

Emerging Options for Field-Grade Officer Promotions in the U.S. Air Force

ALBERT A. ROBBERT, JOHN S. CROWN, AGNES GEREKEN SCHAEFER, MATTHEW WALSH, DIANA Y. MYERS, ANTHONY LAWRENCE, IGNACIO A. LARA

To access the full report, visit www.rand.org/t/RR989-1



ISSUE

The central focus of this research was to determine whether a shift from conventional to alternative promotion authority (APA) (a statutory framework for field-grade officer promotion processes enacted in the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act) would be beneficial and how such a shift would be implemented. The research also examined two related policy options: merit rather than seniority sequencing of promotion lists, and a lineal approach rather than maintenance of year-group integrity in defining promotion zones.



APPROACH

As a foundation for this research, we first compiled and obtained sponsor concurrence on a prioritized list of policy objectives for officer promotion processes. We gauged the relative strengths of conventional and APA in meeting those objectives through policy review, simulation modeling of promotion selection and personnel inventory outcomes, and consultation with sponsor representatives. Using structural and statistical models, we also examined the effects of merit sequencing and their interactions with lineal promotion zone management.



KEY FINDINGS

We noted that APA has some useful features:

- It reduces the potential for stigma related to nonselection for promotion, making promotion consideration less stressful.
- It provides latitude for officers to pursue unconventional career paths or variations in developmental patterns.
- It would largely preserve the predictability of promotion opportunity and timing that have long been considered important objectives of military officer promotion systems.

Setting aside below-the-promotion-zone (BPZ) promotions,¹ promotions under conventional authority are heavily weighted toward in-the-promotion-zone (IPZ) rather than above-the-promotion-zone (APZ) selections. Under APA, we expect that the concentration of selections on the first of the multiple considerations in a

broadened promotion zone would be similar to the distribution of IPZ and APZ selections under conventional authority. A shift to APA might reduce first-look selections somewhat due to the reduction of the potential stigma associated with nonselection. However, our simulation modeling found that expected years-of-service and grade manning profiles under conventional and APA would be similar, even under what we thought would be a high-end estimate of the reduction in first-look selections.

A shift away from the concentration of selections on first look would permit greater differentiation of promotion timing among high-performing officers. We examined various approaches to create such a shift. They include secretarial guidance to promotion boards on distributing promotions across the promotion zone, distributing promotion recommendation quotas across the promotion zone, and making finer-grained development milestone accomplishment more visible to promotion boards. We found that these alternatives would likely violate statutory constraints or, more important, clash with the desired primacy of performance over other promotion considerations.

Limited capacity to differentiate promotion timing for higher-potential officers is a significant drawback. Differentiation through the promotion process is among the few and certainly the most powerful of the mechanisms for mediating extrinsic rewards among military officers. Additionally, absence of sufficiently accelerated promotions for the highest-potential officers could unacceptably reduce their total availability, within tenure limits, for service as general officers.

Other policy options—merit sequencing and lineal zone management—can play a role in differentiating promotion timing under either conventional or APA. With merit sequencing, higher-performing officers are promoted earlier among their peers on the same promotion list, but the effects are cumulative in subsequent promotion considerations only if lineal zone management is used to bump some high performers into an earlier subsequent promotion cycle.

Lineal zone management offers some advantages in smoothing promotion management parameters. However, we do not recommend using it in conjunction with merit sequencing either for that purpose or for high-performer acceleration. Our analysis shows that doing so would result in acceleration and deceleration that is unwarranted by relative performance, detracting from a desired linkage between performance and rewards.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Because of a limited capacity for differentiating promotion timing among higher performers, the U.S. Air Force might be dissatisfied with the results it would obtain under APA. We also note that the administrative processes required to shift into and out of APA are complex and burdensome. For both reasons, if a decision is made to implement APA, we recommend a test case using a single development category or subset of a development category in order to better appreciate both the implementation process and the officer management outcomes.

¹ The Air Force discontinued BPZ promotions to the grade of O-4 in 1999 and to the grades of O-5 and O-6 in 2020.



PROJECT AIR FORCE

RAND Project AIR FORCE (PAF), a division of the RAND Corporation, is the Department of the Air Force's (DAF's) federally funded research and development center for studies and analyses, supporting both the United States Air Force and the United States Space Force. PAF provides DAF with independent analyses of policy alternatives affecting the development, employment, combat readiness, and support of current and future air, space, and cyber forces. For more information, visit PAF's website at www.rand.org/paf.