



## Organizational Dynamics Between the Assistant Secretary of the Air Force, Manpower and Reserve Affairs (SAF/MR) and the Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower, Personnel, and Services (AF/A1)

*Shirley M. Ross and Charles P. Armentrout*

### Introduction

Over the years, the relationship between the Assistant Secretary of the Air Force, Manpower and Reserve Affairs (SAF/MR) and the Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower, Personnel, and Services (AF/A1) has ebbed and flowed, and the division of work (including work content and work processes) between SAF/MR and A1 has been fluid. Much of this appears to be situationally driven by the expertise and personalities of the leaders of the two organizations, as well as the quantity and quality of the staffs that they lead.

At different times, both the SAF/MR and the AF/A1 have brought widely varying backgrounds and levels of expertise in personnel and human resources to the job. The SAF/MR political appointees may or may not bring deep content expertise to the position, and the three-star head of AF/A1, in recent years, has tended to alternate between a rated senior leader and

a career personnelist. Deputies and staffs on both sides can, of course, compensate for a principal's lack of deep technical or specialist expertise, but senior leaders from other disciplines will typically bring different perspectives and agendas with them into the position.

Given the various backgrounds the principals bring to bear, a flexible and adaptable working relationship can be and has been advantageous. Although flexibility and adaptability are on the whole beneficial, changeable working relationships can also result in unsettled, highly variable, or inconsistent approaches to doing business. Inconsistency, in turn, can result in confusion about who can do or is doing what, in expectations that are unmet, or in conflict.

This Perspective emerged from SAF/MR and AF/A1 interest in better understanding the historical dynamics between their organizations. This research attempts to (1) step back and take a long view, both historically and by statute; (2) summa-

size interview data collected from previous SAF/MR and A1 office holders and experts; (3) examine other services' current structures and practices; (4) present preliminary analysis; and (5) offer recommendations on how the current already-collegial relationship might be further refined for added consistency and focus, leveraging the capabilities and efficiencies on both sides.

## Background

The fundamental tenets of civil-military relations underpin the relationship between SAF/MR (political appointee-led and predominantly civilian-staffed) and AF/A1 (military-led and predominantly military-staffed). These tenets are captured in 10 U.S.C., primarily in sections 8013 through 8016, and 8031 through 8035. The Secretary of the Air Force is responsible for all affairs of the Department, including recruiting, organizing, training, mobilizing, demobilizing, and administering (including the morale and welfare of personnel). Both the Secretariat and the Air Staff are charged by law with assisting the Secretary in this capacity, and the Air Staff is further specified to provide “professional assistance” with recruiting, organizing, training, servicing, mobilizing, demobilizing, and administering, subject to the authority, direction, and control of the Secretary of the Air Force. The SAF/MR is given authority for “overall supervision” of manpower and reserve affairs of the department. Responsibilities of the AF/A1 are not specifically mentioned in law, beyond the general responsibilities of the Air Staff.

Further delineation of organizational relationships and responsibilities for SAF/MR and AF/A1 are found in policy. Headquarters Air Force Mission Directive (HAF MD) 1-24,

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*Assistant Secretary of the Air Force (Manpower and Reserve Affairs), and HAF MD 1-32, Deputy Chief of Staff of the Air Force, Manpower, Personnel, and Services, lay out the overarching dynamics. In HAF MD 1-32, the AF/A1 has overall responsibility for supervision of the staff, which develops plans and policies, and then directs and supervises the implementation of resulting programs and procedures for all Air Force military and civilian personnel, manpower and organization, and services activities.*

Attachment 3 in HAF MD 1-32 outlines the standard operating procedures between SAF/MR and AF/A1 as follows:

- AF/A1 develops policies and submits them to SAF/MR for coordination and concurrence prior to approval by the Secretary of the Air Force
- AF/A1 develops Air Force Instructions and submits them to SAF/MR for coordination and concurrence prior to A1 approval
- AF/A1 develops strategic plans and submits them to SAF/MR for coordination and concurrence prior to A1 implementation

- AF/A1 executes approved policies and guidance, Air Force instructions, and strategic plans, providing additional guidance to the field as necessary.

