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General and Flag Officers in the U.S. Armed Forces: Background and Considerations for Congress

Updated March 8, 2024

Congressional Research Service
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R44389

CRS REPORT
Prepared for Members and
Committees of Congress

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General and Flag Officers in the U.S. Armed Forces: Background and Considerations for Congress

SUMMARY

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March 8, 2024

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

As of September 30, 2023, there were 809 active-duty GFOs subject to statutory caps, 48 less than the maximum of 857 authorized by law. The current number is low for the post-Cold War era and substantially lower than the number of GFOs in the 1960s-1980s, when the Armed Forces were much larger in size than they are today. However, while always very small in comparison to the total force, the GFO corps has increased *as a percentage of the total force* over the past five decades. GFOs made up about one-twentieth of one percent (0.048%) of the total force in 1965, while they made up about one-sixteenth of one percent (0.063%) of the total force in 2023, indicating that the share of the total force made up of GFOs is now increased by 31%. This historical trend is more pronounced with respect to four-star officers (which grew from 0.0014% of the total force to 0.0029%, a 107% increase) and three-star officers (which grew from 0.0045% of the total force to 0.0103%, a 129% increase). One- and two-star officers increased less rapidly (from 0.0425% of the total force to 0.0500%, a 17.6% increase).

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

Congress has used its authority to specify the grade and duties of certain GFO positions. For example, Congress increased the grade of the Chief of the National Guard Bureau (NGB) from Lieutenant General to General in 2008. Congress also has added the Chief of Space Operations, Commander of Space Command, and, most recently, the Deputy Chief of the NGB as four-star officers. In 2016, Congress removed the statutory grade requirement from 54 GFO positions.

Compensation for GFOs varies. One commonly used measure of compensation, known as regular military compensation (RMC), includes basic pay, basic allowance for housing, basic allowance for subsistence, and the federal tax advantage associated with allowances, which are exempt from federal income tax. In 2024, the lowest-ranking GFOs make about $251,058 per year in RMC, while the highest-ranking GFOs make about $285,097 per year.

This report provides an overview of active-duty GFOs in the U.S. Armed Forces—including duties, authorizations, and compensation—historical trends in the proportion of GFOs relative to the total force, criticisms and justifications of GFO to total force proportions, and statutory controls. National Guard and Reserve GFOs are not addressed in this report, unless they are serving on active duty in a manner that counts against the active-duty caps on GFOs.

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Background

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

The most senior officers in the Army, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Space Force are known as general officers. The most senior officers in the Navy[2] are known as flag officers. The phrase "general and flag officers," or "GFOs," refers to all officers in paygrades O-7 through O-10, thereby including one-star, two-star, three-star, and four-star officers. At the highest level, O-10, GFOs hold the most visible and important military positions in the Department of Defense (DOD), including the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the chiefs of the five military services, Chief of the National Guard Bureau, and the combatant commanders. At the lowest level, O-7, they hold positions that span an array of roles, including commanders, deputy commanders, and key staff roles in large organizations.

This report provides an overview of active-duty GFOs in the U.S. Armed Forces—including duties, statutory controls, authorizations, and compensation—historical trends in the proportion of GFOs relative to the total force, and issues for Congress including criticisms and justifications of GFO to total force proportions and recurring GFO oversight questions. National Guard and Reserve GFOs are not addressed in this report, unless they are serving on active duty in a manner that counts against the active-duty caps on GFOs.

Given the authority granted to GFOs, Congress has developed a statutory framework applicable to this group and considers changes to these laws as it deems appropriate. Congress also periodically reviews the number, duties, and compensation of GFOs. A frequent tension during these reviews has been DOD requests for additional GFOs versus congressional concerns that there are too many GFOs. As one senior DOD official noted during a 1997 congressional hearing,

> throughout our history there has been a dialogue, just as is going on now, that has ebbed and flowed between the Congress and the military on the number of general and flag officers we need.... I think it is fair to say that over the years, the Congress has consistently taken the view that we have needed fewer general and flag officers, and that we have taken the opposite view, that we needed more than the Congress would allow. These debates tended to intensify during periods of major downsizing and restructuring of our forces, such as after World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and now after the cold war.[3]

References in this report to specific grades (ranks) within the GFO corps use the appropriate capitalized title, insignia, or paygrade as indicated in **Table 1**.

[1] Article II, Section 2. This section also provides that "the Congress may, by law, vest the appointment of such inferior Officers, as they think proper, in the President alone, in the Courts of Law or in the Heads of Departments."

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

[3] Testimony of Frederick Pang, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Force Management Policy, before the Subcommittee on Personnel of the House National Security Committee, April 8, 1997, in House National Security Committee Report No. 105-6, p. 388.

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

Grade (Army, Air Force, Marine Corps and Space Force)	Grade (Navy)	Insignia	Paygrade
General	Admiral	four-stars	0-10
Lieutenant General	Vice Admiral	three-stars	0-9
Major General	Rear Admiral	two-stars	0-8
Brigadier General	Rear Admiral (Lower Half)	one-star	0-7

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

Responsibilities of GFO Positions

While Congress has specified functions or duties for some key positions—such as members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff,[4] the top two officers of each service (i.e., service chiefs and vice chiefs),[5] the combatant commanders,[6] the Commander of U.S. Special Operations Command,[7] the Commander of U.S. Cyber Command,[8] and the Chief and Vice Chief of the National Guard Bureau[9]—the majority of GFO positions are not defined in statute. In these instances, DOD uses the following criteria for determining whether a position should be filled by a general or flag officer:

- nature, characteristics, and function of the position;
- grade and position of superior, principal subordinates, and lateral points of coordination;
- degree of independence of operation;
- official relations with other U.S. and foreign governmental positions;
- magnitude of responsibilities;
- mission and special requirements;
- number, type, and value of resources managed and employed;
- forces, personnel, value of equipment, total obligation authority;
- geographic area of responsibility;
- authority to make decisions and commit resources;
- development of policy;
- national commitment to international agreements;

[4] 10 U.S.C. §§151-154.

