann, Niessen, and Meijer, 2021; Ones and Dilchert, 2009). However, there is a noticeable divergence between this scientific consensus and the reality of assessment practices.

Practitioners, including executive recruiters and senior executives, often prioritize personality traits and applied social skills as crucial predictors of job performance (Neumann, Niessen, and Meijer, 2021). Not only do scientists and practitioners emphasize different factors, but each group also employs diverging assessment methods and tools. Industrial and organizational psychologists utilize standardized tests, assessment centers, work sample tests, and structured interviews. By contrast, practitioners lean on analyses of resumes and cover letters, supplemented by unstructured interviews (Neumann, Niessen, and Meijer, 2021).

Furthermore, the approaches to interpreting and integrating assessment results differ significantly. Scientists typically use rule-based approaches to combine assessment outcomes, whereas practitioners favor a holistic method for synthesizing information to inform decisionmaking (Highhouse, 2008; Neumann, Niessen, and Meijer, 2021; Thornton, Hollenbeck, and Johnson, 2010).

Organizations Often Do Not Use Assessment Tools for Executive Selection

Highlighting the divide between science and practice, a study by Church and Rotolo (2013) found that, while about 90 percent of organizations assess their senior executives, the use and intent of these assessments vary. About one-third of the sample organizations used assessments for internal senior executive placement, and one-quarter used them for external recruitment and selection of senior executives.

The assessment tools that were adopted also reveal an interesting pattern. The most popular tool was multisource (or 360-degree) ratings, used by 60 percent of organizations, followed by personality inventories and interviews at 57 percent. However, assessment tools and methods with solid scientific backing were less prevalent in evaluating senior executives. Thirty-eight percent of the sample assessed cognitive ability, and 30 percent used assessment centers.¹⁹

Adapted from Howard and Thomas (2010), Table 4.1 describes the pros and cons of selected assessment tools. The table shows that popular assessment tools have serious weaknesses. For example, despite the popularity of multisource ratings, the article by Howard and Thomas (2010, p. 407) highlights the subjectivity of the assessors and how multisource ratings can be a poor indicator for selection decisions because the ratings “might not be relevant to future jobs.” Similarly, personality

¹⁹ An assessment center is typically a professionally staffed facility in which candidates can be observed and evaluated on their performance of tasks in simulated business or operational contexts.
measures and interviews share a weakness. Skilled candidates can mask their true personalities and influence interviewers’ perceptions. Although cognitive tests are predictive of job performance, these tests can have adverse effects on some racial and ethnic groups, and senior executives do not accept these tests as suitable for executive selection.

Table 4.1. Pros and Cons of Selected Assessment Methods for Executives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment Method</th>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multisource (360-degree)</td>
<td>Multiple sources of information about executives’ reputations can guide development in current role.</td>
<td>Raters lack training and skills of assessors, and different points of view can be confusing. Ratings might not be relevant to future jobs, and raters might have goals other than accuracy, making these ratings poor for selection or mixed use.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality measures</td>
<td>Enablers and derailers are essential to consider, given the stress and visibility of top jobs.</td>
<td>It might be misleading if executives cover deficiencies with well-developed dissimulation skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Descriptions of past behavior can capture nuances of executive jobs and be tied to important competencies.</td>
<td>Interviews are time-consuming, and executives’ social and communication skills can influence ratings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive tests</td>
<td>Such assessments can help determine high potential in early career.</td>
<td>Such standardized assessments have a high adverse effect on some racial and ethnic groups, as well as low acceptance by executives.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: Adapted from Howard and Thomas, 2010.

Even though relatively fewer organizations use assessment centers, organizations have used them for executive evaluation and selection for over 50 years (Thornton, Rupp, and Hoffman, 2015; Thornton and Krause, 2009). The assessment center combines observation of behaviors in organizational simulations and data from other techniques, such as cognitive tests and personality questionnaires (Thornton, Rupp, and Hoffman, 2015). Studies affirm that assessment centers predict senior management potential and offer incremental validity over cognitive tests in forecasting executive success (Krause et al., 2006; Ritchie, 1994).

Insights from Other Military Services

Our private-sector research uncovered some of the same challenges that the USSF faces: the importance of selectivity and ensuring that the competencies of selections are a fit for well-defined requirements. Yet, because of the gap between science and practice, there are not necessarily “shovel-ready” solutions that the USSF can borrow from the private sector. Thus, we turn to other military services for insights on how the USSF can address its main challenges with GO promotion.

Although there is no military service that is comparable in size to the USSF, there are enclaves in the other military services in which promotion decisions face the same planning challenges. Our
interviews in these areas proved especially fruitful in identifying process adjustments that could help the USSF cope with the challenges of limited selectivity posed by the rectangular pyramid of GO positions, the difficulty of aligning the competencies of selected officers with position requirements, and the technical requirements of promotion boards.

The first insight from these discussions is that the processes for making promotion decisions at smaller scales tend to have mechanisms that factor in the competency needs of particular positions in addition to overall merit. These mechanisms are necessary because the competency needs vary much more widely from year to year in a smaller population. For example, GO promotion processes in both the Air Force Reserve and Air National Guard contain steps that match officers with a particular job as a prerequisite for pinning on their next rank.  

Our interview findings also revealed that smaller segments of the U.S. Air Force, such as the Medical Service Corps, Chaplain Corps, and Judge Advocate General’s Corps, manage promotions at the GO level on a vacancy-by-vacancy basis. Representatives of other military services also confirmed that, despite their larger numbers of officers, they use specialty requirements to a greater degree than the U.S. Air Force process that the USSF inherited. These consistent patterns suggest a line of improvement to the USSF process that more prominently inserts the needs of specific positions into the GO selection process as part of an overall succession plan.

A second insight from these discussions is that managing GO promotions at a smaller scale requires a higher level of predictability in retirement timing. Because year-to-year variation in position needs is greater in a small population, there is also a higher risk that a succession plan would be derailed by unpredictable retirement behaviors. In our interviews, we learned of several mechanisms to force retirements to be more predictable. At the extreme end, the U.S. Coast Guard has a formal continuation board that selects O-7 and O-8 officers for retirement according to projected competency needs. Informally, representatives from other military services described a strong cultural norm in which general and flag officers communicate with management offices about their careers and then willingly retire when it best suits the needs of the service. The following quote from our interviews illustrates such norms:

All GOs are required to submit for retirement every year, so after they pick up one star and they hit three years’ time in grade, every year after every GO submits for retirement. . . . You are serving at the pleasure of the President and the Commandant and understanding where there are limitations and [even if] there are some people who would like to continue. They have these discussions with the GOs four times a year, so none of this comes as a surprise. The default is for them to retire unless the Marine Corp needs them for something else.

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20 In the Air Force Reserve, candidates for O-7 volunteer to meet a non-statutory qualification board that determines which candidates are qualified to fill an O-7 position, and officers must fill an O-7 position for at least six months before meeting a vacancy promotion board, in which they compete for promotion to O-7. Similarly, for the Air National Guard, a promotion board selects officers for promotion, but the promotions do not take effect until the officers are placed in a vacancy.

21 Section 638 in Title 10 of the U.S.C. contains provisions for selection boards focused on early retirement that are available to the services as well.

22 Representative from a service GO management office, interview with the authors, 2022.
With such a small number of positions, the USSF will likely encounter situations in which a well-timed retirement helps connect a succession plan, or conversely, an officer must remain longer to allow more time for succession planning efforts to unfold. Incorporating both strong cultural norms and formal processes for managing retirements could help introduce additional retirement predictability into the planning process.