Additionally, the relationship and division of responsibilities between SAF/MR and AF/A1 are documented, including conditions for action by the AF/A1 and SAF/MR. Generally, AF/A1 is authorized to act on behalf of the Secretary and SAF/MR as follows:

- responding to issues pertaining to the Program Objective Memorandum, Budget Estimation Submission, or President’s Budget
- providing data, analysis, and information (including to the Office of the Secretary of Defense and congressional staffs) in support of established policies, programs, and initiatives that have been vetted through the corporate structure or other appropriate decision forums
- providing linkages to the Manpower, Personnel, and Services Strategic Plan, and aligning program resources with its goals and objectives
- implementing revised policy direction
- satisfying reporting requirements and requests for status from the Office of the Secretary of Defense or Congress on programs and initiatives
- accomplishing any other action or decision that has been delegated to AF/A1 (e.g., in Air Force Policy Directives) with regard to specific manpower, personnel, and services matters.

SAF/MR retains responsibility for matters pertaining to the following:

- resolving disagreements between components
- driving unprogrammed or budgeted resource demands exceeding \$50 million across the Future Years Defense Program
- dealing with matters involving controversial actions that could cause significant reactions among senior administration officials, Congress or key staff, the public, or the press, including but not limited to matters related to sexual assault or religious preference
- initiating action on established breach of performance parameters
- driving broad cultural change that crosses functions and needs sustained effort over time
- assessing programs in the event of problems or failures.

Undefined terms such as “professional assistance” and “overall supervision” do leave space for interpretation by the two organizations. Traditionally, the Air Force has tended to purposefully leave more space in policy—as compared with the Army, for example—to allow practitioners the latitude to exercise judgment and make decisions based on circumstances that may be unique to the situation. This can, however, allow tensions to arise when two organizations view themselves as authoritative over the same domain, and personalities or viewpoints of the organizations are contradictory.

## **Views on Organizational Structure and Effectiveness**

The authors were also interested in learning about experiences of former SAF/MR and AF/A1 office holders, office holders in equiva-

lent personnel structures in other service components, and other experts who had worked in personnel structures of either the Air Force or other services. To that end, the authors conducted several interviews to gather perspectives on the past and current effectiveness of these structures. (These interviews were not designed to be comprehensive nor definitive in nature but were rather a preliminary step in support of this analysis. More extensive interviews are recommended if further work on this topic is required.)

### **Discussion of the SAF/MR and AF/A1 Relationship**

Although division of responsibilities has been spelled out, as seen previously, results from interviews with past and present office holders and experts indicated inconsistency in execution, for a variety of reasons. The first includes the varied skill and expertise of leaders assigned in SAF/MR and AF/A1.

This applies to political appointments to SAF/MR, which at times in the past were viewed as political “payback” placements. Likewise, in AF/A1, general officers from rated backgrounds were and are often selected to lead the organization as part of their development for potential higher-level positions in the Air Force. In short, leaders in both organizations have, at times, had minimal or no experience in the activities or functions they oversee. Although this dynamic certainly occurs in other functions within the Air Force, the SAF/MR and AF/A1 positions seem to be at the extreme on the continuum, opposite of positions like the Surgeon General or General Counsel, which would not be expected to be filled by individuals outside the applicable professions.

Further, changes in the background and abilities of the staffs over time may be pivotal to the relationship between

organizations. In the past, SAF/MR staffs have been smaller in size than the AF/A1 staff, and staffs of several years ago were described by some as relatively stagnant—which was understood to be a somewhat pejorative description of a staff dominated by long-standing civilians who lacked deliberate development and skills such as current tactical and operational knowledge and understanding. It is presumed these shortfalls outweighed the stability and corporate knowledge that might be expected from this type of staff. Further, this situation gave the advantage to the larger, officer-centric, purposefully developed, and often hand-selected staffs in AF/A1.