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

[6] 10 U.S.C. §164.

[7] 10 U.S.C. §167.

[8] 10 U.S.C. §167b.

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

- impact on national security and other national interests; and
- effect on the prestige of the nation or the armed force.[10]

Statutory Controls on GFO Authorizations

Congress has established a statutory framework for GFOs, which limits their numbers by grade, requires presidential determination of many three-star and four-star positions, and specifies the grade and/or duties of certain key positions. This framework provides for greater congressional control over the most senior GFO positions, while providing substantial latitude to the executive branch in the management of the remaining GFOs.

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

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

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024 (FY2024 NDAA; P.L. 118-31) concludes a series of legislative actions begun in the FY2017 NDAA, to lower congressionally mandated limits on the number of GFOs on active duty.

Table 2 summarizes the statutory limitations by grade for GFOs for service-specific positions.

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

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

[12] 10 U.S.C. §526.

[13] The conference report that accompanied the FY2017 National Defense Authorization Act stated, "The conferees note that despite two decades of Congressional concern the Department of Defense and the military departments have not demonstrated the willingness to implement even the reduction in the number of general and flag officer positions directed by the Secretary of Defense's Track Four Efficiencies Initiatives decision of March 14, 2011. In the context of the Department of Defense's continued requests to reduce military end strength, especially in the Army and the Marine Corps, reductions that Congress has cautiously considered and authorized, the time has come for the Department to rigorously evaluate and validate every general and flag officer position. The conferees believe that an additional 10% reduction in the number of general and flag officer positions may be appropriate by downgrading or eliminating positions in addition to the 110 positions required to be eliminated under this provision are achieved. The conferees expect that the Department of Defense and the military departments will improve efficiency by eliminating bloated headquarters and staffs while preserving the necessary number and grades of positions for general and flag officers who are responsible to train and lead our Nation's forces in battle and to bring them safely home again." H.Rept. 114-840, p. 1013. A copy of the *Track Four Efficiency Initiatives Decisions* memo by Secretary Gates is available at https://dodprocurementtoolbox.com/cms/sites/default/files/resources/2021-12/20110314-Track%20Four%20Efficiency%20Initiatives%20Decisions.pdf.

Table 2. Maximum Number of GFOs, by Service, Excluding Joint Positions

As codified in 10 U.S.C. §§525 and 526

Grade	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force	TOTAL
General/Admiral	8	6	2	9	2	27
Lieutenant General/Vice Admiral	46, less the number of Generals	34, less the number of Admirals	18, less the number of Generals	44, less the number of Generals	7, less the number of Generals	148, less the number of Generals and Admirals
Major General/Rear Admiral	90	49	21	73	6	240
Brigadier General/ Rear Admiral (Lower Half)	219, less the number in the grades of Major General through General	150, less the number in higher grades of Rear Admiral though Admiral	64, less the number in the grades of Major General through General	171, less the number in the grades of Major General through General	21, less the number in the grades of Major General through General	625, less the number in the grades of Major General/Rear Admiral through General/Admiral
TOTAL	219	150	64	171	21	525

Source: Total number for each service from P.L. 118-31 §501 and 10 U.S.C. §525(a).

Notes: FY2020 NDAA (P.L. 116-92 §953) authorized Chief of Space Operations as a four-star position.

Per the *Conference Report to Accompany H.R. 2670* (H.Rept. 118-301), the conferees "authorized the permanent increase in general and flag officer authorized strengths [in Section 501, by one per service] to accommodate the congressional requirement for a general or flag officer to serve as the lead special trial counsel, and [added] an increase of an additional Marine Corps general officer to address safety needs in the Marine Corps."[14] There are certain circumstances under which a general or flag officer does not "count" against these caps.[15] Additionally, the President has authority under Title 10, Section 527, of the *U.S. Code* to suspend the operation of the caps in time of war or national emergency declared by the Congress or the President.

Section 526(b) of Title 10 of the *U.S. Code* further authorizes exemption of up to 232 GFOs from the limitations of Section 526(a). Unless the Secretary of Defense determines that a lower number is in the best interest of the department, the GFOs serving in the 232 authorized joint positions shall be at least 75 Army officers, 53 Navy officers, 17 Marine Corps Officers, 68 Air Force Officers, and 6 Space Force Officers.[16] Section 512 of the FY2024 NDAA amends 10 U.S.C. §10505 to require that the Vice Chief of the National Guard Bureau be appointed to serve in the grade of general and that the Secretary of Defense designate this position as one of the general officer positions to be excluded from the limitations of Section 526(a) of Title 10 of the *U.S. Code*. This position would count among those listed in **Table 3**.