The final theme that emerged from discussions with other military services is the need to broaden the base of candidates to increase selectivity. At the grade of O-9, in which individuals are appointed to particular positions, successful candidates sometimes arise from the O-7 ranks. Lt Gen Caroline Miller, Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower, Personnel, and Services, is an example of such a promotion in May 2022 from O-7 to O-9. Although Title 10 limits O-8 promotion processes to only consider officers in the grade of O-7 with one year in grade, Title 10 also waives these requirements for some positions. For the Air Force Chief of Chaplains and the Deputy Judge Advocate General (both O-8 positions), Title 10 allows for consideration of candidates from grades below O-7 to create more alternatives for boards to consider.

In addition to considering officers from the next lower grade to fill requirements for specialized competencies, representatives from the smaller military services emphasized the use of civilians in the Senior Executive Service (SES) to act in a GO capacity when the GO promotion system cannot deliver an officer that meets requirements. As part of an overall succession plan, SESs acting in a GO capacity can provide additional time to cultivate more candidates for key positions without using limited GO headspace.

Our private-sector interviews and literature review emphasized the importance of paying close attention to upcoming position requirements when developing a quality talent pool, and the insights from other military services revealed tools that could help accomplish these goals, many of which are available to the USSF without legislative changes.
Many aspects of GO promotions, like officer promotions in general, are governed by the provisions in Title 10 of the U.S.C. Most of these provisions were established as part of DOPMA in 1980. Changes to these statutory provisions can, of course, be executed only through legislative action. DOPMA sought to standardize treatment of officers across the defense services. To be executable, we believe that proposed statutory changes should adhere to this standardization principle or justifiably depart from it. The standardization principle can be honored if statutory changes are written in such a way that they apply to all services or at least provide the option for all services to use them. If the proposed changes are intended to be exclusive to the USSF, they should be firmly linked to a unique condition of the USSF and tailored closely to treating that condition. This set of considerations will naturally constrain the range of options that the USSF can consider and will put the third of our five ideal characteristics—**executable**—in tension with the other four characteristics.

With this in mind, we find that potential changes take on degrees of executability as a function of how much legislative change, if any, is required. As discussed earlier, changes are

- the most executable if they exercise authorities already vested in the service secretary
- somewhat less executable if they require minor legislative changes but leave major DOPMA structures intact
- an additional degree less executable if they require major structural change but mirror statutory provisions currently in effect in other contexts
- the least executable if they require new statutory structures, particularly if they would be exclusive to the USSF.

The options presented here are arranged in order from the most to least executable, followed by a summary of how well each option addresses known problems and meet our established criteria.

**Align Selection Decisions with Succession Planning Needs**

The U.S.C. mandates that military department secretaries may furnish selection boards with “information or guidelines relating to the needs of the armed force concerned for officers having particular skills” (10 U.S.C. § 615[b]). This provision is used to varying degrees across services and grades.

For GO promotions in the USSF’s sister service in the DAF, this provision is used sparingly. We believe this to be true because the U.S. Air Force has many GO positions for which functional qualifications are either unspecified or not critical. Accordingly, selection of officers in excess of the needs of a specific functional area is not, within reasonable bounds, a problem. Secretarial guidance is limited to setting minimums for certain specialized functions.
The USSF faces a different challenge. As indicated in Appendix D, only two GO positions in the USSF are without specific expected functional competencies. Accordingly, overselection of officers in any one functional area—space, acquisition, or intelligence—could result in officers who are ill-fitted to upcoming vacancies. To prevent this, as part of its GO promotion planning process, the USSF will need to exercise rigorous workforce planning to anticipate future retirements and promotions and use the planning results to set both minimums and maximums in secretarial guidance to promotion boards regarding specific competencies.

**Increase Flexibility of Promotion Board Composition and Selection**

The small number of GOs in the USSF presents two problems with respect to promotion board proceedings. The first is that the USSF could occasionally have too few officers available to meet current statutory requirements for board composition. The second is that, because of the small numbers of eligible promotion candidates, the USSF will regularly be adversely affected by the statutory selection rate cap of 95 percent of promotion zone candidates.

**Expand Promotion Board Member Eligibility**

The U.S.C. requires promotion boards for active-duty officers to consist of at least five active-duty officers in a grade higher than the officers under consideration and prohibits serving on two consecutive boards for the same grade and competitive category (10 U.S.C. § 612). When these conditions cannot be met, retired officers can be appointed as board members. As discussed previously, our analyses predict that the USSF requires both its O-8 and O-9 officers to consistently be available to fully staff O-8 promotion boards. Thus, the USSF might occasionally encounter circumstances in which a full board of active-duty officers cannot be composed, requiring the use of retired officers, who will only be available after the USSF builds a stable of retired GOs. Moreover, the small number of officers in grade O-8 and above will require the use of recently promoted O-8s as board members.

To reduce the adverse impacts of too-frequent board duties among officers, we recommend that the USSF seek a legislative change to expand the eligibility requirements for board membership. Specifically, a legislative proposal could allow for limited use (e.g., two per board) of appropriately qualified SES members. This provision would be worded similarly to Section 612(a)(4) in Title 10 of the U.S.C., which allows for the use of reserve officers, but to provide more readily available relief from board duties borne by USSF officers, it would drop the stipulation that it could be used only when qualified officers on the USSF active-duty list are not available. The proposed provision could be made applicable specifically to the USSF or, with appropriate coordination, to all the services. While the need is most acute for O-8 boards, applicability to O-7 boards would also be helpful. This option might include a stipulation that the Secretary of the Air Force would select SES members to serve on promotion boards only if they were deemed to have a broad appreciation of the leadership needs of the USSF and the characteristics sought by the USSF in individuals occupying GO positions.
Remove Selection Rate Cap

Because of the low ratio of O-7 to O-8 positions, the USSF will need to frequently hold O-8 boards in which the number of required promotions will equal or exceed the number of eligible promotion zone officers. Section 615(d) in Title 10 of the U.S.C. limits selection rates to a maximum of 95 percent of promotion zone officers. Accordingly, the USSF will not be able to promote the number needed to sustain its required O-8 inventory, even if well-qualified officers on their second or subsequent consideration are available. Relief will require a legislative change to exempt the USSF from the 95-percent selection rate ceiling for O-8 selections or, at a minimum, to apply the ceiling to the total number of officers meeting the board.

Authorize Multigrade Promotions

The small numbers and unusually low ratio of O-7 to O-8 positions in the USSF sharply narrows the selectivity (i.e., the ratio of candidates to selections) in USSF O-8 boards, particularly for positions that have acquisition and intelligence requirements. Under normal circumstances, there can be at most one intelligence candidate and two acquisition candidates competing for promotion. For both functional specialties, the number of anticipated O-8 vacancies can realistically exceed the number of eligible candidates who have the required functional competencies. One approach to increasing this selectivity would be to allow O-6s (colonels) to compete along with O-7s in O-8 boards and to eliminate the time-in-grade (TIG) requirement for consideration of O-7s. This would roughly parallel a current provision in Title 10 that allows O-7s, or any other officer, to be considered for appointment as O-9s (10 U.S.C. § 601). With so few O-7s from which to choose, it is possible that one or more of the most qualified and experienced O-6s might be better candidates than one or more of the least qualified O-7s, particularly for the purpose of meeting functional requirements.

