

IN SEARCH OF AN AIR FORCE MERITOCRACY

KEVIN ROSSILLON
COMMENTARY

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In theory, every officer in the military with skill or merit should be able to compete for promotion on a level playing field, with only the best and the brightest getting picked each year to advance. In practice, however, the U.S. armed services are

sticking with a strict schedule of promotion that is stifling risk-taking and incentivizing the status quo.

In a series of surveys conducted with West Point graduates in 2011, Tim Kane found that an alarming 93 percent of respondents believed that a “majority of the best officers leave the military early rather than serving a full career.” He concluded the military was “bleeding talent” because of a “deeply anti-entrepreneurial personnel structure” that was nearly blind to merit in promoting officers and recognizing their significant contributions. Despite efforts to reform this system, no military branch or service has taken sufficient steps to address Kane’s criticism.

In May 2018, Jason Lamb, writing under the pseudonym “Ned Stark,” wrote in these pages about challenges with the Air Force’s promotion system. While Lamb and I agree there is a need for radical change, we disagree about the core issue. I believe that Kane’s focus on retention of talent is more important than Lamb’s focus on promoting the right general officers, though both issues should be addressed.

BECOME A MEMBER

To retain talent, all of the military services should re-imagine their promotion systems to ensure officers are promoted based on merit and future potential, not principally on time served. To do so, the services should permit all officers who meet the legal requirements of time served in rank to compete for promotion, compare officers across “year groups” rather than within year groups, and allow most officers to opt out of competing for promotion in a given year without reason and without repercussion for future years of consideration. These changes will incentivize younger officers to innovate, take rational risks, and focus on excelling in their current positions, rather than chasing positions working directly for senior

leaders. While all the services could benefit from these changes, I focus on what I know best: the Air Force, its promotion system, and how it can be updated to retain top talent and make the organization truly meritocratic.

The Limitations of “Year-Group-Based” Promotion Systems

The reason for the deeply anti-entrepreneurial personnel structure is that promotion is based on time spent at a given rank, which corresponds to a specific zone. Officers are categorized by year group, which is determined by the year of promotion to the current rank. (An analogy would be high school where seniors and juniors constitute different year groups based on the year entering high school.) The military branches select a specific number of years as a target for each rank, and only one year group at a time is ever “in the primary zone” for promotion consideration. Most branches cap the number of officers who can promote “early/ahead of schedule” to less than 5–10 percent of a year group, and few officers promote “late/behind schedule.”

Therefore, for the first 15 years of their careers, the vast majority of officers will have the exact same rank as their commissioning class and are essentially only competing against others with the same number of years at their current rank. As a result, exceptional officers in the 90th percentile of performance promote at the same rate as officers that are in the 20th percentile. This structure creates a culture where exceeding expectations is not rewarded with faster promotion. Instead, officers are incentivized to be cautious and avoid mistakes because mishaps are the main issue that delay or prevent promotion. Officers, therefore, rationally choose to avoid risks, refusing to delegate responsibility to subordinates or challenge the status quo. The current system incentivizes mediocrity rather than encouraging officers to be entrepreneurial and forward-thinking.

Old Legal Restrictions and New Hesitancy

Until recently, the U.S. military branches were severely restricted in how they could consider officers for promotion. The services were required to utilize an “up-or-out” system whereby officers could only be considered two or three times for promotion, once per year in consecutive years. If an officer failed to promote, they would be sent to a retention board with the possibility of involuntary separation, and they had no opportunity for further promotion consideration. Congress eased these restrictions significantly in 2019 but did not mandate changes in the services. The 2019 National Defense Authorization Act granted “Alternative Promotion Authority” to the services, which gives them the ability to consider officers for promotion five times and allows officers to opt out of promotion board consideration in a given year. Since these changes were not mandatory, military services maintained flexibility in how they wanted to modify their promotion systems.

In the Air Force, my branch of service, leaders made a number of changes to its promotion system based on the new authorities. These included the creation of promotion categories for officers and the addition of merit-based reordering of promotion lists. The changes have improved the transparency of the promotion process and provided officers with better comparative feedback. Candidates are now compared to their peers in similar positions rather than people who have the same rank but may do an entirely different job.