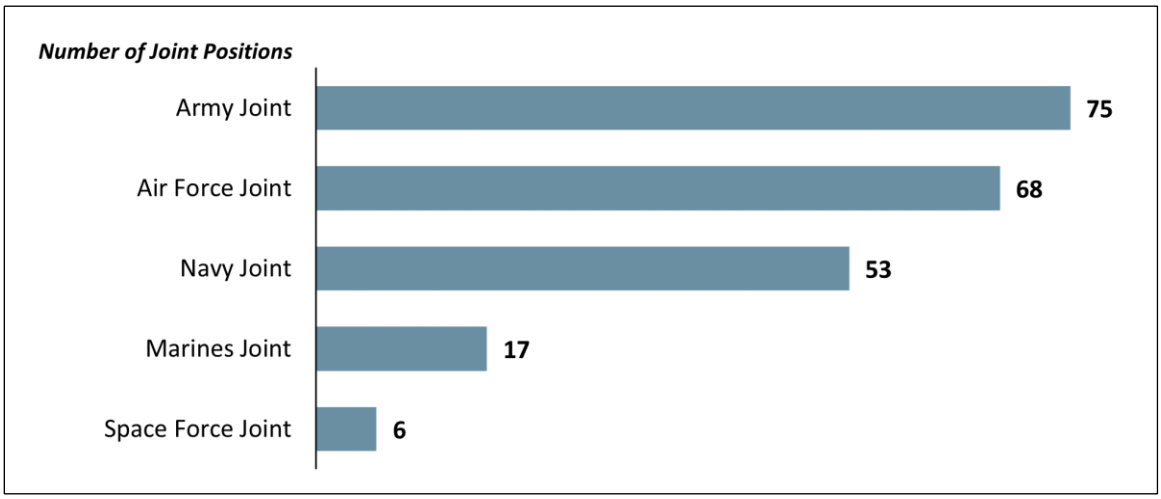
[14] H.Rept. 118-301, p. 1042.

[15] Active-duty GFOs excluded from the caps include those within 60 days of retirement and GFOs transitioning between certain positions for up to 60 days. The Attending Physician of Congress is counted in addition to the number otherwise permitted for the officer's armed force in grades above O-7. Certain reserve component GFOs serving on active duty for limited periods of time are also excluded; see 10 U.S.C. §§525 (d)-(g) and 526(c)-(g).

[16] 10 U.S.C. §526(b)(2).

Figure 1. Minimum Number of GFOs for Joint Positions

As provided by 10 U.S.C. §526

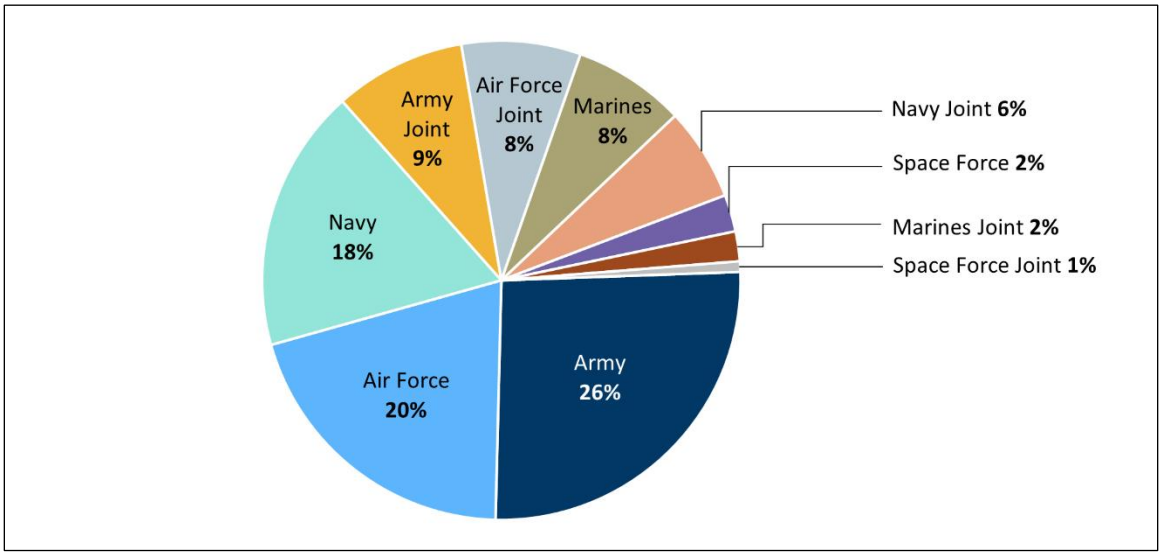


Source: 10 U.S.C. §526.

Note: 10 U.S.C. §526 does not fully allocate the joint authorizations to the Services; it allocates minimums per service.

Combining the maximum number of service and joint GFO authorizations, the maximum number of GFO positions authorized is currently 857.

Figure 2. GFO Authorizations, by Service Percentage



Source: 10 U.S.C. §§525 and 526.

Note: 10 U.S.C. §526 does not fully allocate the joint authorizations to the Services; it allocates minimums per service.

Current Number of GFOs

Table 3 lists the number and flag officers on active duty, whether in service-assignment and joint assignment.

Table 3. Number of Active-Duty General and Flag Officers

As of September 30, 2023

Grade	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force	TOTAL
General/Admiral	15	7	2	11	2	37
Lieutenant General/Vice Admiral	44	28	16	39	5	132
Major General/Rear Admiral	95	53	30	68	6	252
Brigadier General /Rear Admiral (Lower Half)	113	104	37	123	11	388
TOTAL	267	192	85	241	24	809

Source: Department of Defense Active Duty Military Personnel by Rank/Grade and Service, September 30, 2023, available at https://dwp.dmdc.osd.mil/dwp/app/dod-data-reports/workforce-reports. Includes GFOs in Service and Joint assignments.