In addition to mirroring current flexibilities in O-9 and O-10 selections, this proposal would also mirror the grade and TIG flexibilities extended to military department secretaries by Section 9037(e)(2) of Title 10 and comparable provisions for other services regarding recommendation boards for appointment of Deputy Judge Advocates General. We believe this would be a useful and justifiable departure from DOPMA, given the USSF’s very narrow functional pyramids. If unable to obtain this flexibility, we recommend that the USSF restructure its GO grade requirements to make them more sustainable.

Align Assignment and Promotion Processes

Recommendation Board Construct

The USSF’s GO requirements might be small enough to warrant a more radical departure from the selection board process prescribed in Subchapter I of Chapter 36 in Title 10 of the U.S.C. A useful model would be the board processes that are currently established in Sections 9037 and 9039 for recommending and selecting officers for the role of Judge Advocate General, Deputy Judge Advocate General, or Chief of Chaplains. Rather than the periodic (typically annual) selection boards that are currently held for line officers, USSF would convene a board for each vacancy either to
recommend a qualified candidate or candidates to the secretary for selection. Paralleling the provisions of Sections 9037 and 9039, such boards, if convened for the purpose of recommending officers, would “insofar as practicable” adhere to the procedures applicable to selection boards convened under Chapter 36 of Title 10 (10 U.S.C. §§ 9037 and 9039). This recommendation process could also incorporate the multigrade promotion feature discussed above.

There would be two potential approaches to implementing this provision. One approach would treat every O-7 and O-8 position for a USSF officer as a unique position comparable to the statutory Judge Advocate General, Deputy Judge Advocate General, and Chief of Chaplains positions, or the positions in grades O-9 and O-10. Every vacancy would be filled through this appointment process, with officers who currently hold the grade of the position considered along with officers below the grade of the position. In effect, USSF GOs would hold rank-in-position rather than rank-in-person, which would have the effect of making every USSF officer assignment subject to Senate confirmation.

Alternatively, this process could be invoked only after a decision is made that a position will not be filled by reassignment of an officer already holding the grade. A new statutory provision should clarify that, once selected for a specific O-7 or O-8 position through this process, the individual would hold rank-in-person and would not require reappointment after leaving the position. The advantage of this board construct is that it would virtually guarantee that each officer selected for promotion would meet the functional competency requirements of the job or would otherwise have the characteristics required for likely success. This assurance would not hold if there were no viable candidates in the grade immediately below that of the position, but it would hold if the process were allowed to consider candidates two grades below that of the position.

**Reserve Vacancy Promotion Constructs**

A similar matching of individuals to specific jobs could be produced though use of procedures roughly paralleling the reserve vacancy promotion provisions of Section 14315 in Title 10 or the federal recognition provisions of Section 307 in Title 32 of the U.S.C. In both cases, officers are selected for potential promotion or recognition through a board process and their names are submitted for Senate confirmation, but the promotion is not made until a selectee occupies a position at the higher grade.

Although either of these approaches would help to assure good matches of USSF officers to USSF or DAF jobs, they could be disadvantageous for the USSF in placing officers in joint jobs. Commanders, supervisors, and staffs responsible for selecting individuals to fill joint positions might be unfamiliar with reserve promotion procedures that make a promotion contingent on occupying a position at the higher grade, particularly if a reserve-like process is applied in the case of an active-duty officer. Through misunderstanding, these officials might hesitate to select an individual whose current grade does not match the requirement.

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23 In a rank-in-person system, individuals are selected for promotion and hold a specific grade without respect to the position they occupy. They retain their grade or rank as they move from position to position, even if occupying a position authorized at a lower grade. In a rank-in-position system, the individuals’ grades are tied to the positions they occupy. With some exceptions, they lose the grade when they vacate a position. Most military members below the grade of O-9 hold rank-in-person. Military officers in the grades of O-9 and O-10 and most civil service employees below the SES status hold rank-in-position.
A Pure Rank-in-Position System

During our project, we heard proposals for much greater flexibility in aligning individuals and their grades with position requirements. These proposals generally would make O-7 and O-8 appointments comparable to O-9 and O-10 appointments, in that promotions and assignments would be melded into a single consideration—a straightforward rank-in-position rather than a rank-in-person system. Selection for appointments in the grades of O-7 and O-8 would be made by the Secretary of the Air Force as a function of job placements, subject to Senate confirmation and without a competitive recommendation process. Furthermore, the appointment process for O-9s and O-10s (10 U.S.C. § 601) is structured in this way to place increased scrutiny on candidates for positions of importance and responsibility; it does not occur to sidestep competitive promotion board processes for a small population.

We regard this complete departure from competitive board processes as very distinct from current statutory procedures, incompatible with basic DOPMA principles, and unnecessary in view of more modest changes that can meet the USSF’s needs. Moreover, a process like this would create a need for Senate confirmation of every O-7 and O-8 assignment action. This would unnecessarily expose O-7 and O-8 assignment actions to the deeper scrutiny, uncertainties, and potential delays that can arise during the Senate confirmation process.

Promotion Sequencing

Section 624(a) in Title 10 of the U.S.C. requires officers selected for promotion to be placed on a promotion list in order of seniority or on the basis of merit, as determined by a promotion board, and to be promoted in this order as vacancies in the higher grade occur. One proposal that would allow a closer alignment of promotions and assignments would be to promote selectees without regard to the promotion list sequence if they occupy a position at the grade to which they are pending promotion. The statutory change would have to include provisions for tiebreakers if the basic provision would cause a grade ceiling to be exceeded.

Although we can only surmise the considerations that underlie the current Title 10 provisions regarding promotion sequencing, they appear to be intended to prevent favoritism or unearned acceleration in the promotion process. We also observe that there is no unique condition in the USSF that would justify differentiation from the other services on this provision. According to the general principles of executability that we have suggested, such a change should be made applicable to all services. However, we do not think that the minor improvement in promotion and assignment linkages would be worth the challenge of seeking the many agreements needed to obtain this change.

Conventional Assignment Flexibilities

A final alternative to the above DOPMA departures for aligning assignment and promotion processes to prevent unanticipated mismatches is to leverage the existing flexibilities and authorities granted to the services by Title 10. If inventories of eligible officers are less than statutory requirements, grade substitution (i.e., O-7s filling O-8 requirements or O-6s filling O-7 requirements) can be employed. If inventories of eligible officers exceed statutory requirements, selective retirement
actions can be invoked. Additionally, GOs who have broadened backgrounds could be capable of serving effectively in more than one functional capacity, providing flexibility in matching the inventory to requirements. Finally, for persistent gaps in succession planning, members from the smaller military services emphasized the use of existing management tools: specifically, conferring GO authorities to capable SESs, *frocking* (awarding officers the next grade or title before formal promotion can take place), and recalling retired GOs to active duty.

**Fit to Criteria**

Each of the options discussed can be evaluated using the characteristics of an ideal promotion system as criteria. Table 5.1 summarizes our consensus evaluations. Aligning succession decisions with succession planning needs is a fundamental step. It requires no additional statutory authorities and is a good human resource management practice in all respects. We rated it favorably with respect to all five criteria.

