
Defense Report

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Reorganizing the Joint Chiefs—A Case of Congressional Overkill?

By enacting the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, Congress agreed to the most sweeping changes in the nation's top military body since the Joint Chiefs of Staff was created in 1947. The new law was intended to strengthen the hand of the JCS Chairman and reduce duplication among the four military services.

To foster unity among the Army, Navy, Marines and Air Force, the new law directs the services to send their best officers to the joint staff for specified periods. It further decrees that officers who aspire to be generals or admirals should first serve on a joint staff with officers of other services. Aiming to bring an end to what military critics called rampant inter-service rivalry, Congress may have gone a bit overboard in dictating who would be required to serve a joint duty assignment and for how long.

For one thing, the act requires about half the joint staff officers to be part of a newly-created joint specialist corps—officers who have completed special schooling followed by a full three and one-half year tour on a joint staff. The service Chiefs of Staff are asking Congress to allow credit for joint duty in cases where an officer's joint tour is interrupted. The chiefs, argue that officers should be given cumulative credit toward fulfillment of joint staff requirements.

Another aspect of the new law having the potential for disruption of ongoing personnel programs is the need for three and one half year tours for colonels and below—three years for generals and admirals. Normal career calendars do not provide enough years to ensure the best officers can fulfill their joint duty requirements and maintain needed war-fighting expertise as brigade commanders, submarine skippers or air wing commanders. One senior officer on the joint staff likened this program to "trying to put 15 years of experience into a 10-year career."

Congress' intent was to insure that the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Unified Commanders were staffed with the cream of the military officer corps. Now they need to carry it one step further by granting the services the flexibility needed to permit these top-quality officers to share in the responsibilities of strategic planning yet remain qualified to command combat operations in time of war.