Presidential Determination for Three-Star and Four-Star Positions

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

Statutorily Defined Positions

Congress has established in law certain GFO positions with specified grades, designated duties, or both. Those GFOs named in 10 U.S.C. §151, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the commanders of unified and specified combatant commands comprise most of these positions.

Statutory Grades

Congress has specified the grade for certain positions. For example, 10 U.S.C. §152 specifies that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff holds the rank of General or Admiral. Similar language also exists for the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the top two officers of each service, the Commander of U.S. Special Operations Command, the Commander of U.S. Cyber Command, and the Chief of the National Guard Bureau. The **Appendix** highlights some positions with statutorily required grades. Congress may change these statutory grades. For example, in 2008, Congress increased the grade of the Chief of the National Guard Bureau from Lieutenant General to General.[17] Additionally, Section 502 of the FY2017 NDAA amended various statutory

[17] P.L. 110-181 §1811.

provisions to eliminate the statutory grade for 54 positions.[18] As explained in the report that accompanied the Senate version of the FY2017 NDAA, where the provision originated,

> [t]he Committee determined that in order to effectively manage the reduction in the number of general and flag officers prescribed elsewhere in this Act, that the Secretary of Defense must be given the flexibility to assign appropriate officer grades to positions. The provision would not prohibit the position from being filled by an officer with the same, or a higher, or lower grade than the law currently requires.[19]

Statutory Duties

Positions with statutorily required grades typically have statutorily required duties as well. The **Appendix** provides excerpts of the statutorily required responsibilities, duties, or functions of certain GFO positions. Congress may change these duties. For example, in 2011, Congress changed the law to specify that the Chief of the National Guard Bureau was a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff whose duties included "the specific responsibility of addressing matters involving non-Federalized National Guard forces in support of homeland defense and civil support missions."[20]

Regular Military Compensation for GFOs

Military personnel, including GFOs, are compensated in three main ways: cash compensation (pay and allowances), noncash compensation (benefits), and deferred compensation (retired pay and benefits). This report discusses only the compensation elements that make up *regular military compensation* (RMC).

An Overview of Regular Military Compensation

RMC is a statutorily defined measure of the major compensation elements that every servicemember receives. It is widely used as a basic measure of military cash compensation levels and for comparisons with civilian salary levels. RMC, as defined in law, is "the total of the following elements that a member of the uniformed services accrues or receives, directly or indirectly, in cash or in kind every payday: basic pay, basic allowance for housing, basic allowance for subsistence, and Federal tax advantage accruing to the aforementioned allowances because they are not subject to Federal income tax."[21] Certain GFOs receive a "personal money allowance" as well. This is not part of RMC.

[18] Section 502 of the FY2017 NDAA eliminated the statutory general or flag officer grade for 54 positions, including each of the services' senior medical officer, senior legal officer, and chief of legislative affairs. The statutory grade was also removed for the chief of each reserve component (e.g., Chief of the Navy Reserve, Director of the Army National Guard; however, the Chief of the National Guard Bureau retained the statutory designation as an O-10 position). The elimination of a statutory requirement does not necessarily affect the grade of the position, as the military services may designate the position at an equivalent, lower, or higher grade, subject to the statutory strength caps on GFOs and presidential determinations for three-star and four-star positions.

[19] S.Rept. 114-255, pp. 135-136.

[20] P.L. 112-81 §512.

[21] Statutory definition contained in 37 U.S.C. §101(25). For more information on Regular Military Compensation, see CRS In Focus IF10532, *Defense Primer: Regular Military Compensation*, by Kristy N. Kamarck, and CRS Report RL33446, *Military Pay: Key Questions and Answers*, by Lawrence Kapp and Barbara Salazar Torreon.

RMC for GFOs

Table 4 provides the average RMC that GFOs received in 2023. It assumes that all GFOs receive a basic allowance for housing (BAH) rather than living in government provided housing.[22]

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

(as of January 1, 2024)

Grade	Average Basic Pay	Average Basic Allowance for Housing	Average Basic Allowance for Subsistence (Flat Rate)	Average Federal Tax Advantage	Average RMC
General/Admiral	$221,900	$44,212	$3,804	$15,180	$285,097
Lieutenant General/Vice Admiral	$221,900	$44,267	$3,804	$15,091	$285,062
Major General/Rear Admiral	$217,164	$44,230	$3,804	$15,024	$280,222
Brigadier General /Rear Admiral (Lower Half)	$188,805	$44,222	$3,804	$14,227	$251,058

Source: Selected Military Compensation Tables (OSD Compensation Greenbook, January 2024), Table B3, Detailed RMC Tables for All Personnel, (PDF p. 94), at https://militarypay.defense.gov/References/Greenbooks/.

Notes: Average RMC assumes receipt of BAH rather than government-provided housing. Amounts in each column are rounded to the nearest dollar and therefore may not sum perfectly.

Considerations for Congress

Proportion of GFOs in the Force

Historical Perspective

A summary of the number of active-duty GFOs and the proportion of GFOs relative to the total force over the past five decades is provided in **Table 5**. A review of GFO levels indicates a 2.8% increase in the *number* of four-star officers (36 on September 30, 1965, versus 37 on September 30, 2023) and an 11% increase in the number of three-star officers (119 versus 132), with variations over time related to current events. At the same time, the number of one-star and two-star officers has decreased by about 43.3% (1,129 versus 640).