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24 Although Title 10 contains provisions for involuntary selective early retirement boards, these actions would not have to be involuntary retirements. Rather, they could be retirements requested by the Chief of Space Operations or the Secretary of the Air Force. It is common practice for general officers to voluntarily retire when requested by their service chief or service secretary.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alternative</th>
<th>Fulfills Requirements</th>
<th>Fair and Trustworthy</th>
<th>Executable</th>
<th>Explainable</th>
<th>Responsive to Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Align selection decisions with succession planning needs</td>
<td>✅</td>
<td>✅</td>
<td>✅</td>
<td>✅</td>
<td>✅</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increase flexibility of promotion board composition and selection</td>
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<td>Expand promotion board member eligibility</td>
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NOTE: ✅ = most favorable  ✅ = favorable  ▲ = marginally favorable  ❌ = unfavorable  ✗ = not applicable.

Table 5.1. Fit of Alternatives to Criteria
Increased flexibilities are needed by the USSF in both board composition and selection constraints. Expanding selection board member eligibility is a practical necessity for the USSF and is likely to be seen favorably by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Office of Management and Budget, and Congress. Removing the 95-percent cap for USSF O-7 and O-8 selections is also a practical necessity, but we marked executability as marginal because it could encounter some resistance from Congress, given the recency and history of its enactment. We would expect multigrade promotions to also be a hard sell and thus marked its executability as marginal, but the USSF can at least offer its current use for Deputy Judge Advocate General positions as a precedent. Because it would differ markedly from procedures for other grades in USSF promotions and from other services in O-8 promotions, we rate its criterion of explainable as marginal.

For aligning assignment and promotion processes, we see the recommendation board, reserve vacancy, and pure rank-in-position approaches as potentially useful for fulfilling requirements but also as significant and most likely unnecessary departures from DOPMA structures. Enactment is unlikely, resulting in an unfavorable fit for the executable criterion. These approaches also raise fairness concerns because they remove the authority to order the promotion list from promotion boards and, to varying degrees, place it into the less-accountable and less-structured assignment process. For this reason, we also rated them marginally for the fair and trustworthy criterion. The use of conventional assignment flexibilities could be less effective than these other approaches at fulfilling requirements, but it does not have the same potential problems with being fair, executable, and explainable. Therefore, it is the most favorable approach overall to overcome the practical challenges inherent in the basics of GO management and planning.
Chapter 6

Policy Recommendations

The primary challenges inherent to managing such a small number of GOs at the ranks authorized to the USSF include the difficulty of affording enough viable candidates to allow for a measure of selectivity, the difficulty of aligning the competencies of selected officers with those who are vacating positions, and the difficulty of meeting statutory constraints for board membership and selection rates. Our systematic data collection resulted in many options for addressing these challenges. The USSF already has the authority to implement some of the options, while others require legislative action. Using our analysis of these options in view of our five criteria, we offer the following policy recommendations.

The issue of aligning competencies with positions applies only to O-7 and O-8 promotions; officers beyond those grades receive appointments to serve in specific positions. The USSF can address this issue with O-7 and O-8 promotion boards by specifying “floors” and “ceilings” on the competencies that planners expect to need over the board horizon. Our evaluation rated this option as favorable in all five criteria, including being executable. The law already gives promotion boards the authority to consider the skill needs of the armed forces, and other military services have leveraged this authority to a greater degree than the DAF. Furthermore, ensuring requirements for selection boards are specific rather than generic is recommended by the general research literature on executive selection. Thus, we recommend that the USSF provide comprehensive minimum and maximum competency guidance to O-7 and O-8 promotion boards, based not only on expected vacancies, but also on overall succession planning.

To address the remaining two challenges, we recommend that the USSF forward legislative change proposals for three additional flexibilities: (1) a request for the 95-percent cap on the selection rate to apply to the total number of eligible officers rather than those on their first promotion look, (2) the ability to use members of the SES as selection board members, and (3) the authority to consider O-6s for promotion to O-8. We rated all three of these options at least marginally favorable according to our five criteria, with the primary drawbacks being the risk of potential resistance in the process of modifying Title 10.

Our modeling results show that applying the 95-percent selection rate cap to the total number of eligible officers will ensure that the USSF is able to promote enough O-7s to meet O-8 requirements. Incorporating SES personnel as board members creates additional options, potentially permitting promotion boards to be held more frequently if unexpected vacancies emerge. Also, the inclusion of SES personnel could increase the diversity of both perspectives and demographics on selection boards. The authority to use multigrade promotions at the O-8 level could be more difficult to obtain, but it has a precedent in other small populations in the military services, and it is the only way to increase selectivity for O-8 positions requiring competencies that few O-7 positions require. A further justification for this new authority is that it aligns with executive selection best practices that
emphasize broadening the talent pool to include multiple qualified candidates, even for very senior positions.

We examined additional options designed to address the problem of aligning each promoting officer with an appropriate position. We found that, by departing further from DOPMA structures and tying promotions directly to placement in a position at the next grade, the USSF could do more to ensure an ongoing match between promoted officers and their positions, which rated favorably on the ideal criteria for fulfills requirements and responsive to change. However, we do not recommend that the USSF pursue any of these options because they tend to make the process less fair, less executable, and less explainable. Instead, we recommend that the USSF employ all available conventional assignment flexibilities to address these challenges in aligning inventory with positions. Such flexibilities include conferring GO authorities to capable SESs, frocking, and recalling retired GOs to active duty.
Appendix A

The General Officer Lifecycle Flow Model

Several policy questions within the scope of this project come down to how the statutory structures are likely to function when applied to the GO pyramid that the USSF must manage. Furthermore, even if the structures are likely to function well on average, information on how often the USSF is likely to encounter certain difficulties is helpful, so that the USSF can request accommodations in the statutes if such scenarios emerge. To assess these policy questions, we built on previous unpublished RAND work that established a simulation model for GO management, dubbed the General Officer Lifecycle Flow (GOLF) model.

The GOLF model begins with an allocation of headspace at each grade and a current incumbent officer for each slot. The goal of the model is to realistically simulate officer retirements and then replace retiring officers while adhering to the specific constraints discussed in this report, such as the need to be recommended for promotion by a fully staffed selection board at the grades of O-7 and O-8 before an officer can advance to fill a vacancy at the next grade.

The model simulates retirements using the empirical TIG distributions of historical officers when they retire at each grade. When we initiate a new run of the model, it probabilistically draws a TIG value for each officer, representing the point at which the officer will retire if they are not promoted. Each time an officer advances to a new grade, the model draws a new TIG value for when they will retire, absent another promotion.

Each time an officer retires, it triggers a routine to attempt to promote a replacement from the next lower grade, who then needs a replacement, on down until all vacancies from O-7 to O-10 have new occupants. The model can optionally select officers for promotion at random, use historical TIG at promotion data to select among the promotable officers, or select them in order of seniority. For the results in this report, we selected officers for promotion based on seniority. Depending on the statutory rules that we specify, this routine will encounter situations in which there are no eligible officers in the next lower grade to select as part of this chain or string of promotions. Whenever this happens, the GOLF model places a hold on all retirements for officers in the string until all vacancies in the string are filled. The additional time to complete the string is logged for later analysis.

A vacancy is filled by a promotion from the next lower grade. For O-10 and O-9 positions, any officer in the O-9 and O-8 pay grades, respectively, is eligible to move up. We do not allow O-7s to

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25 The TIG distribution used in the model was derived from experience with U.S. Air Force officers.
promote to O-9 or O-10, even though this is permissible in the real world and occasionally occurs. To fill a vacancy at the O-7 or O-8 grade, the officer must have already been selected for promotion by a selection board and then have waited a user-specified number of months for a simulated Senate confirmation process. The model attempts to execute a promotion board routinely, in this case annually, for O-7s and O-8s. These annual boards determine the number of promotions that are needed by first calculating current and projected vacancies. The model does not know the actual retirement dates of officers, but it projects them using the same process that we used to simulate them. Then, the model subtracts the number of officers selected who are still waiting to promote to compute how many the board should ideally select.

