Reducing the Number of Guard and Reserve General/Flag Officers by 25 Percent

By: Mark Cancian
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BACKGROUND

This Senate proposal complements the Senate’s proposal to cut active component GO/FOs by 25 percent by applying the same percentage cut to the reserve components. This direction would eliminate about 100 currently staffed billets.

Two independent studies of reserve GO/FOs have been done recently, one by RAND\(^1\) and one by the Library of Congress.\(^2\)

The RAND study, published in 2016, was conducted for the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs (OASD/RA) in response to direction in the FY 2014 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). The study’s tasks were to evaluate whether the authorized strength of reserve component (RC)\(^3\) GO/FOs was sufficient to produce an effective RC, whether the services were in compliance with statutory limits on the numbers of RC GO/FOs, whether there were opportunities for downgrading or eliminating RC GO/FO positions, and what affect the professional development opportunities of RC GO/FOs had on billet requirements. The study

\(^1\) Lisa M. Harrington et al., Reserve Component General and Flag Officers: A Review of Requirements and Authorized Strength (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2016), [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1156.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1156.html).


\(^3\) The reserve component includes both federal reserve forces and the Air and Army National Guard.
concluded that the RC GO/FO process “generally works, that it is conducted within the limitations set in statute, and that it provides an adequate number of general and flag officers to meet mission needs.” In addition, the study identified several opportunities to improve effectiveness, including a recommendation that the services review 27 RC GO/FO positions for possible elimination or downgrading.

The Congressional Research Services study, conducted in 2007 for the Commission on the National Guard and Reserves, examined whether the numbers and pay grades of the RC GO/FOs were commensurate with contemporary demands and provided a historical account of past authorizations for GO/FOs in the reserve and active components. The report found that, “while RC GO/FO number authorizations, once established, remained the same, the overall size of the RC force, like that of the [active component], has been subject to expansions and contractions.” The study also found that, while concerns about active component GO/FOs have centered on the total size of the GO/FO corps, the focus of concerns for reserve component GO/FOs has been on the “degrees of institutional power that the RC’s top officers can wield within the Pentagon,” which has resulted in “campaigns to increase the authorizations and opportunities for reserve GO/FOs to serve above the two-star level.”

Unlike with the active duty force, the number of Guard/reserve GO/FOs has increased substantially since 9/11. According to the RAND study, in 1997, pre-9/11, the total was 548, which grew to 647 by 2014, an increase of 18 percent. As of May 2016, the total is 666.4 This growth was authorized by statute, mainly by increasing the number of positions exempted from the statutory caps. Growth has been uneven, however, with the Army Guard, Air Guard, and Navy Reserve showing the largest increases.

During the period 2000–2016, the size of the reserve component has been roughly constant, at about 820,000, with some temporary increase at the height of the wars. As a result, the number of troops per GO/FO has declined over time. Also, the ratio of troops per GO/FO is lower for the Guard/reserve (1.250) than for active duty (1.450).

This increase in the number of GO/FOs may have been driven, at least in part, by the policy decision in the 2000s to shift the Guard and reserve components from a strategic to an operational reserve; that is, from a force that was used infrequently to a force that was used regularly. Additional GO/FO leadership may have been needed to enhance readiness and availability.

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4 Numbers include state adjutants general and assistant adjutants general, and other positions exempted by the Congress from the statutory caps, about 180 positions total. Also includes Guard/reserve GO/FOs on active duty, including at NGB.
Section 501(b) cuts federal duty National Guard generals, mainly at the National Guard Bureau (NGB), the Guard’s state billets being excluded. The total billets affected is about 32 (as of April 1, 2016), so the reduction would be eight billets.

Section 502 eliminates the statutory requirement for the heads of reserve components to be three-star positions (among many other statutory eliminations). As with the active duty component, the committee made these eliminations to give the services latitude to implement the GO/FO reductions. This three-star requirement was established in the mid-1990s to give the reserve components the stature to be involved in major service decisions, which were typically made at the three-star level. During the post–Cold War drawdown, there had been concerns that the reserve components had not been treated fairly. The elevation to three-star level was designed to give reserve component heads a seat at the table when key resource decisions were made. The section also eliminates the statutory requirement that the vice chief of the National Guard Bureau (NGB) and heads of the National Guard components be three-star billets. (The chief of the National Guard Bureau remains a four-star, however.)

Elimination of the three-star requirement does not mean that any of these billets must be downgraded, only that they can be downgraded if the service desires to do so to accommodate the reduced number of three-star billets.