During this time, the size of the total force dropped by approximately 51.5%, from 2.66 million on September 30, 1965, to 1.29 million on September 30, 2023. Thus, a more salient measure may be the proportion of GFOs to the total force.

Looking at the data from this perspective, it is clear that although GFOs have always made up a very small percentage of the total force, the GFO corps has increased *as a percentage of the total*

[22] About 17% of GFOs live in government-provided housing and therefore do not receive BAH. While this lowers the cash compensation received, they receive free housing instead. For the purposes of **Table 4**, the value of the free housing is assumed to be equivalent to the average BAH of their GFO peers. Calculation of proportion living in government provided housing made using Selected Military Compensation Tables (OSD Compensation Greenbook, 2019), Table A5, BAH Percentages 2019, and Table A6, Military Personnel by Pay Cell, available at https://militarypay.defense.gov/Portals/3/Documents/Reports/GreenBook%202019.pdf?ver=2019-01-16-132128-617.

force over the past five decades. GFOs made up about one-twentieth of one percent (0.048%) of the total force in 1965, whereas they made up about one-sixteenth of one percent (0.063%) of the total force in 2023, indicating that the share of the total force made up of GFOs has increased by 31%. This historical trend is more pronounced with respect to four-star officers (which grew from 0.0014% of the total force to 0.0029%, a 107% increase) and three-star officers (which grew from 0.0045% of the total force to 0.0103%, a 129% increase). One- and two-star officers as a percentage of the total force increased less demonstrably (from 0.0425% of the total force to 0.0500%, a 17.6% increase).

These increases occurred at the same time that the size of the officer corps in general was increasing as a percentage of the total force. As indicated in the last column of **Table 5**, between 1965 and 2023, the officer corps increased from 12.76% of the total force in 1965 to 18.22% in 2023, indicating that the share of the total force made up of officers increased by 42.8%.

Overview of Effects of Legislative Action from 2017 Through 2023

The FY2017 NDAA (P.L. 114-328) was enacted on December 23, 2016. Section 501 stipulates the purpose was to "reduce the number of general and flag officers on active duty by 110 from the aggregate authorized number of general and flag officers authorized by sections 525 and 526 of title 10, United States Code, as of December 31, 2015." The FY2024 NDAA, in Section 501, codified and generally affirmed this purpose.

Overall, the reduction is for 100 GFOs, or 11% of the GFO population. With respect to the total force, GFOs made up about one-fourteenth of one percent (0.069%) of the total force in 2015, whereas they made up about one-sixteenth of one percent (0.063%) of the total force in 2023, indicating that the share of the total force made up of GFOs has decreased by 8.7%. Four-star officers dropped by one, from 38 to 37, remaining at 0.0029% of the force. Three-star officers dropped from 141 to 132, a 6.4% population drop that reduced them from 0.0107% to 0.0103% of the force. One- and two-star officers dropped from 730 to 640, a 12.33% population drop that reduced them from 0.0556% to 0.0500% of the force.

Table 5. Historical General and Flag Officer Levels

(As of September 30th of each year)

Year	4-Star Officers	3-Star Officers	2-Star Officers	1-Star Officers	1- & 2-Star Officers	All GFOs	All Officer	Total Force	4-Star Officers As Percent of Total Force	3-Star Officers As Percent of Total Force	1- & 2-Star Officers As Percent of Total Force	All GFOs As Percent of Total Force	All Officers As Percent of Total Force
1965	36	119	n.a.	n.a.	1,129	1,284	338,822	2,655,389	0.0014%	0.0045%	0.0425%	0.048%	12.76%
1970	40	141	n.a.	n.a.	1,157	1,338	402,226	3,066,294	0.0013%	0.0046%	0.0377%	0.044%	13.12%
1975	36	118	443	584	1,027	1,181	292,424	2,128,120	0.0017%	0.0055%	0.0483%	0.055%	13.74%
1980	32	113	406	559	965	1,110	277,622	2,050,627	0.0016%	0.0055%	0.0471%	0.054%	13.54%
1985	36	125	370	519	889	1,050	308,919	2,151,032	0.0017%	0.0058%	0.0413%	0.049%	14.36%
1990	36	121	367	530	897	1,054	296,591	2,043,705	0.0018%	0.0059%	0.0439%	0.052%	14.51%

Year	4-Star Officers	3-Star Officers	2-Star Officers	1-Star Officers	1- & 2-Star Officers	All GFOs	All Officer	Total Force	4-Star Officers As Percent of Total Force	3-Star Officers As Percent of Total Force	1- & 2-Star Officers As Percent of Total Force	All GFOs As Percent of Total Force	All Officers As Percent of Total Force
1995	35	110	274	432	706	851	237,602	1,518,224	0.0023%	0.0072%	0.0465%	0.056%	15.65%
2000	34	119	282	436	718	871	217,178	1,384,338	0.0025%	0.0086%	0.0519%	0.063%	15.69%
2005	35	128	272	439	711	874	226,619	1,389,394	0.0025%	0.0092%	0.0512%	0.063%	16.31%
2010	39	150	310	482	792	981	234,000	1,430,985	0.0027%	0.0105%	0.0553%	0.069%	16.35%
2015	38	141	310	420	730	909	230,468	1,313,940	0.0029%	0.0107%	0.0556%	0.069%	17.54%
2018	40	147	296	438	734	921	230,708	1,317,325	0.0030%	0.0112%	0.0557%	0.070%	17.51%
2019	37	142	295	409	704	883	214,661	1,325,826	0.0028%	0.0107%	0.0531%	0.0666%	16.19%
2020	45	153	281	417	698	896	215,935	1,333,461	0.0034%	0.0115%	0.0523%	0.0672%	16.19%
2021	41	156	293	405	698	895	216,369	1,333,771	0.0031%	0.0117%	0.0523%	0.0671%	16.22%
2022	39	146	283	373	656	841	213,175	1,296,309	0.0030%	0.0113%	0.0506%	0.0649%	16.44%
2023	37	132	252	388	640	809	234,252	1,286,027	0.0029%	0.0103%	0.0500%	0.0630%	18.22%