The model attempts to select up to this number, subject to constraints (i.e., the 95-percent cap) and the actual number of eligible candidates. If statutory rules or a shortage of eligible candidates prevent a board from selecting enough officers to meet requirements, this will drive additional extensions until a future board can select more officers. Because there are many more O-6s than O-7s in the USSF, we assume that there are always enough eligible candidates to meet selection needs. The model will only hold a board if requirements and constraints permit it to select one or more officers. These rules allow our analysis to assess how frequently boards must be held, as well as how limiting the statutory constraints might be, relative to the number of selections needed to sustain the higher grades.

The model can only hold a board if it has enough eligible board members. According to statute, board members must be one grade above the candidates and cannot have sat on the previous board. DAF boards also include a non-voting board president, who is two grades above the candidates and did not sit on the previous board. If the model cannot fully staff a board with eligible board members, it cancels the board, and thus, no officers are selected for promotion. The model allows O-10 officers to serve as board presidents but not as voting board members.

The most significant limitation of the model in its current form is that it assumes any officer can fill any requirement. Future extensions of the model could incorporate needs for certain competencies, so that it can be used to assess the other GO management concerns that we discussed in this report.
Appendix B

Description of General Officer Promotion Processes

In this appendix, we describe the GO promotion processes established in Title 10, beginning with selection for brigadier general (O-7) and major general (O-8). Selection for lieutenant general (O-9) and general (O-10) follow a different process, which reflects the importance and responsibilities of these positions.

Promotion to Brigadier General and Major General

Much like promoting through the field grade ranks, selection for promotion to brigadier general and major general occurs through the formal promotion board process governed by Title 10 of the U.S.C. In 2021, the USSF conducted its first GO promotion boards. In large part, the USSF adopted the same board process used by the U.S. Air Force.

Promotion eligibility starts with an officer meeting basic TIG requirements: one-year TIG for promotion to brigadier general or major general but with a provision that service secretaries can establish a longer period. The USSF chose to conduct its initial boards with a single competitive category: Line of the Space Force. Board members are appointed to each board by the Secretary of the Air Force and are required to be at least one grade above those being considered. Additionally, there is a statutory requirement to have at least five members on each board, and board members are prohibited from sitting on consecutive boards for the same competitive category. If possible, board members are chosen to reflect the diversity of the broader military service in race, ethnicity, and gender.

As with promotion to lower grades, Title 10 defines a promotion zone for officers being considered for promotion to brigadier general and major general. This promotion zone includes all those officers meeting minimum TIG, as specified by the service secretary, who have not previously failed of selection. Notably, this definition of the promotion zone might change because of provisions in the FY 2024 NDAA. The specific changes could not be determined as of this writing because the House and Senate versions differ.

The role of the promotion board is to review and score the records of the eligible officers and select those members who are both best and fully qualified to serve at the next grade, according to guidance issued by the Secretary of the Air Force. The board will review the officer’s selection record, which contains a summarized single page selection brief, all performance reports, decorations, letters of evaluation, and any documented derogatory information. The board also receives a promotion recommendation form for each officer.
For colonels, the promotion recommendation form is a one-time use document that contains an overall recommendation within a three-tier system, with the top tier being controlled through a forced distribution allocation, a short write-up summarizing qualifications, and a potential stratification statement, if warranted. The recommendations are assigned by an established set of designated management levels, which are typically headed by O-10s and O-9s or senior civil servants and political appointees. The promotion recommendation for O-7s is combined with their annual evaluation on the Form 78, which becomes part of their permanent record. The Form 78 and associated recommendation is prepared by the senior rater (also the management levels for O-7s), who provides a written evaluation of performance and provides a stratification ranking of all O-7s within their rating chain (e.g., one of three, two of three, or three of three).

The board is also given guidance through the Secretary of the Air Force's memorandum of instruction (MOI). The MOI provides guidance on the rules for conducting the board and what can and cannot be considered, criteria outlining the desired attributes of selectees, the maximum number (i.e., quota) of officers that can be selected, and, in some cases, specific guidance on the desired skills required among the selectees. In both boards, a board president oversees the process and can reintroduce records and ask for rescoring to meet the MOI's guidance and to ensure that the process is fairly executed before the board proceedings are finalized.

Brigadier general boards conduct a two-step process in which records are first scored in a yes/no vote system to establish a smaller set of records that are deemed “Exceptionally Well Qualified.” The list of Exceptionally Well Qualified records continued to the second phase follows the standard practices for scoring (using a scale of six to ten), resolving scoring disparities, resolving ties and close scores, and establishing cut lines to meet the established quota. Unless directed to use the “Exceptionally Well Qualified” process, major general boards conduct an initial review without scoring to familiarize the members with the record and then follow the standard practices for scoring (using a six to ten scale).

**Promotion to Lieutenant General and General**

GOs attain the rank of lieutenant general and general through appointments, not as the result of a promotion board. Instead, these ranks are tied to specific positions of importance as described in Section 601 of Title 10 of the U.S.C. Any GO can be considered for appointment to O-9 and O-10 positions; however, it is typical that an officer would proceed through each grade sequentially, holding one or two jobs at each grade. Appointments to O-9 and O-10 are temporary, meaning that the officer only holds that grade while serving in that specific position, whereas O-7 and O-8 are permanent grades.

Selection for O-9 and O-10 positions is a vigorous process that involves the General Officer Management Office, the service chief and vice chief, other senior leaders in the service, the major command or field command commanders, and the Secretary of the Air Force. Typically, vacancies are projected about a year in advance because of known or expected retirements or promotions. Once a service or joint position has been identified, the General Officer Management Office works with the senior leaders to build a slate of eligible candidates for consideration. This slate would include any current O-8s ready for promotion, O-9s eligible for another O-9 position, or O-9s ready for
promotion to O-10. The candidate list is reviewed and usually narrowed down to three members who will be interviewed. The Secretary of the Air Force commonly interviews candidates for all O-10 positions and any O-9 positions that serve on the Secretary of the Air Force, Headquarters Air Force, or Headquarters Space Force staff. If the Secretary of the Air Force is not on the interview panel, it is led by the service chief.

Once a final candidate has been selected, the General Office Management Office will prepare the appropriate paperwork to forward to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Together, the Joint Chiefs of Staff review and select the best candidate for joint positions and forward that nominee to the Secretary of Defense for consideration. Nominees for service positions are also reviewed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff before going forward to the Secretary of Defense. Once approved by the Secretary of Defense, the nominees will continue to the White House for presidential review and, if approved, to nomination for appointment to the O-9 or O-10 position. From there, the nomination proceeds to the Senate, where it is first reviewed by the Senate Armed Services Committee and, if approved by the committee, considered for a confirmation vote by the entire Senate.