Some interviewees also noted, however, that the quality and experience of those hired into SAF/MR began to change after the 2000 National Defense Authorization Act (Pub. L. 106-65, Section 651, 1999), which opened the gates for past military officers to come into civil service without prohibitive financial penalty (often referred to as allowing “double-dipping”). About this time (post-2002), as well, career civilians increasingly began to be deliberately and effectively developed based on guidance from the Force Management and Development Council (FMDC) (Hanser et al., 2015). As a result, many more-recent civilian hires in SAF/MR (both former military and career civilians) have brought with them a greater breadth and depth of experience, as well as credibility gained from a variety of previous assignments—which often included time on the AF/A1 staff itself. Understandably, such staff members may have also brought with them the desire, rooted in past experience, to be more hands-on with human resource management activities such as policy and strategy, and the knowledge to do so effectively.

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Meanwhile, the AF/A1 staff has been affected by repeated staff cuts that have limited its capabilities relative to earlier years. Deployments resulting in temporary but nevertheless multiple-month vacant positions have added to the staffing decreases. In other words, although the two staffs are still clearly not the same size, there has been a *relative* equalization in both quality and quantity. This, combined with an increasing number of SAF/MR staff members who previously had hands-on experience with human resource management, may partially explain why SAF/MR appears to be moving beyond the traditional oversight and total force integration role, into a larger and more active participant role in the development and execution of human resource management policy and strategy.

A shift in governance structures may also have had some influence on the equilibrium. In 2013, a change was made from the FMDC Air Force governance structure to a structure that includes a Human Resource Management Strategic Board (HSB) and the Human Resource Management Strategic Council (HSC) (Air Force Personnel Directive 36-81, 2013). The FMDC was

uniform and active component–centric, headed by the Air Force Vice Chief of Staff. The HSB/HSC structure is SAF/MR–led and includes total force representation. (SAF/MR generally has a stronger total force orientation.) Although in the past AF/A1 had some reserve component members integrated into the staff to provide a total force perspective, these have mostly been lost due to staff reductions.

This change of governance structure was made primarily to increase agility (the HSB/HSC is a smaller, less top-heavy structure), and to promote policy consistency among components. As mentioned, the FMDC was active duty–centric. This change of governance structure may have had several unintended consequences, however. One consequence is that, as lead for the current governance structure, SAF/MR has understandably become more involved in working the day-to-day issues versus oversight and direction. Further, although the HSB/HSC structure is linked into the budget process on paper, memberships of the HSB/HSC and membership of those leading the budget process do not overlap significantly. This lack of alignment has at times caused strategy and funding disconnects, resulting in frustration on the part of strategy and policy executors. Previously, the members of the FMDC making strategy and policy decisions were also on the Air Force Council, thereby providing some strategy and funding consistency and integration.

Other related comments by interviewees underscored the give-and-take nature of the relationship. For example, some deeply experienced office holders stated that SAF/MR could have at times an overly political view, while the uniformed AF/A1 can be parochial and overly protective of portions of the military institution or culture needing change. Also, SAF/MR can sometimes

ease into the initiation and development of strategy or policy, or otherwise venture into operational issues traditionally viewed as AF/A1's domain. At the same time, the AF/A1 can sometimes try to circumvent SAF/MR's oversight responsibility and appeal directly to the Secretary on policy issues.

One defining characteristic of the relationship dynamic, mentioned by several interviewees as pivotal, is the strength of communication between SAF/MR and AF/A1. When personalities connect and communication flourishes, the efficiency and effectiveness of the policy process is positively affected, regardless of structure or governance. When personalities clash and communication is sparse, the current delineation of roles and responsibilities and governance structures, as described previously, tend to be inadequate in ensuring efficient and effective human resource management processes.