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

Criticisms of Increasing the Proportion of GFOs

There have been two principal criticisms raised against increasing the proportion of GFOs relative to the total force. The first criticism revolves around the increased cost of employing a GFO compared with employing a lower-ranking officer. The second relates to the belief that too many GFOs slow down decisionmaking processes. Each point is explained in more detail below.

- **Cost.** GFOs cost more to employ than officers of a lower rank. In part, this is due to the higher compensation they receive. For example, the average GFO in paygrade O-7 receives $251,058 in RMC[23] in 2024, while the average officer in paygrade O-6 receives $220,275. Additionally, there can be other costs associated with GFOs, particularly at higher grades, such as the costs of larger staffs, official travel, security details, and aides.[24] An example of this perspective was provided by a witness at a 2011 congressional hearing, who stated, "The progression towards a more top-heavy force is not without its consequences.... The cost of

[23] Title 37 U.S.C. §101(25) defines regular military compensation (RMC), as "the total of the following elements that a member of the uniformed services accrues or receives, directly or indirectly, in cash or in kind every payday: basic pay, basic allowance for housing, basic allowance for subsistence, and Federal tax advantage accruing to the aforementioned allowances because they are not subject to Federal income tax."

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

officers increases markedly with their rank, so taxpayers are overpaying whenever a GFO is in a position that could be filled by a lower ranking officer."[25]

- **Decisionmaking.** Another criticism is that an increasing proportion of GFOs slows decisionmaking by adding additional layers of management between the highest echelons of command and the lowest. In a 2010 speech, former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates criticized the impact of an increase in GFOs and senior civilians in making the DOD a top-heavy and overly bureaucratic organization:

> During the 1990s, the military saw deep cuts in overall force structure—the Army by nearly 40 percent. But the reduction in flag officers—generals and admirals—was about half that. The Department's management layers—civilian and military—and numbers of senior executives outside the services grew during that same period. Almost a decade ago, Secretary Rumsfeld lamented that there were 17 levels of staff between him and a line officer. The Defense Business Board recently estimated that in some cases the gap between me and an action officer may be as high as 30 layers.... Consider that a request for a dog-handling team in Afghanistan—or for any other unit—has to go through no fewer than five four-star headquarters in order to be processed, validated, and eventually dealt with. This during an era when more and more responsibility—including decisions with strategic consequences—is being exercised by young captains and colonels on the battlefield.[26]

Justifications for Increasing the Proportion of GFOs

The increasing proportion of GFOs in comparison to the total force has been a topic of particular interest during past congressional hearings.[27] During these hearings, and particularly during a 1997 congressional review of GFO authorizations, witnesses from the DOD put forth a number of rationales for this growth, including the following:

- **Coalition operations.** A rationale used to explain the increased proportion of GFOs has been an increased emphasis by the United States on forging coalitions with other nations to achieve common security objectives. This has, in turn, generated a demand for senior military leaders to conduct coordinated planning, training, and operations with their peers from foreign nations. The argument is also linked to the number of contingency operations the U.S. military has conducted since the end of the Cold War, which have often involved forces from dozens of countries, including the forces of the nation in which the operations take place. Examples of these coalition operations include Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as smaller-scale contingencies such as Bosnia, Haiti, and Kosovo (ongoing), Somalia (ongoing), and Syria (ongoing). Contingency operations such as these are often commanded by a GFO, who usually has additional GFOs as

[25] Statement by Dr. Benjamin Freeman, Project on Government Oversight, before the Subcommittee on Personnel of the Senate Armed Services Committee, September 14, 2011.