Once confirmed, the member will proceed on assignment to the position and attain the rank associated with the position on the day that they assume the duties of the position. Typically, a GO serves in an O-9 or O-10 position for two to four years. Some positions, such as the service chiefs, are appointed for a determined period, in this case, four years, as outlined in Title 10 of the U.S.C. Once O-9s or O-10s have reached the end of tour for their specific positions, and if not reappointed to another O-9 or O-10 position, it is expected that they will request to retire. After successfully serving in an O-9 or O-10 position, a request to retire at the rank of lieutenant general or general, as applicable, can be submitted for approval by the Secretary of Defense.
Appendix C

Insights from Allied and Partner Nation Military Services

Assessing GO promotion processes within allied and partner military services offers insights into various mechanisms and evaluation criteria that could benefit the USSF, both in terms of institutional aspects to adopt and elements to avoid. For a most-similar case evaluation, we examined GO promotion and development processes within the UK’s British Armed Forces and three key U.S. allies within the Commonwealth: Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Like the United States, these allied and partner nation militaries initially derived their officer promotion and development processes from foundational UK systems because of their inclusion within the British Empire. This shared historical institutional foundation provides opportunities to compare cross-national GO promotion and management approaches that have emerged over time.

British Armed Forces

Similar to the U.S. Department of Defense structure, the British Ministry of Defence encompasses the three branches of the British Armed Forces: the Royal Navy (including the Royal Marines), the British Army, and the Royal Air Force. The Secretary of State for Defence leads the British Ministry of Defence and maintains acting powers through parliamentary legislation, common law, and royal prerogative.

The Defence Secretary also chairs the Defence Board, which offers strategic direction and oversight of military defense matters. The Defence Act of 1964 created the unified Ministry of Defence, the role of the Defence Secretary, and the Defence Council, which maintains the formal powers of command and administration over the British Armed Forces on behalf of the reigning monarch, who serves as Commander-in-Chief (British Ministry of Defence, 2020).

As of April 2022, the British Armed Forces maintained 314 GO active personnel (Government of the United Kingdom, 2022):

- 133 GOs in the Royal Navy and Royal Marines, one-star to four-star rank
- 59 GOs in the British Army, two-star to four-star rank26
- 122 GOs in the Royal Air Force, one-star to four-star rank.

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26 The British Army does not consider one star to be a GO rank but rather a field officer rank (British Army, undated).
General Officer Promotion Process

All senior GO appointments proceed internally within each service branch, with service board authorities vested in promotion boards on behalf of the monarch and the Defence Council (Royal British Navy, 2022). GO promotion is competitive and substantive and is based on merit and individual career performance. According to Royal Navy guidance,

Merit is defined as suitability, capacity and having sufficient experience to be employed in at least the next higher rank alongside a proven track record of caring for and developing subordinates. Factors such as consistency of success, especially in the face of particular challenge; leadership and management acumen; judgement and the ability to make things happen, especially through innovation, effective management of risk and exploitation of opportunity; ability to think on a level above peer group; potential flair for command, future employability, in specialist and/or broader appointments, all constitute merit. (Royal British Navy, 2022, p. 65-3)

During the mid-2000s, the Royal Air Force instituted a competency-based officer management system to develop officers in the rank of wing commander, or O-5, and above (Steele et al., 2006). Once promoted to the rank of O-5, officers are placed into the General Duty branch—as opposed to the existing five branches of officer specialties (Air Operations, Operations Support, Engineers and Logistics, Support Services, and Professions)—within the two Royal Air Force commands: Strike Command and Personnel and Training Command. Once in the General Duty branch, O-5s are developed and managed according to the competencies that they have earned during their career, as maintained by the Royal Air Force in a personal profile.

The Royal Air Force begins management of competency skills at the rank of squadron leader, or O-4, with officers concentrating on specific career field technical competency prior to O-4. In addition to the competency development system, the Royal Air Force uses education programs to develop officers identified for future promotion or increased responsibility. Overall, exposure to a broad variety of employment areas, combined with staff and in-command experience, enables the Royal Air Force to identify and prepare officers for senior ranks (Steele et al., 2006).

In 2018, the British Army instituted Programme CASTLE to “accelerate generational change in the Army’s personnel system to design an attractive, modern and sustainable system of career structures, training and education and personnel management, which maximises opportunity and the talent of current and future soldiers” (British Army, 2018, p. 9). The goal of this program is to adjust the army career structure to improve talent management (Watling, 2021). The British Army’s Army People Strategy shares similar goals to increase organizational agility, create sustainable workforce structures, maximize the use of talent, create employment models to access and retain troops, and establish a stronger personnel management function (British Army, 2019).

In 2021, the UK established its new Space Command, a joint command staffed by personnel from the Royal Navy, British Army, and Royal Air Force (Royal British Air Force, undated). The inaugural commander of the UK Space Command was then–Air Commodore Paul Godfrey, who joined the Royal Air Force in 1991 and served most of his career as a fighter pilot. The “UK Space Command brings together three functions under a single military commander”: space operations, space workforce generation, and space capability (Royal British Air Force, undated).
According to a report by the Sutton Trust, an educational charity working to improve social mobility and educational disadvantage,

Historically, the officer class in the British armed forces has been the preserve of the aristocracy, populated by those of “high social position, holding large possessions.” Amongst other reasons, this reflected the vested interests of political elites, the logic being that if the military was controlled by the powerful and landed, “then there was little danger of the officers coming to constitute a political challenge to the status quo.” (Kirby, 2016, p. 17; emphasis in original)

Lessons Learned for the USSF

The British Armed Forces maintain a similar GO promotion structure to the United States, with similar legal and procedural authorities for holding and executing promotion boards. No existing procedural practices offer innovative models for adoption by the USSF. The establishment of the UK Space Command offers opportunities for the USSF to partner with the British Armed Forces to establish and compare personnel management policies for this joint command, both in terms of mission similarity and staffing dynamics. The history of the British Armed Forces includes a legacy of aristocratic practices, such as commission purchasing, which should still be considered when confronting challenges for talent management and advancing diversity and inclusion today.

In light of existing efforts to increase diversity and inclusion, the USSF’s Guardian Ideal development team can look to the British Army’s Programme CASTLE to evaluate lessons learned from the past five years of this program’s implementation. Finally, the USSF might glean GO development lessons learned from Royal Air Force procedures for identifying and developing generalists at the O-5 level to produce a viable cadre of GO candidates. This could aid the USSF in engaging and developing its small pool of viable GO candidates who are spread across distinct career fields.

Canadian Armed Forces

The Canadian Armed Forces is composed of the Royal Canadian Navy, the Canadian Army, and the Royal Canadian Air Force. The National Defence Act of 1985 established the Department of National Defence, over which the Minister of National Defence presides. Under the authorities of the National Defence Act, “officers and non-commissioned members may be promoted by the Minister or by such authorities of the Canadian Forces as are prescribed in regulations made by the Governor in Council” (Government of Canada, 2022, Section 28).

As of January 2023, the Canadian Armed Forces maintained 138 permanent and temporary regular force and primary reserve GO positions. The Department of National Defence states that “the Canadian Armed Forces is structured to have 631 Regular Force members per 1 GOFO [general or flag officer], which makes us lighter at the top when compared to like-sized military forces of some of our closest Commonwealth Allies” (Government of Canada, 2024).
General Officer Promotion Process

The promotion of an officer to a GO rank requires the approval of the minister on the recommendation of the chief of the Defence Staff. The Canadian Armed Forces’ established requirements for general and flag officers is driven by three needs:

- to lead defense priorities at the institutional level
- to create and sustain a diverse and inclusive culture
- to project Canadian leadership and influence abroad. (Government of Canada, 2024)

As of 2021, the Canadian Armed Forces initiated changes to the GO appointment and promotion process to be more inclusive and prioritize ethics and values among selectees. The GO promotion process involves an evidence-based assessment of character, appraisal of inclusive behaviors, and due diligence verifications. Additionally, the Department of National Defence has an explicit goal to “build a Defence Team that comprises members who reflect the rich diversity of Canada and who are recognized and encouraged to contribute through their unique experiences, abilities and perspectives” (Government of Canada, 2024).

