

YOU DON'T GET TO THE NDAA PERSONNEL REFORMS WITHOUT FORCE OF THE FUTURE

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COMMENTARY

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The Department of Defense is overhauling the military personnel system for the first time in a generation. And the changes, some large, others small, all indicate that the department has finally embraced the “talent management” revolution that swept the private sector more than two decades ago. In a recent article at *War on the Rocks*, three observers from the Bipartisan Policy Center rightfully laud these changes. But those authors go too far in their assertion that the reforms have nothing to do with Secretary Ash Carter’s “Force of the Future” initiative — an

effort they harshly and wrongfully deem a “failure.” In this glib judgment, they do violence not only to history, but also, and far more importantly, to the hopes of future defense reform. For the truth is, these reforms would never have happened without the important and controversial work begun in the last administration. Getting the story right is essential. Force of the Future is a critical case study in the possibilities and pitfalls of bureaucratic change.

It is important to remember the context in which the recent efforts at personnel reform arose. Before Force of the Future was launched, no one at the Department of Defense was even talking about meaningful reform of the officer management system. On this I can speak from experience, having served in Army leadership before leading the department’s office of personnel and readiness. While undersecretary of the Army in 2014, I was asked to speak at the annual meeting of the Association of the United States Army (AUSA). During my comments, I mentioned — really just in passing — that the officer personnel management system was antiquated and actually harmful to military readiness. It had to be reformed, I said, and I concluded my talk by noting that someone should do it. This suggestion, as obvious as it seemed to me, was met with audible gasps and a visible shaking of heads by most in the large crowd. Reform of the personnel system, such as ending the “up-or-out” promotion system and otherwise introducing more flexibility, was unthinkable, anathema to every right-thinking soldier. Or so it seemed.

Little did I know it at the time of this speech, but a growing number of people were questioning the utility of the existing personnel system. Chief among these were the soldier-scholars at the Office of Economic Manpower and Analysis, part of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and headed at the time by David Lyle. By 2015, Lyle, an Army colonel with a Ph.D. in economics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, had been writing for years about the infirmities of the Army’s manpower system. And in report after report, he didn’t merely criticize, but, rather, offered innovative solutions to what he perceived as a one-size-fits-all

approach to human resources. Lyle's work, alongside that of economist Tim Kane, would turn out to be the intellectual inspiration for officers, many quite junior and centered around the Defense Entrepreneurs Forum, who were also dissatisfied with a personnel system that squandered the talents and commitment of far too many people. If anyone should be credited for the personnel reforms in the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act, it is really Lyle, Kane, and the members of the Defense Entrepreneurs Forum, all of whom argued for years and without much applause that things could be done better.

When I became the acting undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness in 2015, I found myself in a position to put my money where my mouth had been earlier at the AUSA conference. Alas, it is no exaggeration to say that there was not a single military or civilian senior leader at the Defense Department who shared my own belief that the personnel system needed to be overhauled. So what to do?

With the Obama administration nearing its end, the only option was to charge ahead. Over a period of four months — an extraordinarily short period in an agency that usually moves only in geologic time — the Force of the Future team, sleeping in their offices, proposed hundreds of significant reforms, ranging from changing “up-or-out” to enhanced parental leave to new education programs. Few reform efforts in the whole of government have matched the ambitions, scope, and speed of this one. And throughout 2015 and 2016, Carter announced that the Department of Defense would unilaterally implement those reforms for which no congressional approval was required. He also announced that he would ask Congress for support on those reforms outside of the department's exclusive power. Significantly, these included reform of “up-or-out,” expanded lateral entry, deferred promotion boards, and adjusting lineal numbers. Never before had any secretary of defense had the temerity to ask for such sweeping changes to the personnel system. Indeed, one year before, no one was even thinking about such ideas! Now, all of these sensible changes are in the National Defense Authorization Act.

So, what does the balance sheet show for Force of the Future? To name just a few of its assets: more sabbaticals, greater educational opportunities, a doubling of parental leave, improved recruiting metrics, exit interviews for separating service members, more public-private partnerships, mother's rooms at every installation, and increased hours at child development centers. For the first time ever, in 2016 the department asked Congress for the authority to delay permanent change of station (PCS) moves, to change to "up-or-out," to increase the retirement age, and offer constructive credit for lateral entry. These are just some of the noteworthy changes. There are dozens more. If people choose to call this effort a "failure," well, the Department of Defense could use a few more of them. Yes, the efforts were controversial, and the reforms' chief architects on my team became controversial too. But to make change is really hard, and a lesson from all efforts at defense reform is that controversy is an inevitable residue of conflict, and anyone who thinks they can push major change in a massive bureaucracy without becoming a lightning rod is hopelessly and haplessly in error.

More significantly, the purpose of Force of the Future went beyond any particular change to law or regulation. The aim was to do nothing less than fundamentally change the way the Department of Defense *thought about* its people, to transform a view of personnel as just an input to the industrial process to one where talent was identified, nurtured, and rewarded. What this might specifically require is a matter about which reasonable people may disagree. The battle was not about such details, but, instead, about how to think about the problem itself. Force of the Future proposed a new paradigm, one that had few supporters and many opponents at the time Carter first articulated it. And that new paradigm has, by and large, been acknowledged over the last two years as superior. All revolutions are really revolutions in consciousness. Today, the military services are all experimenting with personnel practices that were beyond the pale just two years ago.

Any successful policy change has countless authors, all of whom play indispensable yet different roles. Some people come up with the ideas, justifying them in scholarly monographs that defend in detail the merits of the new proposals. Some people have the power to enact legislation, without which many changes can never be realized. Some people lend their good names to the cause, giving cover to younger activists. And some people engage in the controversial bureaucratic fights that seek to expand the Overton Window of debate.

The Bipartisan Policy Center's 2017 report on military personnel was terrific and without a doubt helpful in convincing Congress to enact personnel reform. Helpful, too, was the work of groups like the Defense Business Board and Business Executives for National Security, whose members were often the most enthusiastic supporters of Force of the Future. But I believe it safe to say that none of these groups would have ever taken up the fight if Force of the Future had not laid a marker on the ground. That marker was laid by people who worked seven days a week, weathering great criticism, knowing the work was important to the country, and confident only that history would provide vindication.

It already has.

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