### Other Service Models

The service components differ meaningfully in their divisions of responsibility between the civilian and uniformed sides of personnel management. Of all the services, the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Manpower and Reserve Affairs (ASA[M&RA]) has the strongest approach to the direction, approval, and oversight role provided in statute. Little latitude is given to Army Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel (G1); authorities are meticulously delegated, and specific direction is often issued on key initiatives. There is no clear corporate governance body similar to the FMDC or the HSB/HSC, which also makes the strong ASA(M&RA) role more important.

Recently, consideration was given to moving all of the civilian policy and execution under ASA(M&RA); however,

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it now appears that the Army is going to choose to keep the ASA(M&RA) in the traditional oversight role with civilian management. Strategies the Army employs to ensure communication between the ASA(M&RA) and the Army G1 are worth noting. First, the ASA(M&RA) meets with the Army G1 weekly to synchronize efforts. Key staff members follow this example and also meet weekly with their counterparts. Second, a Strategic Initiatives Group (SIG), which works for both the ASA(M&RA) and the Army G1, acts not only as an "engine room" to work key strategic issues, but it also facilitates communication and proper coordination between the two organizations on key issues and initiatives.

In the Navy, the Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Manpower and Reserve Affairs (ASN[M&RA]) and Navy Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower and Personnel (N1) are less well linked and more independent of each other than is the case in other services. Traditionally, the ASN(M&RA) is weaker in the staff hierarchy, and considerable time and effort within the ASN(M&RA) is spent synchronizing policy between the Navy

and Marines. Further, all civilian policy and action were under the ASN(M&RA), demanding considerable focus. However, a shift is occurring, and the Navy N1 is assuming a more active role with civilians. This combination of factors has often allowed the Navy N1 to act more independently on military policy matters, a source of frustration for past ASN(M&RA)s. Placement of a high-performing officer as the ASN(M&RA)'s Flag Aide has, in the past, assisted with communication between ASN(M&RA) and the Navy N1. One former senior office holder discussed how he leveraged the communication route from the ASN(M&RA) Flag Aide to the Navy's N1 Flag Aide to foster informal communication between the two organizations.

Interestingly, the set of office holders and other experts interviewed had widely diverging viewpoints on the best division of responsibilities between SAF/MR and AF/A1. Each espoused a different ideal division and structure. Individual viewpoints covered the spectrum from "eliminate AF/A1" and build a robust SAF/MR to "eliminate SAF/MR" and focus on a strong AF/A1, with several interviewees recommending structures between these two extremes.

### Alternative Organizational Structures

Given the wide range of viewpoints from seasoned office holders and experts as to the right balance between AF/A1 and SAF/MR, we can initially take into consideration that the ideal division may be *situationally dependent*. Several variables, such as depth of functional expertise of either or both the SAF/MR and the AF/A1 and current manning levels at the Air Staff, may render any one optimal solution impractical and ill-advised. We will consider a

range of structural alternatives and discuss the possible dynamics of each. Alternatives discussed will include

1. Leaving the two organizations as they are structurally and organizationally, but refining the definition or understanding of responsibilities
2. Realigning both responsibilities and resources
  - a. to better meet increased demands
  - b. to reduce the variability in policy leadership between AF/A1 and SAF/MR on issues related to policy and strategy development
3. Merging the two organizations into one.

In the current structure, the roles and responsibilities for the SAF/MR and AF/A1 are defined, as mentioned previously. Beyond the oversight responsibility, which is given to the Secretary and SAF/MR in statute, specific roles and process flows are largely assigned by policy, not law. The current policy delineation, however, is either not clear enough, not expansive enough, or has not been sufficiently enforced to ensure consistent business approaches and the avoidance of confusion. Since, however, this relationship is codified primarily in policy and not law, it can easily be redefined, strengthened, or further delineated.