The evidence-based framework for character-based leader assessments of GO candidates involves the following elements (Hamel, 2021):

- Candidates complete three online psychometric assessments: a non-verbal measure of general cognitive ability and reasoning, a personality inventory measuring various aspects of personality commonly associated with success in organizations, and an assessment of leadership skills commonly used in executive selection processes.
- Once the candidates are recommended for GO promotion to the Minister of National Defence, the cadre will be subject to a “360-degree” assessment tool that collects feedback from evaluators regarding each individual’s leadership effectiveness, with raters chosen from a diverse group.
- All GO selection boards have efforts to reduce bias and foster diverse perspectives, which include a Gender-Based Analysis Plus review of scoring criteria and the inclusion of at least one voting member from a minority group, such as women, a racial or ethnic group, or Indigenous representative.

According to a 2005 report on command styles in the Canadian military, the Canadian Navy and its senior officers maintain a distinct and problematic personality-driven culture. The report stated,

The small size of the Canadian Navy has imbued its command culture with two characteristics: a magnified impact of commanders’ personality on command culture and confusion of administrative-operational responsibility. The small number of officers eligible for senior command and the influence of the most senior of them in selecting their successors have exaggerated the influence of senior Canadian naval officers compared to the senior officers of larger allied navies. (English et al., 2005, p. 109)

Contemporary critiques address the size of the Canadian Armed Forces GO corps. An Ottawa Citizen 2021 request under Canada’s Access to Information law revealed that overall personnel
numbers across the Canadian Armed Forces dropped, whereas the number of GOs remained relatively consistent. These dynamics caused the military’s public affairs branch to develop messages that highlighted the leadership abilities of Canadian generals (Government of Canada, 2021). Overall, existing retention challenges across the force, despite high GO salaries and supporting staff dynamics, remain items of concern in online forums among military personnel and critics (Pugliese, 2021).

Finally, since 2021, the Canadian Armed Forces have faced sweeping sexual misconduct crises within the military, with specific focus on senior military officers. According to news reporting on the crises,

Since early February 2021, 13 senior Canadian military officers—current and former—have been sidelined, investigated or forced into retirement from some of the most powerful and prestigious posts in the defence establishment. Experts say they can’t think of another military anywhere else in the world that has seen so many senior leaders swept up in scandal at the same time. (Burke and Brewster, 2023)

Lessons Learned for the USSF

The Canadian Armed Forces maintain a similar GO promotion structure to the United States, with similar legal and procedural authorities for holding and executing promotion boards. No existing procedural practices offer innovative models for adoption by the USSF. The newly instituted internal board processes employing an evidence-based framework for character-based leader assessments of GO candidates offers a model for USSF consideration, particularly considering the small pool of USSF GO candidates. Of note, Canada’s adoption of this model might be in direct response to the sexual misconduct crises in its military. As a result, the process deserves further scrutiny before adoption by the USSF to evaluate the framework’s long-term impact, compared with its potential use as a band-aid policy addressing a critical public relations crisis.

Australian Defence Force

Like the British and Canadian armed forces, the Australian Defence Force consists of the Royal Australian Navy, the Australian Army, and the Royal Australian Air Force. The Chief of Defence Force commands the Australian Defence Force, and each of the three services maintains its own service chief. Within the Australian Defence portfolio, the Australian Defence Force works in concert with the Department of Defence, headed by the Secretary of the Department of Defence (Australian Department of Defence, undated).

As of 2022, the Australian Armed Forces maintained 205 GO permanent members across the one-star to four-star ranks (Australian Department of Defence, 2022, Table C.15):

- 58 GOs in the Royal Australian Navy
- 86 GOs in the Australian Army
- 61 GOs in the Royal Australian Air Force.
General Officer Promotion Process

According to the Defence Act of 1903, the Governor-General of Australia—the appointed representative of the British monarch and the Chief of Staff of the Australian Defence Force—makes regulations in relation to the “enlistment, appointment, promotion, reduction in rank, retirement and discharge of members of the Defence Force” (Australian Government, 2021).

On January 18, 2022, the Australian Defence Force established the Defence Space Command, which “brings members of Air Force, Army, Navy and the Australian Public Service together under an integrated headquarters reporting to the Chief of Air Force, as the Space Domain Lead” (Royal Australian Air Force, undated). According to de Silva (2022), the Australian Defence Space Command “will employ personnel from all areas within defense and, importantly, will be a collaboration between the Army, Navy, and RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force] rather than an entirely separate entity, reflecting the importance of the space domain.”

The Australian Defence Force is a leader among allied militaries in adopting and executing the Gender, Peace and Security policy framework (Hewitt, 2017). According to Sharland (2014),

The appointment of a Gender Adviser to Australia’s Chief of Defence Force earlier this year to progress efforts to address gender equality across the ADF [Australian Defense Force] is a further welcome move. Among other things, that inaugural position will provide advice on women’s access to leadership opportunities, as well as factors affecting the recruitment and retention of women in the ADF.

In 2019, an Australian news outlet reported that the Australian Defence Force would change its ranking systems to bring its three-star service chiefs to the equivalent four-star rank with their global counterparts, such as the United States (Dillon, 2019). According to Dillon (2019),

The move is almost entirely so that the service chiefs are able to communicate, on a level rank, with their international counterparts. While Australia’s not the only NATO and Five Eyes ally to only have one four-star general (Canada and New Zealand also just have one), key partners such as the US and the UK have multiple.

As of 2023, no rank change to the service chief level had occurred.

Lessons Learned for the USSF

Minimal information is publicly available on the Australian Defence Force’s GO selection and promotion processes. Following from our analysis of accessible defense legislation, the Australian Defence Force most likely maintains a similar GO promotion structure to the British Armed Forces, with similar legal and procedural authorities for holding and executing promotion boards. No existing procedural practices offer innovative models for adoption by the USSF. The establishment of the Defence Space Command offers opportunities for USSF to partner with the Australian Defence Force to establish and compare personnel management policies for this joint command, both in terms of mission similarity and staffing dynamics. The Australian Defence Force also maintains robust policies for leveraging the Gender, Peace and Security policy framework to shape personnel management and development, particularly among military leadership roles. The USSF can learn from this innovative practice when establishing criteria for promoting and managing GOs.
New Zealand Defence Force

The New Zealand Defence Force includes the Royal New Zealand Navy, the New Zealand Army, and the Royal New Zealand Air Force. The New Zealand Defence Force is supported by the New Zealand Ministry of Defence and commanded by the Chief of Defence Force, with the Governor-General acting as Commander-in-Chief to represent the British monarch. The New Zealand service components work jointly together and conduct operations under command of Headquarters Joint Forces New Zealand, which was established in 2001 (New Zealand Defence Force, undated-b).

As of May 2023, the New Zealand Defence Force consisted of 8,832 regular force and 3,368 reserve force personnel across the following services (New Zealand Defence Force, undated-a):

- 2,131 regular force and 707 reserve force sailors in the Royal New Zealand Navy
- 4,336 regular force and 2,219 reserve force personnel in the New Zealand Army
- 2,365 regular force and 442 reserve force personnel in the Royal New Zealand Air Force.

