

Your Military

Congress is giving the officer promotion system a massive overhaul

By [Leo Shane III](#)

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The military's officer promotion system will get its most significant reforms in decades. Pictured: A Marine is pinned with the rank insignia of major aboard the amphibious transport dock USS New York (LPD 21) March 1, 2018. (Cpl. Juan A. Soto-Delgado/Marine Corps)

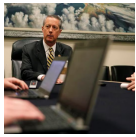
Congress is poised to pass the most sweeping reforms to [the military's officer promotion system](#) in almost four decades, a move that would end years of intense debate inside the Pentagon to bring [the personnel system](#) in line with many private-sector employment practices.

The changes would have a far-reaching impact on the culture of the officer corps and change the incentives for how individual officers manage their own careers.

“These are the most significant reforms we’ve seen since the late 1970s — if not longer,” said Brad Carson, who served as [the Pentagon’s top personnel official](#) during President Barack Obama’s administration.

“And this isn’t just about cyber jobs or signal or the JAG corps. This can be applied to any person in any job.”

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The House Armed Services Committee chairman says some of the controversial personnel reforms could help military readiness.

By [Leo Shane III](#)

The bill aims to make military promotion boards place more emphasis on merit and job performance rather than seniority. The changes would also allow officers the opportunity to develop more technical expertise in increasingly complex career fields that are essential to future missions.

Specifically, the changes would include:

- Ending some of the up-or-out rules that force officers to leave military service if they fail to be promoted along rigid timelines.
- Allowing for mid-career civilians with high-demand skills to enter the military up to the rank of O-6.
- Allowing promotion boards to move high-performing officers higher on the promotion list regardless of their time in service.
- Allowing service secretaries to create “an alternative promotion process” for specific career fields.

The bill, which appears likely to become law, rewrites many key aspects of the 1980 Defense Officer Personnel Management Act that was drawn up in the early years of the all-volunteer

force.

None of the changes included in the final annual defense authorization bill draft — released by conference committee officials this week — will be mandatory for the services, and Carson expects a slow, measured roll out of the new authorities once the military services craft regulations for the new policies.

The services have signaled different levels of support for the changes. For example, the Navy is eager to implement many of the reforms, yet the Marine Corps has been particularly skeptical of changing the longstanding rules currently in place.

Nevertheless, the changes will be written into federal law and represent a significant shift in how Congress and the Pentagon think about the traditional 20-year career path of military officers.

“It gives the services more flexibility in who they recruit and who they retain, but it brings up a lot of cultural questions, too,” said Mike Barron, director of government relations at the Military Officers Association of America. “And we may not know all the effects until years down the road.”



Lt. j.g. Corey T. Jones, center, assigned to USS Gerald R. Ford's (CVN 78) media department, is pinned to his current rank by Chief Mass Communication Specialist Bryan Weyers, left, and Lt. Cmdr. Anthony Falvo, right, Ford's public affairs officer, during a May 7, 2018, promotion ceremony held onboard. (MC3 Liz Thompson/Navy)

Majors who stay in place for 20 years

Some provisions would allow officers in certain high-demand specialties to stay in on the job without promotion for much longer stretches, up to 40 years of service.

Under the current up-or-out system, officers who fail to continue their upward rank advancement every few years are pushed out of the service. The new congressional plan would subvert that, at least for a few hard-to-replicate skills and exceptional individuals.

“While there will likely be few junior officers who remain on active duty for 40 years ... it is sometimes counterproductive to force officers to separate or retire at an arbitrary point in time,” lawmakers wrote of the provision.

“No matter the process or policy, some officers will not be selected for promotion. It is important to retain the up-or-out concept for officer management, but there must be some exceptions when the needs of the military will be best served by retaining an officer.”

Advocates see that as a way to make continued military service appealing to officers content with their current jobs but with unclear — or unappealing — promotion prospects.

“Today’s promotion system was designed for a different era,” said Larry Korb, senior fellow at the Center for American Progress and the assistant secretary of defense for manpower under President Ronald Reagan.

“Why does everyone have to start at the bottom and aim for the very top? Why are we grooming everyone to be chief of naval operations or chief of staff of the Army?”

Korb said allowing some officers to stay in place for longer stretches — again, in limited circumstances and hard-to-fill positions — brings military service more in line with civilian careers.

More flexibility

Lawmakers will allow service officials to grant exemptions from traditional promotion timelines as a way to encourage officers to pursue non-traditional career tracks that include fellowships, outside graduate degree programs or other opportunities that could add to their military skillset down the road. Previously, time spent on those endeavors counted against officers' advancement timelines and often threatened their prospects for career advancement.

Related, the bill makes permanent the military's Career Intermission Program. But how many individuals will be eligible for those career flexibility options remains up to service officials.

Barron said it's doubtful that officers in career fields with little private-sector competition — for example, the combat arms — will see much impact from the changes because leaders won't have to fight to keep their positions filled. But for those with skills targeted by civilian recruiters — areas like logistics specialists, cyber experts and other technical specialties — these changes could expand their military careers significantly.

Potentially, the most problematic of the changes are provisions dealing with quicker promotions for some highly regarded younger officers.