Table 1: Remarks from Congress and Administration

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<tr>
<th>SENATE</th>
<th>HOUSE</th>
<th>SECRETARY CARTER/ADMINISTRATION</th>
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<td>Yes – 25 percent cut and repeal of statutory requirements for various positions</td>
<td>[No equivalent provision.]</td>
<td>SAP supported some GO/FO reduction but not statutory goals and included this provision in the long list of veto items.</td>
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| Section 501 *(a) In general. The authorized strengths of the Army, Air Force, and Marine Corps in reserve general officers in an active status, and the authorized strength of the Navy in reserve flag officers in an active status, after December 31, 2017, are as follows: *(1) In the Army, 155.* *(2) In the Air Force, 117.* *(3) In the Navy, 36.* *(4) In the Marine Corps, 7.* | Administration statements have not differentiated between cuts to active duty and reserve/Guard GO/FOs. SAP on Senate NDAA: “[The administration] objects to section 501, which would arbitrarily reduce the number of general and flag officers by 25 percent by the
(b) Aggregate number of certain National Guard officers.

(1) In general. The aggregate number of general officers described in paragraph (2) serving on active duty after December 31, 2017, may not exceed the number equal to 75 percent of the aggregate number of such officers who were serving on active duty as of December 31, 2015.

(2) Covered general officers. The general officers described in this paragraph are the following:

(A) General officers of the National Guard of the States and territories.
(B) General officers serving in the National Guard Bureau.

Section 502
Repeal of Statutory Specification of General or Flag Officer Grade for Various Positions...

...Assistants to CJCS for National Guard Matters...Chief of Army Reserve...Chief of Navy Reserve...Commander, Marine Corps Reserve...Chief of Air Force Reserve...Vice Chief of the National Guard Bureau...Other senior National Guard Bureau officers...

dead of calendar year 2017. Reductions to the number of general and flag officer positions should be made deliberately after reviewing the role of each position and analyzing the impact of the reduction on the force.

ASSESSMENT

The proposed cut is consistent with the widespread desire to reduce “overhead” and with DoD’s proposed 25 percent cut to management headquarters. Further, because the number of Guard/reserve GO/FOs has been growing while the number of Guard/reserve troops has been constant, there would appear to be some opportunity for reductions.
However, a full 25 percent cut would be large and disruptive. Further, the cut focuses on operational billets and exempts most Guard infrastructure billets (State Adjutants General and Assistant Adjutants General), though it does cut the National Guard bureau.

Returning the total number of Guard/reserve GO/FOs (ignoring statutory exclusions) to the pre-9/11 level, as CSIS recommended for active duty GO/FOs, would not work here. Because of reserve GO/FO increases, such a reduction would have nearly the same impact as a 25 percent cut.

Fiscal savings from RC GO/FO cuts would be much smaller than cuts to active duty GO/FOs because the costs of reserve personnel are much lower—for compensation, as well as for staff support and operations—as a result of reservists being only part-time.

Finally, there would be active component implications for these reductions as the active component now uses reserve component generals in full-time service and joint positions (about 40 as of April 1, 2016, excluding the NGB). Reducing the number of RC GO/FOs might mean that the active component would need to fill those positions.

The loss of the three-star positions will likely be seen in the reserve community as a serious loss of influence. Although the services could opt to retain these positions at the three-star level, such positions are scarce, and there will be pressure to move the senior billets elsewhere.

One difference between the active and reserve components is the close connection of the reserve components, especially the National Guard, with state and local politics. As a result they have often been able to make their case in Congress more effectively than the active duty components.

**RECOMMENDATION FOR WAY FORWARD**

As with active duty GO/FOs, there are two potential approaches.

One approach would be to direct DoD to produce a plan for reductions at different levels, identifying which billets would be eliminated and the resulting impacts. The levels might be 5 percent increments, from 5 percent to 25 percent. This would force DoD to think concretely about reductions and give the Congress the information it needed to make an informed decision in a future NDAA about the appropriate level of reductions. Supporting analytic work could be done by an outside agency, like a federally funded research and development center. The Reserve Forces Policy Board should comment on the plan before it is transmitted to the Congress to ensure that
the Guard and reserve community is consulted. With the additional information in hand, the Congress could revisit the issue in a future NDAA.

If a departmental study is not enough, then an alternative way forward would direct a combination of reductions and analysis. An intuitively acceptable approach would be to apply the same guidance to the Guard and reserve GO/FOs as to the active duty:

- Reduce the number of Guard/reserve GO/FO officers by 41, the same reduction that CSIS has proposed for active duty GO/FOs, and focus reductions on those components with the largest increases.

- Retain the statutory requirement for reserve component heads to be three-star positions. This elevation has eased active/reserve tensions that were evident in the 1990s, and eliminating the requirement would constitute a step backwards. Retaining the three-star positions in the National Guard Bureau would be both equitable and needed to prepare officers for the Guard four-star position (which continues).

- Lengthen the time period for implementation of the cuts, from the end of calendar year 2017 to at least the end of calendar year 2018.

- Develop a plan for potential reductions at different five percent levels and assess their impact, as described above. Revisit the issue with the additional information in hand.

Mark Cancian is a senior adviser with the CSIS International Security Program.