General Officer Promotion Process

The Defence Act of 1990 mandates that the New Zealand Governor-General may appoint and promote officers, in a process similar to the one used by the Australian Defence Force. The Governor-General may delegate this authority to the Chief of Defence Force (New Zealand Government, 2022).

The Headquarters Joint Forces New Zealand aligns each service within a consolidated joint structure:

The tactical levels of command are provided by each of the three Services, and it is still the responsibility of the Navy, Army and Air Force to raising, training and sustaining [sic] their own Service. But joint operational planning, deploying and controlling the NZDF [New Zealand Defense Force] resources achieves greater synergy through a permanent, dedicated, operational joint headquarters. (New Zealand Defence Force, undated-b)

This structure offers potential flexibility in how the New Zealand Defence Force employs and manages its GOs.

The New Zealand Defence Force is struggling with retention challenges and low pay. Over the last two years, New Zealand Defence Force has lost 29.8 percent of its full-time military personnel (Craymer, 2023b). According to Craymer (2023a),

The Defence Force has been struggling with record attrition in part because of low pay, which has forced the navy to idle three of its ships and to retire its P-3 Orion fleet early. Resources are so thin . . . that if a second significant event had occurred while the Defence Force was responding to the aftermath of Cyclone Gabrielle in February [2023], it would have struggled to respond.

To address retention and aging equipment challenges, the New Zealand Defence Force will receive an additional $472 million over four years "as the government tries to stop the loss of military
personnel and ensure the country’s military can operate alongside allies and partners” (Craymer, 2023b).

**Lessons Learned for the USSF**

The formation of the Headquarters Joint Forces New Zealand construct offers an innovative model that the USSF might follow to leverage joint positions and personnel in its GO cadre. The USSF should also consider the root causes of the retention challenges limiting the New Zealand Defence Force capabilities in an endeavor to avoid such issues in its own force.

**Overall Takeaways for USSF General Officer Promotion Processes**

Evaluating allied and partner nation GO promotion and development processes offers several insights for USSF approaches. First, among the cases evaluated, no comparable model exists for managing the low numbers of GOs within service-specific processes that the USSF currently faces. The British Armed Forces, Canadian Armed Forces, and Australian Defence Force all maintain far greater numbers of GOs within each service branch than the USSF does, and the New Zealand Defence Force combines its services under joint management. Additionally, each military included in this evaluation executes its GO promotion processes through legislative authority that flows from government policy through defense ministry execution. As a result, no helpful model exists for flexible GO promotion and appointment processes outside these existing legislative channels.

Insightful lessons that emerge from GO personnel development and management processes and that might benefit the USSF include the following:

- adopting the British Royal Air Force’s procedures to identify and develop generalists at the grade of O-5 to produce a viable cadre of GO candidates
- adopting the Canadian Armed Force’s evidence-based framework for character-based leader assessments of GO candidates
- examining the new UK Space Command and Australian Defence Space Command to evaluate how these militaries staff their new organizations from personnel across the services
- adopting the Australian Defence Force’s Gender, Peace and Security policy framework to advance gender equity within the ranks and across senior leadership levels
- considering the Headquarters Joint Forces New Zealand construct as a model that the USSF could follow to leverage joint positions and personnel within its own GO cadre.
Appendix D

Current U.S. Space Force Positions and Expected Functional Competencies

Table D.1 lists the GO positions in the USSF and their associated functional competencies. The USSF is limited to 21 GO positions to which GOs in joint positions are added. Currently, GOs fill four joint positions, which are noted in the table. The table also indicates the expected functional competency associated with each position with an X, which is dominated by competency in space operations.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Expected Functional Competency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Space Operations</strong></td>
<td><strong>Acquisition</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O-10</td>
<td>Chief of Space Operations (CSO)</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vice Chief of Space Operations (VCSO)</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O-9</td>
<td>USSF Director of Staff (USSF/DS)</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deputy Chief of Space Operations for Operations, Cyber, and Nuclear (USSF/S3/6/10)</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deputy Chief of Space Operations for Strategy, Plans, Programs, Requirements, and Analysis (USSF/S5/8/9)</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commander, Space System Center (SSC/CC)</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commander, Space Operations Command (SpOC/CC)</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deputy Commander, U.S. Space Command (USSPACECOM)</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O-8</td>
<td>Commander, Space Training and Readiness Command (STARCOM/CC)</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vice Commander, Space Operations Command</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deputy Chief of Space Operations for Intelligence (USSF/S2)</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commander, Space Launch Delta 45; Director of Launch and Range Operations, Space Systems Command</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Director of Training and Force Development (J3/7), US Space Command</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deputy Director, National Reconnaissance Office</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Military Deputy, Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Space Acquisition and Integration</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade</td>
<td>Position</td>
<td>Expected Functional Competency</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Space Operations</td>
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<tr>
<td>O-7</td>
<td>Deputy Commander, Space Systems Command (CSS/CD)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assistant Deputy Chief of Space Operations for Operations, Cyber, and</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nuclear (USSF/S3/6/10)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deputy Commander, Space Training and Readiness Command (STARCOM/CD)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Program Executive Officer for Space Domain Awareness and Combat Power</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Program Executive Officer for Battle Management Command, Control, and</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Communications</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Commander, United States Space Forces Indo-Pacific (COMSPACEFOR-INDOPAC)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Deputy Commanding General (Operations), Space Operations Command</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commander, Joint Task Force–Space Defense</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Director of National Security Space Policy, National Space Council</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deputy United States Military Representative to NATO&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Director, Intelligence (J2), USSPACECOM&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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</table>

<sup>a</sup> These positions are rotational joint positions and represent a larger set of positions filled by USSF officers in rotation with other services.
## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DAF</td>
<td>Department of the Air Force</td>
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<tr>
<td>DOPMA</td>
<td>Defense Officer Personnel Management Act</td>
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<tr>
<td>FY</td>
<td>fiscal year</td>
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<tr>
<td>GO</td>
<td>general officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>GOLF</td>
<td>General Officer Lifecycle Flow</td>
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<tr>
<td>MOI</td>
<td>memorandum of instruction</td>
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<tr>
<td>NDAA</td>
<td>National Defense Authorization Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>Senior Executive Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TIG</td>
<td>time in grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USSF</td>
<td>U.S. Space Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USSF/S1</td>
<td>Deputy Chief of Space Operations for Human Capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USSPACECOM</td>
<td>U.S. Space Command</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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U.S. Code, Title 10, Chapter 35, Section 601, Positions of Importance and Responsibility: Generals and Lieutenant Generals; Admirals and Vice Admirals.
U.S. Code, Title 10, Chapter 36, Promotion, Separation, and Involuntary Retirement of Officers on the Active-Duty List.

U.S. Code, Title 10, Chapter 36, Section 611, Convening of Selection Boards.

U.S. Code, Title 10, Chapter 36, Section 612, Composition of Selection Boards.

U.S. Code, Title 10, Chapter 36, Section 615, Information Furnished to Selection Boards.

U.S. Code, Title 10, Chapter 36, Section 616, Recommendations for Promotion by Selection Boards.

U.S. Code, Title 10, Chapter 36, Section 624, Promotions: How Made.

U.S. Code, Title 10, Chapter 36, Section 638, Selective Early Retirement.

U.S. Code, Title 10, Chapter 36, Section 645, Definitions.

U.S. Code, Title 10, Chapter 36, Subchapter I, Selection Boards.

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