

Reducing the Number of Senior Executive Service Positions by 25 Percent

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BACKGROUND

The Senior Executive Service (SES) is a position classification for senior federal employees, analogous to general officer or flag officer ranks in the military. The Senate proposes to cut 25 percent consistent with the cut to GO/FOs. (The base for the cut includes both career and non-career positions but excludes up to 200 "highly qualified experts" and Senate-confirmed positions.) This would constitute a cut of about 250 positions.

Over the last 30 years, the total number of SES positions has fluctuated between 1,100 and 1,400. From 1,400 positions in the early 1990s, the number declined to 1,100 by the end of that decade. The number increased again to 1,400 in the late 2000s. In 2011 Secretary Gates proposed to cut or downgrade 209 SES positions in tandem with his GO/FO cuts. Today the number of SES positions in DoD is about 1,200.¹

The number of SES has generally tracked to the number of civilian employees overall. During this same 30-year period, the number of DoD civilian employees declined from 1.1 million at the end of the Cold War (1989) to 677,000 at 9/11. The number grew rapidly during the 2000s, peaking at 807,000 in 2011, before declining gradually to the FY 2016 level of 770,000.

The number of SES positions today (about 1,200) is significantly larger than the number of GO/FOs (884). In part, this represents a conscious effort in recent years to move

¹ Office of Personnel Management, *SES Facts and Figures for 2014*, <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/senior-executive-service/facts-figures/#url-Demographics>.

management and headquarters positions from rapidly rotating military officers to longer-serving civilians.

DoD represents a relatively small proportion (17 percent) of the government-wide SES total of 7,000 and has proportionally fewer SES as part of its civilian workforce. The ratio of DoD civilians to SES is three times that of non-DoD agencies (640 v. 205).

Table 1: Remarks from Congress and Administration

SENATE	HOUSE	SECRETARY CARTER/ ADMINISTRATION
Cut by 25 percent.	[No equivalent provision.]	SAP on Senate NDAA opposes making reductions statutory and included this provision in its long list of veto objections.
<p>Section 1112: “On and after January 1, 2019, the number of covered SES employees may not exceed the number equal to the product obtained by multiplying [the] number of covered SES employees on December 31, 2015 and 0.75.”</p>		<p>Senate SAP: “The Administration objects to section 1112. . . . The Administration supports the elimination of unnecessary and excessive executive positions as evidenced by DOD’s elimination of 97 SES positions in 2011, and a further reduction of over 140 SES positions since then. However, any further reductions to SES positions in DOD should be made in a deliberate manner following a review and analysis of the impact of such reductions on the functioning of each component or agency. Requiring DOD to arbitrarily cut additional SES positions across-the-board would create long-term negative impacts for various DOD services and organizations.”²</p>

² Executive Office of the President, *Statement of Administration Policy: S.2943-National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017*, June 7, 2016, https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/legislative/sap/114/saps2943s_20160607.pdf.

ASSESSMENT

Cutting the number of SES is consistent with the widespread desire to cut overhead and the existing DoD direction to cut management headquarters specifically. However, the current number of SES is not out of line with history. Further, DoD has proportionally many fewer SES than the domestic agencies. Overall, there does not seem to be a significant imbalance here.

RECOMMENDATION FOR WAY FORWARD

- If SES reductions are desired, cap the reductions at 100, the number needed to achieve the pre-9/11 level.
- Include SES in the independent study of DoD senior leadership, described in the four-star officer and GO/FO papers.
- Ensure that DoD's SES numbers are considered in the context of government-wide SES policies and supervisory ratios.



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