Current definitions of responsibilities are, for the most part, tied to specific actions or processes. One possible way to add to or strengthen the definition of responsibilities and to make them more meaningful is to first define them in terms of a set of principles before processes or actions are considered. For example, SAF/MR (or AF/A1) could be assigned overall responsibility for strategic innovation. This principle-based approach, in addition to the current statutory and policy stipulations, could help

with understanding of responsibilities for emerging or evolving requirements that may fall into gray areas of law or policy. Further, the principles can and should be derived from Air Force doctrine and strategy documents and, therefore, would have the added benefit of further strengthening the linkage between human resource management and overarching Air Force strategy and doctrine.

In looking at realigning structure, it is noteworthy that the ability (quality plus quantity) of staffs has often been a strong factor in determining the relationship dynamics. However, in recent years, the abilities of the two staffs have become more similar, creating a situation that one interviewee described as “having two [vice presidents] of [human resources] in the same company.” If it is determined that this is indeed the current state, alternatives 2 and 3 present themselves: Make the two organizations unequal (e.g., reduce/limit SAF/MR’s role to oversight only and shift some of the staff to AF/A1), or merge the two staffs into one. Since SAF/MR has its basis in statute but AF/A1 does not, we will assume for sake of argument that the result of a merger would be a robust SAF/MR staff.

There are certainly precedents for merger of the two organizations, as evidenced by current structures and functions in the office of the Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Acquisition (SAF/AQ) and the office of the Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Financial Management and Comptroller (SAF/FM). However, there are important dynamics that must be considered and mitigation strategies that must be developed if a merger were to be considered. First, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force must have a voice in force management and readiness decisions, particularly with but not limited to senior officer management decisions. The Chief’s investment and interest in force management decisions is probably similar to interest

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and investment in major acquisition decisions, and we would suggest that any consideration of a merger include a comprehensive review and analysis of lessons learned from the SAF/AQ merger.

Second, personnel is often considered one of the primary assignments necessary for developing future senior Air Force leaders, and the general officer positions in AF/A1 have often been used as developmental positions for rated officers destined for three and four stars. Consideration should be given to retention and proper alignment of these general officer slots to allow this development to continue. Any changes would need to include continuance of developmental and aspirational senior leader positions for officers in AF/A1 career fields, or career personnelists. It goes without saying that pursuing this course would require that the Chief of Staff and Secretary of the Air Force be convinced of the need for a merger.

Finally, it is also important to note that a merger of the two organizations has been considered in the past, most recently in 2014. This consideration has garnered strong push-back from the professional staffs of the House and Senate Armed Services Committees, with articulated concerns centered on maintaining

a separate and distinct advisory voice from military leadership on personnel matters. Any new attempt at merging the staffs should be cognizant of past resistance and should strive to either articulate a compelling case or put forth a solution that mitigates the concern.

Inseparable from possible restructuring scenarios is the need for a review of the current strategic force development governance structure. This review should be performed in parallel with recommendations under consideration, such as stand-up of a SIG-like organization or other possible changes currently under review. It may also be that a strong but inclusive governance structure could actually go a long way toward resolving inconsistent or conflicting approaches to doing business across the human resource management enterprise and may be a reasonably sufficient solution by itself.

Finally, under the current structural paradigm, the resolution of an oft-mentioned issue—that of inconsistent communication—could go a long way to solving many other related issues. The Army model of a robust SIG that supports both organizations offers one possible model for a solution to this issue. A SIG-like group could further provide value as the “engine room” for a governance structure (like the HSC/HSB, FMDC, or similar). It could also function as a central clearinghouse for strategic analysis, acting as the lead and integrator for pop-up, time-sensitive strategic initiatives like Force of the Future and the National Commission on the Structure of the Air Force recommendations. These time-sensitive initiatives tend to be assigned in a scattershot fashion, at times, because of the need to spread the workload across limited staff. Working such issues with the assistance of a single strategic integrator could be advantageous.