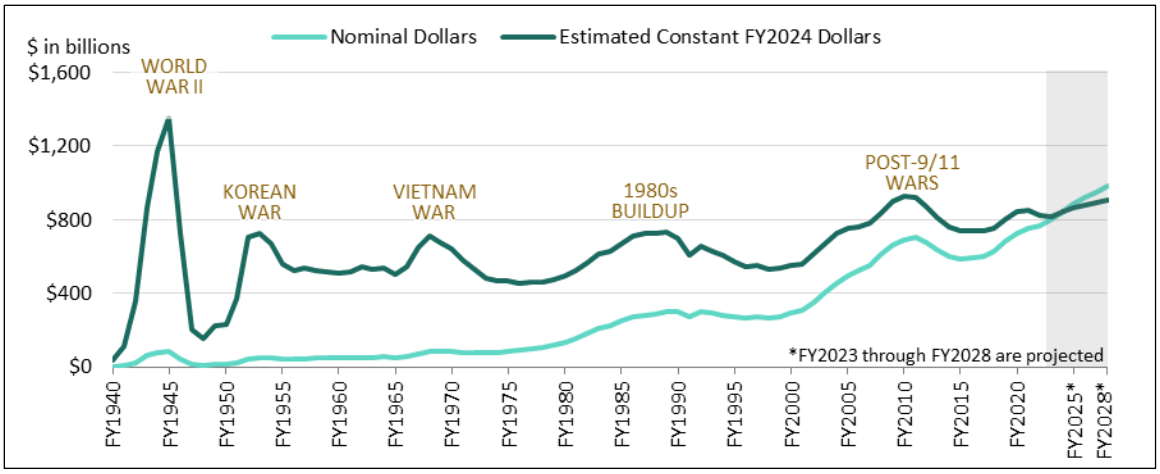
[26] Secretary of Defense Robert Gates speech at Eisenhower Library, delivered May 8, 2010, available at https://media.defense.gov/2018/May/07/2001913228/-1/-1/0/05082010%20GATES%20CALLS%20FOR%20SIGNIFICANT%20CUTS%20IN%20DEFENSE%20OVERHEAD.PDF.

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

subordinate commanders and senior staff officers. Both their experience and the authority inherent in their grade can be considered important elements to the success of complex operations. Political and diplomatic considerations can also be a factor, as the officers leading these operations are normally expected to interact with the senior military and civilian leadership of the foreign nation where the operations are occurring.

- **Organizational structure.** As noted previously, the increase in the proportion of GFOs over the past 50 years has not been due to an increase in the number of GFOs, but to the much larger decrease in the size of the Armed Forces in general. In part, this slower reduction of GFOs is due to the organizational structure of the Armed Forces, which includes certain GFO positions whether the Armed Forces are comparatively large or small. For example, there was a Chief of Staff of the Air Force at the peak of the Vietnam War, when the Air Force had about 900,000 airmen, and there is one today, when the Air Force has approximately 315,000 airmen. A similar case can be made for many of the GFOs who serve on the Joint Staff, the Service Staffs, the combatant commands, and certain defense agencies. Given the organizational structure and "posture" of the Armed Forces—some of which is required by law—the amount of management "overhead" does not necessarily change in direct proportion to the size of the force. Another way of illustrating this is to consider what would happen if an Army division were disestablished: doing so would eliminate about 15,000 soldiers, but only three of them would be general officers.
- **Technological changes.** A fourth justification for increased GFO ratios is that technological advances have changed the way the United States fights its wars. Modern weapons systems, much more powerful and accurate than their predecessors, require fewer personnel to deliver greater firepower. Thus, while the number of personnel a GFO commands may decline as more sophisticated equipment is substituted for manpower, the lethality of those forces may increase. From this perspective, the lethality of the weapons systems, rather than the number of people, provides the justification for an organization to be led by a very senior military officer. Additionally, the advent and development of new domains of warfare—such as space and cyber—has led to the creation of new organizations (e.g., U.S. Space Force) to exploit advantages and defend against vulnerabilities in those environments.
- **Budget changes.** The budgets appropriated for defense have increased, as have expectations of their management. (DOD outlays are depicted in **Figure 3**.) As with the increased sophistication of operations and weaponry, increased budgets over time and responsibility for budgets that amount to over one half of federal discretionary spending may require more senior-level management.

Figure 3. National Defense Outlays, FY1940-FY2028 (Projected)



Sources: CRS Report R47582, *FY2024 Defense Budget Request: Context and Selected Issues for Congress*, by Cameron M. Keys and Brendan W. McGarry. Figure created by CRS using data from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Budget of the United States Government, FY2024, Historical Tables, Table 3.1 and Table 10.1, March 2023, and the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), Budget and Economic Data, Spending Projections, by Budget Account, February 2023.

Notes: Figures adjusted to estimated constant FY2024 dollars using "Total Defense" deflator in OMB Table 10.1. FY2021-FY2022 amounts from OMB; FY2023-FY2028 projections from CBO.

Recurring Questions for Congress in Managing GFO Authorizations

Congress has a long-standing interest in the military officer corps in general, and it has periodically focused additional attention on its most senior officers. Should Congress elect to address GFO authorizations, duties, compensation, or other related topics in more detail, it may consider the following:

- What about a task or role requires a senior military officer, especially in terms of advanced managerial skills, versus a senior civilian?
- How do advances in information technology and decisionmaking tools affect the need for GFOs? Could use of these technologies result in flattened management structures and decrease the need for GFOs? Or do they require additional GFOs with specialized expertise?
- What is the most appropriate way to determine how many GFOs the DOD should have? How closely should this be linked to total force size? What other factors would be useful in determining the optimal number of GFOs?
- To what extent do statutory requirements, such as the Goldwater-Nichols Act (GNA), drive GFO requirements? Should GNA be revised to alter this effect?
- Could organizational restructuring of the Joint Staff, Service Staffs, and combatant command staffs decrease the need for GFOs or allow positions to be held by lower pay-grade officers? Could selected organizations be merged to reduce the requirements for GFOs?
- Could military relations with international partners be restructured so as to reduce the need for GFO representation? How important is rank equivalence when senior U.S. military personnel work with their allied peers?