Traditionally, promotion schedules have been tied to officers' dates of commission. Lawmakers are pushing military leaders to shift away from simply time in service to focus more on competitive categories that recognize individuals' skills.

Barron said that could infuriate mid-career officers who suddenly see younger troops advancing past them based on “shades of gray” in their service record. “The devil is going to be in the details of how they use that.”

Originally, members of Congress have wanted to make several the promotion changes mandatory but opted for a lighter touch in their final legislation. But they still are “encouraging” military leaders to use the new authorities, to see what can help better build the workforce.

Some officers who like the traditional system may view these changes as unfair and counter to the military’s culture, said Leonard Wong, a retired Army officer who now teaches military manpower at the Army War College.

“Because of our egalitarian nature, in the military, we’re always looking to make sure things are fair. But it’s hard to be talent management-oriented and yet, treat everyone the same. ... It might be better for the force and better for the nation to treat certain people differently, and this is a step in that direction,” Wong said in an interview.

These changes have been debated inside the military for years and setting those changes in motion is a step in the right direction, Wong said.

“We talk talent management, and now you’re starting to see it... that’s refreshing.”

The changes could help boost retention at a time when the incentives to serve a 20-year career is fundamentally changing with the new “blended retirement system,” which offers a smaller pension check and takes effect fully next year.

“Some of these things may be in reaction in the change to the retirement policy. Now that the 20-year retention carrot is becoming a thing of the past, they will need other ways to keep people if they are to retain both officers and enlisted beyond the 12-year mark,” said Bill Hatch, a retired Navy officer who teaches personnel and manpower at the Naval Postgraduate School in California.

“I think this is kind of a Hail Mary. Without the 20-year retirement system, it exponentially changes the ability to predict human behavior because it fundamentally changes the playing field.”



Maj. Gen. Michael E. Langley has his family promote him to major general after the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) relinquishment of command ceremony on Camp Lejeune, N.C., May 23, 2018. Langley, outgoing commanding officer for 2nd MEB, was promoted following his relinquishment of command ceremony. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Lance Cpl. Tanner Seims/Marine Corps)

O-6 officers with no prior military experience?

Many of the ideas contained in the authorization bill echo former Defense Secretary Ash Carter’s “Force of the Future” reforms for the Pentagon touted near the end of Obama’s term in office.

Carson worked closely with Carter on those ideas, and said he sees the new congressional plans as inevitable given the competitive recruiting environment that the military faces.

“I used to say if (Facebook CEO) Mark Zuckerberg woke up one day and decided to join the Army, the best I could do was make him an O-2,” he said. “There was no way to have him come in with the stature his professional abilities demand.”

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Now, services will have the authority to award direct commissions to ranks up to colonel or Navy captain, if recruits warrant that level of authority.

Lawmakers hope the change “would allow the services to recruit those mid-grade and senior officers from the civilian labor pool by offering the incentives of a higher initial rank along with a more competitive compensation package,” according to the bill.

Services already have that authority for some specialties, like physicians and medical experts. But the new language broadens it to include any area that officials see as a position of need. Cyber security and other technical specialties are the likely starting point.

Barron said the rule brings with it great potential to recruit highly skilled, mid-career civilians into critical skills gaps. But it also could present a shock to other officers whose promotions are suddenly overtaken by complete outsiders to the military community.

“Each service already has a unique culture, and part of the process of moving up has always been inculcating individuals in that culture over years,” he said. “I’m not saying that it can’t work, but that change is something the services will be watching closely.”

Will the services use it?

None of the changes are mandatory, meaning service officials could completely ignore the ideas.

But defense officials have publicly expressed interest in the moves in recent months, and Carson thinks even long-held traditions won't stand in the way of market pressure.

“If you allow even one service to do this, then they'll all have to do it,” he said. “People want these kind of reforms, and if they see one service offering them, it'll make (that service) more attractive.”

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Exactly when the changes will go into effect remains unclear. Each of the services will have to develop rules and procedures surrounding the changes, and that work won't start until the legislation actually becomes law.

Senate lawmakers are expected to finalize the measure and send it to President Donald Trump for his signature next month. Typically, the budget policy bill isn't finalized until much later in the fall.

But Korb said the changes are already well overdue.

“This is a step in the right direction for the military,” he said. “The services don't have to do all of it. But this is where the 21st century military is heading.

Staff Writers Meghann Myers and Mark Faram contributed to this report.

About [Leo Shane III](#)

Leo covers Congress, Veterans Affairs and the White House for Military Times. He has covered Washington, D.C. since 2004, focusing on military personnel and veterans policies. His work has earned numerous honors, including a 2009 Polk award, a 2010 National Headliner Award, the IAVA Leadership in Journalism award and the VFW News Media award.

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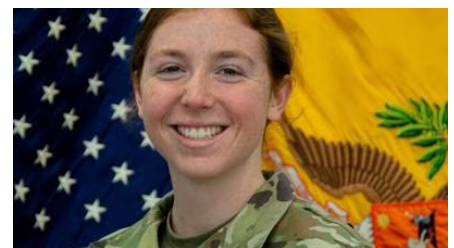
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