However, the Air Force also deemed any officer who would have previously been eligible for promotion ahead of schedule to be ineligible. In other words, all early promotions to major and lieutenant colonel were eliminated, leading to promotion rates of about 95 percent to major during the first year of promotion eligibility. Thus, promotion is still based almost entirely on year group, rather than merit.

This practice repeats the issues that Kane identified. To justify this practice, the Air Force argued that the pre-2019 promotion system led to “less development time” for officers who were selected early for promotion. The Air Force also argued that the system limited the “ability to recognize emerging talent as it blooms” and could

“leave talented officers behind.” Indeed, the old system had many negative side effects, including the creation of a “fast-track” system that predestined certain officers for promotion to general. However, these side effects are not directly attributable to early promotion. Furthermore, eliminating early promotion privileges time-in-rank, rather than merit, when promoting officers. This practice will simply decrease the Air Force’s odds of retaining top talent.

The Necessity of Merit-Based Promotion

The military often turns to pay increases or large bonuses to retain personnel. However, these monetary solutions do not target individuals for retention but focus on broad swaths of the population based on career field and year group. According to multiple peer-reviewed studies, there is a strong relationship between “satisfactory compensation” and retention. Increased retention can also lead to improved organizational performance. Importantly, top performers care more about competitive compensation and bonus rewards than average performers. In the U.S. military, pay is standardized by rank, time-in-service, and career field. It does not vary by individual performance. Thus, absent a change in policy on pay, the military services need an alternative method to fairly compensate their top performers by distinguishing them from their peers, or they risk losing those officers.

Merit-based promotion is the most tangible way the services can offer top performers recognition and fair compensation in that it provides those individuals with greater responsibility and positional influence. Without it, the services risk alienating these officers, as they will not be compensated differently from their peers for 15 or more years, a stark contrast with norms in the private sector.

Simple Changes to Enable Open Competition

A re-imagined officer promotion system can only be considered merit-based and sustainable if it accomplishes three distinct tasks. First, promotion should not rely on time-in-rank or education, but instead focus on performance, wisdom gained

from experience, and the ability to lead. Second, the system should provide the opportunity for outstanding officers to promote early — that is, a year or more ahead of the majority of their peers. Third, it must guard against path-dependency, whereby the service informally guarantees strong performers at early ranks promotion to the most senior ranks. If these changes are enacted, the system should then be better positioned to retain officers at appropriate ranks based on their interest and capacity for leadership. This process should be open to officers in multiple year groups, which would allow for service leadership to compare a larger pool of people every year. This comparison would allow for younger leaders who show promise to promote faster. The Air Force technically implemented comparison across year groups in 2020, but the changes have not had any practical effect because the eligibility restrictions are still so severe that early promotion is impossible.

The Air Force should continue comparing officers across year groups and open up competition to any officer with three years' time-in-rank, the minimum required by U.S. law. Further restrictions should be avoided because officers have different prior experiences and learn at different rates. Current eligibility restrictions prevent senior leaders from identifying talented officers who gain and apply wisdom from experience more rapidly than their peers, because they substitute the proxy of time-in-rank for the hard-to-measure metric of useful experience. With the current system, useful experience is treated as equivalent to time-in-rank.

These proposed changes do have some potential downsides. Allowing officers to promote early risks repeating some of the mistakes made with the fast-track promotion system. However, this risk can be managed if the primary causes of the fast track are addressed. Eliminating year-group based promotion, removing the previous “markers” of early promotion, and challenging the culture of “up-or-out” — the perspective that those who do not promote should not be retained — will mitigate this risk. These causes can be addressed while allowing for early promotion.

In these pages, Lamb made a series of recommendations about resolving the “marker” issue associated with early promotion. I concur with most of his proposals. Additionally, if the armed services permit early promotions and compare officers across year groups, leaders who write performance evaluations will have fewer incentives to manipulate those evaluations. The narrow promotion windows of the old system incentivized leaders to give their best appraisals to those officers who “needed it,” either because they were previously tagged as future leaders or because their year group was the only one eligible. Under my proposal, these incentives to manipulate recommendations for “those who need it” are greatly attenuated. Most officers are eligible for promotion, so most could benefit immediately from a strong evaluation.