## Recommendations

Given the lack of consensus among experts we interviewed, and the situational dependency of past relationships between SAF/ MR and AF/A1, we recommend that consideration of major changes to the current structural paradigm proceed slowly and be informed by further exploratory work and analysis to support evidence-based decisions. However, two initiatives that can and should be explored in the near term are (1) possible new human resource enterprise governance structures and processes, and (2) structures that address communications and integration issues. It could be that successful interventions in one or both of these areas may render broader structural changes unnecessary. The following are specific recommendations for consideration:

1. Undertake a comprehensive review and make a final determination on a governance structure or structures for force development and management to promote better linkages between policy, strategy, and budgetary actions.
2. Explore the feasibility of the stand-up of a (SIG-like) strategic initiatives and integration “engine room” that would provide a bridge between SAF/MR and AF/A1, as well as a home for cross-cutting strategic initiatives or tasks. Also, consider other processes that may facilitate communication, integration, and optimization of SAF/MR and AF/A1 efforts (e.g., weekly cross-talk meetings).
3. Undertake a preliminary review of the lessons learned, benefits, and detriments of the SAF/FM and SAF/AQ merger processes, with particular emphasis on the SAF/AQ process and any concerns from professional staffers in Congress and

how they were mitigated. Consider a more detailed exploration and analysis based on the findings of this preliminary review in conjunction with the outcomes of recommendations (1) and (2) above.

4. Regardless of outcome, explore ways to ensure that there is an appropriate balance of total force representation across any decisionmaking structure (organizational structure or governance structure). Further, if the current structure is retained, explore ways to deliberately promote movement of individuals between the AF/A1 and SAF/MR staffs.

As a final cautionary note, throughout all these efforts, lessons of history should be recognized and care exercised that accidents of history do not drive the set of principles, the organizational structure, or the governance structures adopted.

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## Abbreviations

AF	Air Force
AF/A1	Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower, Personnel, and Services
ASA(M&RA)	Assistant Secretary of the Army for Manpower and Reserve Affairs
ASN(M&RA)	Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Manpower and Reserve Affairs
FMDC	Force Management and Development Council
G1	Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel
HAF MD	Headquarters Air Force Mission Directive
HSB	Human Resource Management Strategic Board
HSC	Human Resource Management Strategic Council
N1	Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower and Personnel
SAF/AQ	Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Acquisition
SAF/FM	Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Financial Management and Comptroller
SAF/MR	Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Manpower and Reserve Affairs
SIG	Strategic Initiatives Group

## About This Perspective

Over the past three years, RAND Project AIR FORCE (PAF) has been working with the Assistant Secretary of the Air Force, Manpower and Reserve Affairs (SAF/MR) and the Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower, Personnel, and Services (AF/A1) as they develop and implement the Air Force's Human Capital Plan, known as the Human Capital Annex (HCA). PAF has supported development and implementation of the HCA, which encompasses areas of strategic importance for manpower, personnel, force development, and force management. As this work has proceeded, PAF has been able to observe the organizations and processes central to human resource planning and programming in the Air Force and has identified several areas where improvements could be made.

This research examines the historical dynamics between SAF/MR and AF/A1 and offers recommendations on how that relationship might be further refined to leverage capabilities and efficiencies on both sides. A companion piece, *Design of Board Membership and Processes for Optimal Force Management: Preliminary Discussion and Recommendations*, examines two human resources governance structures and offers insights on how such structures could become more adaptable and flexible.

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## About the Authors

**Shirley M. Ross** is a senior behavioral scientist with the RAND Corporation and the principal investigator for the core Project AIR FORCE project supporting the Air Force's creation of a human capital strategy. Prior to RAND, she led the human capital analyses for the National Commission on the Structure of the Air Force and served for four years as Senior Advisor to AF/A1.

**Charles P. Armentrout** is an adjunct public policy researcher at the RAND Corporation, a force development senior leader consultant, and a public policy doctoral candidate at George Mason University. His association with RAND began when he was a RAND Air Force Fellow in 2003–2004.



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