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

Appendix. Selected Positions with Statutorily Specified Grades and/or Responsibilities

Position	Service	Grade Specified in Law	Selected Duties, Responsibilities, or Functions Specified in Law	Statute
Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff	Joint	General or Admiral	• Assisting the President and the Secretary of Defense in providing for the strategic direction of the Armed Forces. • In matters related to strategic and contingency planning, developing strategic frameworks and preparing strategic plans, as required, to guide the use and employment of military force and related activities across all geographic regions and military functions and domains, and to sustain military efforts over different durations of time, as necessary. • In matters relating to global military strategic and operational integration, providing advice to the President and the Secretary on ongoing military operations; and advising the Secretary on the allocation and transfer of forces among geographic and functional combatant commands, as necessary, to address transregional, multidomain, and multifunctional threats. • In matters related to comprehensive joint readiness, evaluating the overall preparedness of the joint force to perform the responsibilities of that force under national defense strategies and to respond to significant contingencies worldwide. • In matters relating to joint capability development, identifying new joint military capabilities based on advances in technology and concepts of operation needed to maintain the technological and operational superiority of the Armed Forces, and recommending investments and experiments in such capabilities to the Secretary. • In matters relating to joint force development activities, developing doctrine for the joint employment of the Armed Forces, and formulating policies and technical standards, and executing actions, for the joint training of the Armed Forces. • Performing such other duties as may be prescribed by law or by the President or the Secretary.	10 U.S.C. §§152-153
Service Chiefs	Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, and Space Force	General or Admiral	**Varies by Service. For the Chief of Staff of the Army:** • Presiding over the Army Staff. • Transmitting the plans and recommendations of the Army Staff to the Secretary and advising the Secretary with regard to such plans and recommendations. • After approval of the plans or recommendations of the Army Staff by the Secretary, acting as the agent of the Secretary in carrying them into effect.	10 U.S.C. §7033 (for other Service Chiefs, see 10 U.S.C. §§8043, 8033,

Position	Service	Grade Specified in Law	Selected Duties, Responsibilities, or Functions Specified in Law	Statute
			• Exercising supervision, consistent with the authority assigned to commanders of unified or specified combatant commands under Chapter 6 of this title, over such members and organizations of the Army as the Secretary determines; • Performing duties as prescribed for members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.	9033, and 9082)
Combatant Commanders	Joint	10 U.S.C. §604 refers to "commander of a combatant command" positions as "Joint 4-star officer positions."	• Giving authoritative direction to subordinate commands and forces necessary to carry out missions assigned to the command, including authoritative direction over all aspects of military operations, joint training, and logistics. • Prescribing the chain of command to the commands and forces within the command. • Organizing commands and forces within that command as he considers necessary to carry out missions assigned to the command. • Employing forces within that command as he considers necessary to carry out missions assigned to the command. • Assigning command functions to subordinate commanders. • Coordinating and approving those aspects of administration and support (including control of resources and equipment, internal organization, and training) and discipline necessary to carry out missions assigned to the command. • Exercising the authority with respect to selecting subordinate commanders, selecting combatant command staff, suspending subordinates, and convening courts-martial.	10 U.S.C. §164 and §604
Commander, Special Operations Command	Joint	General or Admiral	• Developing strategy, doctrine, and tactics [related to special operations activities]. • Preparing and submitting to the Secretary of Defense program recommendations and budget proposals for special operations forces and for other forces assigned to the special operations command. • Training assigned forces. • Conducting specialized courses of instruction for commissioned and noncommissioned officers. • Validating requirements. • Establishing priorities for requirements. • Ensuring the interoperability of equipment and forces. • Ensuring the combat readiness of forces assigned to the special operations command. • Monitoring the preparedness to carry out assigned missions of special operations forces assigned to unified combatant commands other than the special operations command.	10 U.S.C. §167

Position	Service	Grade Specified in Law	Selected Duties, Responsibilities, or Functions Specified in Law	Statute
			• Managing the development and acquisition of special operations-peculiar equipment.	
Commander, Cyber Command	Joint	General or Admiral	• Developing strategy, doctrine, and tactics [related to cyber operations activities]. • Preparing and submitting to the Secretary of Defense program recommendations and budget proposals for cyber operations forces and for other forces assigned to the cyber command. • Exercising authority, direction, and control over the expenditure of funds for forces assigned directly to the cyber command, and for cyber operations forces assigned to unified combatant commands other than the cyber command. • Training and certifying assigned joint forces. • Conducting specialized courses of instruction for commissioned and noncommissioned officers. • Validating requirements, establishing priorities for requirements, and ensuring the interoperability of equipment and forces. • Monitoring the promotion of cyber operation forces and coordinating with the military departments regarding the assignment, retention, training, professional military education, and special and incentive pays of cyber operation forces. • Ensuring the combat readiness of forces assigned to the cyber command. • Monitoring the preparedness to carry out assigned missions of cyber forces assigned to unified combatant commands other than the cyber command.	10 U.S.C. §167b
Chief of the National Guard Bureau	Joint	General	• Serving as a principal advisor to the Secretary of Defense, through the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, on matters involving nonfederalized National Guard forces and on other matters as determined by the Secretary of Defense. • Serving as the principal advisor to the Secretary of the Army and the Chief of Staff of the Army, and to the Secretary of the Air Force and the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, on matters relating to the National Guard, the Army National Guard of the United States, and the Air National Guard of the United States. • Addressing matters involving nonfederalized National Guard forces in support of homeland defense and civil support missions as a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.	10 U.S.C. §10502

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

Note: Due to space considerations, this table does not include a full listing of statutory positions. Likewise, for the positions it does list, the table does not include a full description of statutorily defined functions, duties, or responsibilities.

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Acknowledgments

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