The old promotion system also encouraged senior leaders and promotion boards to focus their attention on the “extremes” of the bell curve for promotion to major and lieutenant colonel, which incentivized cronyism and risk aversion. Cronyism emerged because only a very small percentage of officers in a year group could promote early. Consequently, officers who wished to promote rapidly were forced to seek out positions with access to senior leaders, hoping that the face time would lead to the personalized, top evaluation necessary for early promotion. The senior leaders themselves were incentivized to place outsized emphasis on mentoring this small batch of officers. Risk aversion and mistake avoidance were incentivized for all other officers as the best policy to get promoted. In short, the old system incentivized forming a personal relationship with senior leaders or, absent that relationship, blending in with the crowd by avoiding risk-tolerant behavior.

A more meritocratic system of open competition across year groups will incentivize officers to excel in all of their assignments. By expanding the year groups eligible for promotion, the pool of aspirants increases by about 300 percent. The rate of promotion, then, could decrease to as low as 20–35 percent across eligible year groups since the Air Force would still promote the same number of individuals per year, as determined by needs of the Air Force and legal

limits. Thus, the process is more competitive, and promotion is no longer guaranteed. This competitive structure incentivizes officers to take calculated risks to stand out from the crowd and encourages leaders to identify and promote individuals that contribute to organizational success. While leaders are likely to show some deference to longevity, they now have the opportunity to identify those who have cultivated the proper technical and leadership skills by recommending them for promotion ahead of officers with more time-in-rank.

Challenging a System and Culture of “Up-or-Out”

Open competition for promotion, including the opportunity for early promotion, is still likely to fail if the “up-or-out” careerism is not updated to do away with restrictive time requirements. With the regulations in the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act, the system does not need more reform to combat this practice. The new rules allow for the services to consider officers for promotion up to five times. The Air Force could use the extended eligibility window for promotions to challenge old ways of thinking about career progression and give officers more flexibility with their own professional development.

This change will challenge Air Force culture. Under the old system, an officer that promoted “early” to major, but then “late” to lieutenant colonel would essentially be in the same place as an officer that promoted “on-time” twice. However, due to Air Force culture, promoting late has always been a career killer. Consequently, senior leaders were unwilling to delay the promotion of officers who had previously promoted early, which in turn incentivized early promoters to avoid the risks associated with innovation. If the Air Force opens up promotion eligibility for five years and permits officers to promote “early” at one rank and “late” at the next rank without repercussion, the culture could be changed.

This cultural challenge is best addressed if all officers, including top performers, are given more flexibility over their career progression. Then, promotion boards cannot assume that all top performers are early promoters, as may have been the

previous, though incorrect, perception. Thankfully, provisions in the 2019 defense authorization bill also allow services to let officers opt out of promotion consideration for one to three years without reason and without repercussion. During this window, officers could either prioritize promotion or some other career or life goal. Instead of seeking early promotion, officers could focus on mastering their jobs and proving themselves as tacticians, either through combat deployments or further education. They could also choose to delay promotion for personal reasons, like having a child, but then seek promotion at a later date. The Air Force should also value patience and recognize that many exceptional officers will not promote early because they do not want to rush through the ranks. In fact, many officers could be better suited for senior leadership positions if they can construct career paths that provide themselves with a diversity of experiences across ranks and do not follow a “standard” promotion path.

The Link Between Promotion and Retention

Many U.S. policymakers and military leaders correctly recognize that disruptive innovation and risk acceptance are necessary in strategic competition against increasingly belligerent adversaries. Furthermore, promoting talented, risk-acceptant leaders and strategic thinkers is necessary if the U.S. military is to pursue that vision and adapt rapidly. However, the military services have a talent retention problem, one that the Alternative Promotion Authority within the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act was arguably created to address. Using that new authority, the armed services should strive to build promotion systems that reward merit, not simply time served at rank, in order to retain talented officers. Abolishing year-group-based promotion and expanding promotion eligibility are necessary steps toward accomplishing that goal. Furthermore, the services should challenge a counterproductive system of “up-or-out” that alienates officers and incentivizes cronyism and risk-averse behaviors. Just like Lamb, “I hold out hope the system can change” so that the military can retain and “promote the best leadership as the rule instead of the exception.”

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Maj. Kevin Rossillon is an active-duty U.S. Air Force officer who holds a master's degree in operations research from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and is currently a doctoral candidate in political science at the University of California San Diego. He was a distinguished graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy and competitively selected for the Chief of Staff of the Air Force Captains Prestigious Ph.D. program. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Air Force, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

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